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A Peek At The Past

Hipples, Hannas and Hopkins, Oh my!

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A house doesn't have to be a grand, 20-room mansion to have a wonderful history. Sometimes the stories behind smaller scale homes can be just as compelling as those of the huge Gothic and Victorian piles that seem to dwarf their more modest cousins.

Take the Edmund Baird house at 105 West Water Street, for example. Built in 1881 with a distinctive Jerkin-head cross-gable on the front roof and a full porch across the first floor, the house today is missing those signature elements, its unique exterior ship lathing encased in aluminum siding, but still it retains a great deal of charm.

Inside, the home's architectural elements include ornate hard wood floors, period moldings, a dark wood staircase banister that appears original to the house, pocket doors and high ceilings. These are the aspects of the house that Edmund Baird himself might recognize if he were to travel through time and revisit his old abode today.



The Edmund Baird House, 105 West Water St. has been in existence for 128 years.

Baird was just four years out of dental school (the Pennsylvania College of Dental Surgery, now U. Penn.) and was new to his chosen profession when he built the house at 105 West Water. He was born in the village of Liberty, on the Great Island road, and among his living descendants is Betty Schantz, owner/operator of the Partnership House Bed & Breakfast. During the brief period the Bairds resided at the Water Street house, Edmund's wife Hattie gave birth to two children there, this being a time when births and deaths occurred far more often at home than in the hospital.

"His son, Donald and daughter, Florence, were born there," said Kristy Hopkins Kunkle, who is descended from Edmund Baird's daughter, Florence Baird-Hopkins. Reached by phone at her home in Seattle, Hopkins Kunkle said she's done a great deal of genealogical research on the Baird family.

"They were only in that house on Water Street for a few years before they moved to Florida," she said. "He was one of the first dentists in Orlando. But then they had one of their bad freezes, and a lot of people lost everything. So they came back and bought a house in Lockport Heights and did a lot of farming."

Over on the mountain overlooking Lock Haven on the Lockport side of the river, Baird built another distinctive home which still stands today. That house is most often referred to as the Russell Looker house, named for the retired Great Island Presbyterian minister who once owned the property.

"Edmund was a very interesting guy," Hopkins Kunkle said. "He was a beekeeper for many years I have all the letters to his brother telling him what to do with the bees and was an extraordinary wood carver. We still have trunks, frames and a table he made."

Edmund Baird died of pneumonia at age 83 while staying with his son in Sewickley. His body was returned to Lock Haven soon thereafter he was buried in Dunnstown Cemetery.

But he was only the first in a long line of white collar professionals who made their home in the house. In 1886, the home briefly became the property of Newton and Charlotte Fredericks, who appear to have purchased the home as a wedding present for their daughter, Mary.

Newton worked for the Fredericks, Munro & Co. fire brick business in Farrandsville (one of various Frederickses who made their living in the family-owned brick making company) and served on the board of directors of the First National Bank. He had six children by two wives (his first wife, Mary Watson, died in 1855).

Mary, a child by his second wife, Charlotte, married attorney Edgar Geary in November, 1886, the same month her father transferred the deed to the West Water Street home into her name. Sadly, Mary's health was precarious she was described as an "invalid" in several newspaper accounts and after just over two decades years at the house, she and her husband moved to the warmer climate of California in hopes of improving her health.

They lived out the rest of their lives in Pasadena, Mary passing away there in 1931, Edgar nine years later, in 1940.

Just before they packed up and headed west, the Gearys sold their home to Clark Roads Gearhart, who was perhaps the most accomplished businessman ever to call the former Baird house home.

By the time he purchased the property in 1907, Gearhart had already been in the insurance and real estate business for 40 years, a business in which he prospered.

He also launched an insurance industry trade publication, and from that became involved in the printing trade, launching the Clark Printing & Manufacturing Company to support his publishing endeavors. Subsequently Clark Printing became the largest printing house in the central part of the state.

Among the employees of the Clark Printing Company were the two local Kessler girls, Helen and Dorothy, who worked at the shop probably in the early 1920s. Helen died last year at age 103. She was interviewed by The Express on the eve of her 102nd birthday in 2007.

"They were there for a long time," Kessler said of the printing business. "The shop was right there on the river. They printed calendars and stuff like that. They had quite a business. I worked there when I was going to school."

Her job, she said, was to collate pages for the company's calendars.

"They used to put the pages in a pile January, February, March, April and we'd go along and pick up the pages and then we'd shuffle them in a nice pile and then they were cut into small pads," she said. "The Clark Printing Company was very nice for girls to work. It was a nice clean place. They used to hire school kids. In fact it was the school that got us the job. I forget how many of us there were who worked there, but they called the school and said they needed help, that they had jobs. That's how Dorothy and I got to work there."

But it was the insurance company that really put C. Roads Gearhart on the map. After an accident confined him to a wheelchair, Gearhart changed the company motto to, "Call on me. I cannot call on you" and continued to thrive.

He died in 1919, but by then he had long since deeded his West Water Street home over to his son, Fredrick D. Gearhart, and turned over management of the printing company to him as well.

It wasn't long after his father's death, however, that Fredrick sold the house and moved to Mountain Lakes, N.J., where he began daily commuting into New York City as part of a wholesale coal business in which he became involved there. He made an annual visit to Lock Haven as part of his duties as a board member in Clark Printing, but otherwise that part of his life was behind him.

In 1941 he had some sort of seizure while walking on the street in lower Manhattan and was rushed to St. Vincent's Hospital, where he died in October of that year. The insurance company his father started in 1867 is still in existence today as Gearhart Herr & Co.

But let's back up a moment. It is 1919, the year Fredrick Gearhart sold the West Water Street home to its next owner, a dentist and football coach named Mark Hoag.

It had been four years since Hoag became Lock Haven High School's very first football coach, striding out onto what the Express once referred to as "the battle-scarred turf of the old Hanson Field" in the autumn of 1915.

"Doc" Hoag was considered the father of Lock Haven High's football program. A dashing man in his youth, who allegedly set female hearts aflutter when he passed by, Hoag had a passion for the game of football that never waned.

When not filling cavities at his East Main Street office in the Keller Building, Hoag could be found out on Hanson Field, drilling his young charges. His methods were so successful that the team quickly rose to the top echelons of high school football in the state.

Nineteen sixteen, '17 and '19 were undefeated seasons for the LHHS football program and, under Doc Hoag's leadership, the team twice played in the Pennsylvania Scholastic Championships.

But football (or foot ball as it was then called) was arguably a much more dangerous game then than it is today. The boys played with flexible leather helmets and far less padding and protection than is used currently. Those factors likely led to the singular tragedy of LHHS football of the era.

In 1920, team captain Melvin Kepler, 17, was killed during a practice scrimmage at Hanson. Kepler, a lineman, fractured his vertebrae, resulting in paralysis and, just one day later, death. Hundreds of students attended his funeral. Hoag wasn't sure he could go on as coach after the incident.

But the team finished their season, "as Melvin Kepler and his family wished," Hoag said, adding that while his heart clearly wasn't in it, he would complete the season if that was what the school wished.

The heartbroken team and their coach lost three of the four games remaining.

But things soon began to turn around again, and 1922 marked another undefeated season, Hoag's fourth in seven years as coach.

That was also the year Hoag sold the West Water Street house to banker Leon Klepper and his wife, Virginia, who had all kinds of interesting connections to previous home owners.

"Nearly all of his life, he spent in Lock Haven, in responsible positions in employment and community service," wrote an Express obituary writer at the time Leon's death in 1966. "From 1906 to 1929 he worked for the A.C. Hopkins Estate. His long and faithful association with First National Bank dated from Jan. 16, 1929."

Former West Water Street resident Newton Fredericks, of course, also served on the board of the First National Bank, and surely Keppler would have had regular dealings with members of the Fredericks clan.

Additionally, A.C. Hopkins was related to original home builder Edmund Baird, through Baird's daughter, Florence Baird Hopkins.

One has to believe that Klepper was aware of all these connections when he purchased the house from Hoag in March, 1922. Certainly he and his family he and wife Virginia had two sons remained in residence for longer than some of the earlier home owners. The house remained in his name until 1936.

At that point the house fell into the hands of one of the most prominent families in the city's history, when Henry Hipple, grandson of attorney T.C. Hipple and son of Judge Henry Hipple Sr., purchased the house from the Kleppers.

Henry Jr. had a prosperous law career himself, and seemed to enjoy the work of the simple country lawyer perhaps more than his illustrious father. When Henry Sr. died, the older Hipple was serving as President Judge of the district. Henry Jr.'s name was bandied about as a possible choice to fill the judicial vacancy in Clinton County resulting from his father's death, but the young lawyer demurred, preferring to remain in private practice.

Still, he held various public positions over the course of his long career, including as county and city solicitor and district attorney, the youngest lawyer in the state to hold that post.

When he died in 1966, the Clinton County Bar Association passed a resolution honoring his name, and Judge Abraham H. Lipez called a special session of court in tribute to him.

From one old family name to another, the house passed. When the Hipples moved out in 1953, James and Mary Hanna descendants of one of the city's pioneer families moved in.

Kate Hanna, now an employee of Lock Haven University, was one of four children raised in the house by James and Mary Hanna from the early 1950s through the late 1970s.

"We lived in the river everyday," Kate said when asked about her memories of the house. "That was our activity."

In those days, the dike-levee flood protection system was nonexistent, and many West Water Street back yards rolled all the way to the river's edge, with long boat docks extending out into the Susquehanna.

"There were orchards in the backyard, apple trees and cherry trees," Hanna said. "We had a babysitter who'd send us out for apples and cherries to make pies. Her name was Clara It was a great place to live. We could walk to the Y, we could walk to church, we could walk to school. It was just a great, great place."

The Hannas also loved to entertain in their charming house, which Kate says then had exterior wooden siding and was painted white with green shutters.

"We had some wild parties," Kate says with a laugh. "It was a fun place to grow up Every year at Christmas Eve my mother always had an open house. They'd have a drink or two and then go to midnight mass."

When her parents separated, Kate said, her mother, Mary, was unable to afford to keep the house alone, and after nearly a quarter century, the Hannas moved out of their beloved home.

After that, a series of owners held on to the house for brief periods as little as one year, as long as five or six before it passed into the hands of Dr. Henry "Tripp" Dietrich and his wife, Rena, who bought the house in 1990.

The Dietrichs kept the house for eight years, but with three growing children, the relatively modest four-bedroom house was beginning to seem cramped by the time the house next door, at 47 West Water Street, came on the market.

The Dietrichs leapt at the chance to buy the larger home next door and put 105 West Water Street up for sale.

"Tripp really wanted to sell it, but he wanted to watch who bought it because he didn't want it to become student housing," says Rick Conklin, the current owner. "He was going to be right next door with his kids."

Conklin, a nuclear medicine technologist for Lock Haven Hospital, resides at the house with his wife, Jacqui, the Quality Management and Regulatory Compliance (QMRC) officer for the hospital, and their daughter, Ericka, a Central Mountain senior who will be starting her Freshman year Messiah College in the fall.

"When I went to High School, the bus would always go down Water Street and I'd think, 'Oh, there's no way I'll ever be able to live in that neighborhood,'" Rick says. "It was still all single family homes at that time."

At the time the couple was living in a lovely old Victorian in Clintondale, but were interested in moving into the city. There was an Open House at 105 West Water and they decided to take a look.

"We walked through and liked it I liked it more than Jacqui did and I said, 'I don't think we'll be able to afford it, anyway.' But it was a beautiful home."

They made an offer, the Dietrichs countered, and a deal was worked out.

"The house was the right size," he said. "It had a lot of character. We liked the location, and since we've been here we really fell in love with the location. Being right downtown and still having private space behind the house is great. It's very nice, a great neighborhood. All the history and the people are just outstanding."

About four years ago, Conklin installed a "media room" with a wide screen TV and elaborate sound system in the former garage on the east side of the house, but the interior still retains much of its period detail.

One conversation piece is a spectacular crystal chandelier in the formal dining room. The Conklins like to refer to it as "the divorce chandelier" because it came into their hands as a result of a series of family divorces.

"The chandelier was originally from a house Jacqui's father built, and her mother had to have the best of everything a handful of years later, Jacqui's mother and father divorced and the chandelier ended up with Jacqui's sister, who also divorced Their mother packed it away so the sister's husband didn't get it and finally we ended up with it."

As the "divorce chandelier" was installed in the house, Conklin said, he turned to his wife and said, "This will be our test."

Happily, the Conklins are still together, and with any luck their house will continue to stand for another 128 years.

Two of the original "Peek at the Past" books are available for purchase at Ross Library.

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