

A Peek At The Past:

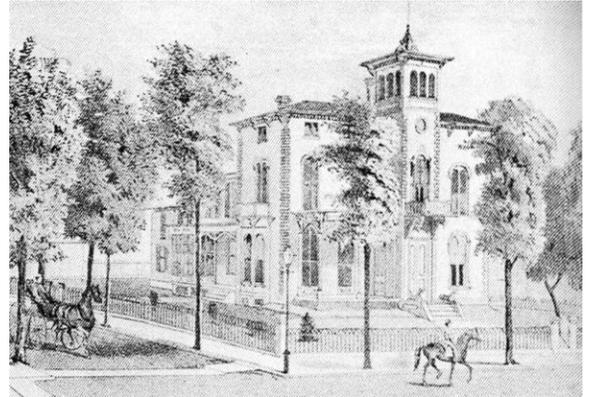
C.S. McCormick: Legal legend and 'friend of the friendless'

September 4, 2010 - by Matt Connor - For The Express

When fire alarms filled the air in the City of Lock Haven on Friday morning, Jan. 2, 1891, curious citizens naturally wondered about the origins of the blaze, and it wasn't long before their inquisitiveness was satisfied.

It turned out the beautiful wood frame Italian villa of C.S. McCormick, the popular local attorney, was in flames.

Built in 1868 on the southwest corner of Water and Mill streets (now site of the Great Island Presbyterian Church parsonage), and designed by Samuel Sloan, Pennsylvania's most important architect of the era, the house was one of the city's most spectacular Victorian era buildings.



Now firefighters seemed helpless in the face of the fire that engulfed it.

"The flames were first seen issuing from the portion of the building on the Mill Street side and they made the most rapid progress," reported the Clinton Democrat several days later. "The fire department hurried to the premises as quickly as possible, and soon four or five streams were being poured upon the burning edifice.

"The firemen worked hard and earnestly but seemingly without avail, for apparently the more water that was thrown upon the conflagration the hotter it grew. It burned with great fierceness between the walls, and it was not long until the fine, comfortable homelike house was in ruins, the whole interior having been burned out."

Friends and volunteers did their best to save whatever they could of the great lawyer's possessions. A man of tremendous means, from one of the city's oldest pioneer families, McCormick no doubt had kept a substantial library, and likely filled his home with the best furniture and fixtures.

But in the panic to get the property out of the burning house, much of it ended up tossed haphazardly in the surrounding streets and sidewalks, which were snow- and slush-covered on this cold winter's day.

"Willing hands saved considerable of the furniture, but the most of it was ruined and it was a sad sight to see the number of books and other treasures of the household lying around in the snow and water," the Democrat reported. "Mr. McCormick's residence was a handsome and commodious structure and its destruction by the devouring element is a great pity.

"It leaves a black desolation in a very pretty and attractive locality and deprives the family of a home which they have occupied for many years."

Perhaps the only bright spot in the entire affair was that McCormick had been well insured. Two policies - one from the Gearhart Agency, now Gearhart-Herr - covered the house to the amount of \$7,800, or about \$190,000 today, based on the Consumer Price Index. Unfortunately, the Democrat estimated damages at \$10,000, or \$243,000 today.

It was a sad day for the McCormicks, but they would persevere. The great attorney, who played a significant role in some of the highest-profile legal cases in the county, including a number of sensational murder trials, would remain in practice for more than 50 years. He would serve as public defender, narrowly missing being elected judge and presided over the local bar association for decades.

And it appears that after the burnt-out remains of his old house were torn down, he simply moved into a more modest property across the street, now known as the George Curts house, located at 1 E. Water St. and built seven years before C.S. McCormick's Italianate masterpiece, in 1861.

Interestingly, the most striking feature of the Curts house, wrote the authors of 1979's "Historic Lock Haven: An Architectural Survey": "is its virtual lack of any ornamentation. We need be reminded that not all Victorian houses were highly decorated. It is remarkable that this quiet but elegant example has escaped the wide aluminum siding, picture windows, and other trappings of the 'make it new' movement."

Well, not so remarkable. The house was unfortunately encased in aluminum siding about five years ago. According to published reports and interviews with a surviving descendant, it became the new McCormick family home sometime after the 1891 fire. But like many of Lock Haven's most important structures, it is now occupied by college students who likely don't know, and don't care, about its historic significance.

Charles Stewart McCormick was born Nov. 5, 1835 on a massive farm that extended westward from the junction of the Bald Eagle Creek and the Susquehanna toward the city limits. It had been acquired by his grandfather, John McCormick, in 1793, about 20 years after the older McCormick settled in Clinton County after a journey that took him from Ireland and through various central Pennsylvania locales.

"The Scotch-Irish race are numerously represented in the United States, and have contributed largely to its stability and prosperity," wrote John Blair Linn in his 1883 "History of Centre and Clinton Counties." "To this intelligent, enterprising, honorable race belong the McCormicks of Clinton County."

In 1761, according to Linn, the McCormicks emigrated to the then-British colonies in the Americas. Sadly, they left their youngest son, John, age 13, behind.

"Being of an enterprising disposition and having a natural longing to see again his parents and brothers and sisters, he resolved to follow them," Linn wrote. "After much anxiety, toil and hardship, he reached at length the home of his parents in Chester County, Pa."

What happened next is considered either comedy or tragedy, depending on the source. According to Isabel Winner Miller's "Old Town: A History of Early Lock Haven, 1769-1845," John McCormick stowed away on a ship bound for Philadelphia and arrived in that city - then the largest in the colonies - without a penny to his name.

"He earned enough money to find his way to Chester County where his parents lived, only to find his mother didn't recognize him when he knocked at their door," she wrote. "Showing her a tell-tale scar, he convinced her that he was her son."

Winner-Miller referred to this story as "touching" and tells it in a rather melancholy fashion. Linn's version, however, is a comic romp.

"Arriving in the evening, he thought he would play a joke upon his mother," Linn wrote. "Pretending to be a stranger, he asked her to give him a night's lodging. Not believing all strangers are to be angels in disguise she refused, telling him he must go to the tavern. After he had had his fun he made himself known as the balance of the family which had been left in the Green Isle, and then the fatted calf was killed, and there was a season of general rejoicing."

In 1773 John McCormick moved to Great Island and built a house whimsically named "Sassafras Cabin." He later served in the Continental army and helped defend the colonists in armed confrontations with the Indians.

He married the former Elizabeth Fleming, daughter of John Fleming, a descendant of Scottish nobility who at that time owned 1,600 acres of land in the area. The huge Fleming property included what is now the city of Lock Haven and parts of Flemington (which was named after him).

When old John Fleming passed away in 1777, John and Elizabeth McCormick inherited a substantial chunk of his property, and subsequently bought an additional tract of the Fleming land from Elizabeth's brother, Joseph. Their farm was known as "The Point," and 58 years later Charles Stewart McCormick was born on that same farm, one of nine grandchildren of John and Elizabeth McCormick.

Charles Stewart - commonly known simply as "Charley" - was educated in what J. Milton Furey referred to in his 1892 book, "Past and Present of Clinton County" as "the pioneer schools of this section." He later graduated from LaFayette College and joined the C.G. Furst law firm in the city.

In 1860 he was admitted to the bar and two years later married Sue Fleming, the daughter of then-Clinton County Sheriff Algernon Fleming.

C.S. thrived in the field of law, becoming one of the most prominent attorneys in the region and landing several high-profile clients whose cases made headlines in the local newspapers. He served as district attorney from 1862 to 1865 and ran for judge in 1878.

"After one of the most memorable political contests of the times, he was defeated by the late C.A. Mayer by a small majority," The Express reported of C.S.'s campaign for judge.

Mayer remained a county judge for decades, and his portrait today hangs in the first-floor hallway of the county courthouse, which was also designed by architect Samuel Sloan, with whom C.S. McCormick was clearly familiar.

McCormick was a longtime trustee of the Great Island Presbyterian Church, superintendent of its Sunday school and a member of its building committee. It was through this connection, it is believed, that he became acquainted with the work of architect Sloan, who designed the church.

Great Island Presbyterian was built during the same period of time (1863-1870) that McCormick built his own grand Italianate house by the same architect, on a neighboring plot of land.

The house was built during the early years of McCormick's long and distinguished career. According to his Express obituary, "He was essentially a trial lawyer and during his life was concerned in most of the important trials in the civil and criminal courts. At the height of his career he enjoyed a wide reputation as an orator and jury lawyer of great ability. The records of the courts of this county bear an enduring record of his long and successful career as a lawyer."

Well into the early 20th century, when he was in his 60s and 70s, C.S. McCormick was still going strong. In vigorous good health, he was in 1900 endorsed by Clinton and Clearfield counties for a superior court judge position, but failed to receive the nomination. In 1910 the local bar association honored him with a dinner celebrating his 50th year as a member of that august body.

Three years later, however, he had a recurrence of an ailment the newspapers of the time described as "cystitis, or inflammation of the bladder." Even so he seemed well on his way to recovery when he suddenly lapsed into a coma at his home on the corner of Water and Mill streets and died at 10 p.m. on Sunday, March 16, 1913.

His funeral was held at Great Island Presbyterian and he was interred at Highland Cemetery.

His death made the front pages of The Express and the Clinton Democrat and was met with widespread sadness in the community.

He was eulogized in the Democrat as having "possessed a pleasing personality, being affable and courteous to all, whether of high or low estate, and as a rule greeting his friends and acquaintances with a smile and a wave of the hand. He was a friend to the friendless, and frequently gave his services without expectation of pecuniary reward."

The editors of The Express wrote, "The death of C.S. McCormick, Esq., marks the passing of another of the gentlemen of the old school, who reflected dignity and professional worth on the Clinton County bar. Up until his last illness Mr. McCormick was actively engaged in the practice of law and was alert mentally and physically, being the oldest practitioner before the Clinton County courts. In former years 'Charley' McCormick always figured in the big cases, both locally and before the higher courts His death will be mourned by his colleagues at the bar and by a host of clients and friends throughout the county."

McCormick was survived by two sons, Allison White McCormick and Robert B. McCormick. Allison remained in his father's home at 1 E. Water St. and his branch of the family tree married into the family of A.C. Hopkins, who made a fortune in lumber and whose son, Donald, built a fine Georgian style home at 201 W. Water St.

Today the last surviving member of the McCormick family residing in Clinton County is Woolrich resident John McCormick, grandson of Allison White McCormick.

He says the McCormick-Hopkins wealth was eventually divided up between Donald Hopkins and one Matilda McDonald, a nurse who cared for A.C. Hopkins at the end of his life and ended up marrying the lumber mogul.

Though his father would have been about 13 years old at the time of C.S. McCormick's death, John says he never heard any family stories - either from his dad or other extended family members - about his illustrious attorney great-grandfather.

What he knows about C.S. McCormick, he said, he learned from his own research.

"People didn't care much about genealogy 30 years ago," said John, who like his great-grandfather could easily be described as "affable" and "a friend of the friendless." "They just wanted to get on with their own lives."

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