

A Peek At The Past: Majestic Simpson House faces uncertain future

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By MATT CONNOR , For The Express

A figure of imposing majesty, it has stood in the city for the last 158 years, but the next few weeks may very well determine its uncertain future.

The William A. Simpson House at 118 W. Water St. is considered a Second Empire masterpiece and "one of the most historically significant buildings in Lock Haven."

"At every step of the way, there's been something historic happening with it," said Clinton County Historic Society curator Lou Bernard, "right up through the time Chuck Stein had the house."

Indeed, Stein, now 83, whose family owned the house from the 1940s through the 1970s, is a font of information about the old building. His parents - particularly his mother, Martha - were history buffs who turned the house into a showplace, a tradition he carried on during the later period when he and his wife owned the property.



One of the most intriguing aspects of the house is the fact that it was originally constructed of brick, over which a wooden house was then built. Even today, if one digs deep enough into the wooden exterior layer of wood surrounding the home, one would still find the brick house, nearly intact, underneath.

"It's one of the few examples around of a building inside a building," said Bernard. "Originally it was the David Jackman building and (William A.) Simpson built his own building around the Jackman building. It's still in there."

"Interestingly enough the house was, at one time, a two-story Georgian Revival or Greek Revival home," said Stein in a 2005 Express interview about the house. "At that time, in the 1860's, the wives of the millionaires - including Simpson's wife - would go on two-year chateau tours of Europe.

"She went away for two years and when she came back it was the Victorian building you see today. He added the third floor and the mansard roof and all that.

"It was a stone and brick building, but everyone would harass him because he was a lumber man who didn't live in a wooden house. They covered it with wood made to look like stone."

It is said that when Mary Simpson returned home from her journey and stepped out of her carriage in front of the house, she fainted dead away at the sight of her remodeled home.

But perhaps we should pause for some background at this point. Originally constructed in 1853, the building now known as the W.A. Simpson House at 118 W. Water St. was built by David K. Jackman, the first house to be constructed on the new "mansion row" of West Water Street.

According to local historians, David K. Jackman is the man for whom the town of Lock Haven most owes its early importance in central Pennsylvania. A native of New Hampshire, Jackman moved to Lock Haven in 1840 and within a few years was an owner, partner or executive in myriad business enterprises in area, including those involving gas, coal and railroading.

In 1857 he was elected to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and by 1862, when he was then living in Philadelphia, he was known as the leading dealer of lumber in the state. A Civil War hero, he was also, according to local historians, one of the bondsmen for Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy during the Civil War.

In 1864 the house was purchased by Col. William A. Simpson, owner-operator of one of the largest saw mills in the area, located just opposite his new home on the banks of the Susquehanna, an enterprise that made him vastly wealthy.

He attained the "Col. Simpson" moniker as a result of his appointment as lieutenant colonel on the staff of then-Pennsylvania Gov. W.F. Packer, a native of Centre County, in 1858. Born in Lancaster, Simpson's ancestral roots ran deep. One of his forefathers helped lay out the city of Lancaster, and his grandfather, Michael Simpson, was a general in Washington's army during the Revolutionary War.

Simpson used his newly-acquired lumber riches to transform D.K. Jackman's temple form brick building into what the book "Historic Lock Haven: An Architectural Survey" described as "a Second Empire Masterpiece."

Encasing the brick mansion in wooden siding designed to emulate cut stone, Simpson added a third floor and, in 1873, expanded the rear portion of the house. He wisely left the existing doors and windows where they were when he covered up the outside and added height to the building.

This elaborate re-construction must have been amazing to witness. Sadly, no photographs of this incredible transformation are known to exist. John Wilbur Clarence Floyd, Lock Haven's most important historic photographer of the era, didn't move into town until 1881, otherwise he undoubtedly would have shot some pictures of the remarkable process.

He did, however, shoot some of the earliest known images of the completed house. Today - despite the peeling paint and wood patches - the home's exterior looks remarkably similar to its state during Floyd's day.

Col. Simpson, Stein said, "was an interesting guy. He had a lumber mill, a saw mill, right across the street from where they lived." The lumber mogul placed a telescope in the cupola at the very top of his grand house, said Stein, where he would spy on his operations at the lumber mill across the street. If he saw something of which he didn't approve, he would send a "runner" over to the mill to correct the matter.

The Simpsons were also close friends with the cowboy star "Buffalo" Bill Cody, a major show business personality at the time. Cody headlined a Wild West Show that drew huge crowds across the country, including those that turned out to see his act at the Opera House downtown and at theatrical venues in Williamsport.

According to Stein, Cody regularly stayed at the Simpson House when performing in the area.

Married in 1852 to the former Mary Tamanay, Simpson and his wife raised four children in the enormous, 26-room home, including son William A., Jr., who went into military service and became known as Capt. (or "Cap") Simpson.

When 79-year-old Col. Simpson died at the home in 1904, the house was inherited by Cap.

A man of rather short physical stature, Cap may hold the record as the longest resident of the house. Indeed, although he was felled by a heart ailment in the 1920s and died there, many believers in the paranormal say he still may be roaming the grand old home's parlors to this day.

"Weird things would happen in the house," Stein said during a telephone interview last week. "Lights would go on on the third floor, when it was not occupied, and water would go on in sinks and doors would pop open."

And, said Stein, one of his children claimed they saw the ghost of Cap Simpson climbing the elaborate front stairway of the house: "He was a short dark man and that pretty much describes Cap Simpson, who was pretty short," Stein said of the vaporous phantom.

In the 1990s, two female Lock Haven University students who rented an apartment at the Simpson House said they regularly experienced paranormal activity there, including odd noises and spectral visions.

And even more recently, according to Bernard, a Heisey Museum intern who resided in the house said she frequently heard phantom footsteps on the front stairway.

None of this surprises Stein, who says quite openly that he believed the house to be haunted.

In 1927, the last of the surviving Simpson siblings to hold deed to the house sold it to Postmaster Paul Brosius, who owned the house for 10 years, until his death at age 63 in 1937. His funeral was held at his West Water Street home, not the only memorial service to be held at the house that year.

Indeed, there was yet another famous Lock Haven family - perhaps the single most famous family name in Lock Haven history - that called the Simpson House home at the time, and it, too, faced tragedy during its tenure there.

When Piper Aircraft moved from Bradford to Lock Haven in 1937, the Piper family moved into one-half of the Simpson House, which they apparently rented from the Brosius family. It was likely the Pipers' first home in Lock Haven.

Just five months after moving to town, Mrs. Marie V. Piper, wife of Piper President William T. Piper Sr., died at the Abington Memorial Hospital near Philadelphia. Her body was returned to Lock Haven and her funeral services were held at her former home on West Water Street, according to her Express obituary.

"Mrs. Piper lived in the apartment that was the double living room on the east side of the house," said Stein. "She occupied one half of the house and another family occupied the other half. How it was divided, I don't know. That was many years before we bought the house. It was 1937 when she passed away and was laid out there."

Her obituary lists her husband and children William T. Piper Jr., Thomas and Betty as surviving her "at home."

"Burial was made at Highland Cemetery, where flowers were strewn at the burial place by three airplanes," according to The Express.

It wasn't long, however, before the Pipers established themselves in another house just down the street from the old Simpson place. And this being the height of the Great Depression, the surviving Brosius relatives had trouble maintaining the huge house.

Just three months after Paul's death, his grand home was sold in a sheriff's sale.

In the 1940s the house was briefly owned by Richard and Anne Miller, who resided in the home with Chester McLaughlin. They took in women boarders on the upper floors and ran what today would be called an underage club in the basement.

"The Victorian," a "milk bar" or "teen canteen" was operated in the basement level of the house for a few, brief pre-war years of the early 1940s.

There, according to Stein, teenagers could go for dancing and non-alcoholic refreshments. During that time even the basement of the building was beautifully finished, with raised wood paneling, a full kitchen and several enormous rooms.

Ephraim Stein, the proprietor of Stein's Furniture Store, purchased the house when Chester McLaughlin and Richard Miller joined the military at the onset of World War II. Charles Stein, Ephraim's son, also joined the military at about that time, but he was aware that his mother, Martha, had a keen interest in the house for many years.

"My mother always wanted to own a Victorian home, and particularly the Simpson House," Stein said in 2005. "She had been collecting furniture for it for 40 years. We had a big warehouse full of furniture."

Today members of the Stein family remain in the furniture business. Stein's daughter is the owner of the spectacular "Contemporary Concepts" furniture store in the city.

Beginning in the 1940s, Chuck's parents began transforming the house into a showplace, filling it with exquisite antique furniture, estate silver, elaborate window treatments and lush floor covering.

"My mother was partial to remodeling it and changed quite a few things over the years," Stein said during an Express interview six years ago. "During the remodeling we found a stairwell that went up to the third floor, and downstairs in the basement level we put in a kitchen and that's when we found out there had been a kitchen there before, a summer kitchen, probably. There was a fireplace flue and everything there."

Assisting his mother on her ongoing house project, Stein said, was a particularly skilled interior designer who was equally devoted to the home. The designer, Samuel J. Dornsife, was qualified for his American Institute of Architects designation after working on the house.

He was later retained by the Coca Cola Company, where he worked on the restoration of the antebellum and post-antebellum houses that the company purchased in Georgia near their bottling plant.

"That became a lifetime thing for him," Stein said in 2005.

Indeed, Dornsife would go on to a remarkable career, serving as a consultant to leading museums and historic houses throughout the United States and authoring several books on Victoriana. He won several awards from the Victorian Society of America and at the time of his death was considered something of a legend in the field.

Two of Dornsife's most important contributions to house included an elaborate mural in the dining room and an enormous pier mirror in the front hallway, both of which remained in the house for decades after the Steins sold the home.

The dining room mural, hand-silk-screened by a Swiss artist, was a one-of-a-kind piece that drew the attention of the Kennedy White House in the early 1960s.

According to Stein, who talked about the mural during a telephone interview last week, the Kennedys "were interested in purchasing it for the White House. My mother had that installed with the help of a man named Sam Dornsife. He did most of the design work in the house.

"As far as I know, it was a one-off print and there were no more in existence. All the prints had been destroyed, and the Kennedys wanted it for one of the rooms of the White House, which room I do not know.

"My father-in-law was an artist and he painted the balustrade on canvas on the wall, so it looked like you were looking through a curtain on the wall."

Called the "El Alhambra," the mural likely came to the attention of then-First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy via Dornsife, who had myriad connections in the world of Victoriana. At the time, Mrs. Kennedy was executing an elaborate restoration of the White House living quarters.

Stein said the Simpson house was visited by White House interior decorators who viewed the mural with interest. It was not, in the end, purchased for the presidential home.

The massive pier mirror in the front hallway also had an interesting provenance. It had been purchased by Dornsife from the former Mark Twain House in Elmira, N.Y. Twain, who like "Buffalo" Bill Cody once played the Lock Haven Opera House, resided in Elmira for many years and his former study is still a tourist attraction in the area.

"It was a very large mirror and underneath was a sitting place with drawers in it and it came from the Mark Twain house," said Stein last week. "It was still in the house when we sold it. It was in the front hallway, past the main entrance to the house.

"Once you come inside the double doors, it was on the right hand side in the hall. It was beautiful, with hand-carved framing and a seat or little platform. Sam Dornsife also bought that for my mother."

Sadly, both of those remarkable pieces were removed from the house and sold to private individuals during just the past two years, when former owner Troy Bitner was forced to sell off the home's contents after falling on hard times during the real estate crash and mortgage crisis of 2008.

The mural was allegedly sold prior to a public auction at the home about 18 months ago, and was in the process of being restored in Williamsport. The pier mirror was purchased at the auction for \$1,800 and was later spotted by a Lock Haven resident at an Upstate New York antiques store for \$8,000.

"They stripped out everything out of the house," said Stein.

"The funny part about it was, there were people who told me I should strip the house before I sold it, in 1971," he said. "All the woodwork was hand-crafted walnut. A company called The Wrecking Ball in Atlanta, Georgia used to buy architectural features from homes. They came up and looked at it and gave me an estimate.

"Their estimate was that it would bring at least \$120,000. But my wife would have nothing to do with that. She said the house is a landmark and we wouldn't have anything to do with that. So we sold the house for a lot less money in October 1971, just before the flood."

That would be the disastrous flood of 1972, from which the city of Lock Haven took decades to recover.

"The idiot architect who bought the house from us, he stripped all the white pine wainscot out of the house after the flood and threw it away," said Stein.

That "idiot architect," according to Stein, was Norman Coulson, who promptly declared after purchasing the property that he was going to tear down the then-118-year-old house and build a modern apartment building on the lot. According to Stein, this announcement was met with cries of local outrage.

Coulson then backed down, Stein said. Instead of building a new apartment building, he said, he would chop up the Simpson house into individual apartments and rent to college students.

And it remained college housing for the ensuing decades under the ownership of the late Dr. Gerard Del Grippo and Bitner, until the former American Dream Mortgage company owner's economic downturn caused serious losses to his real estate investment portfolio and his many local properties went into foreclosure.

Today the house is perhaps in its worst condition in over 150 years. The Williams & Williams company (www.williamsauction.com) is auctioning off the property at 11:30 a.m. May 25 at the property site. According to a Williams auction flier, the nominal opening bid is \$10,000.

"We would like to see it preserved, but unfortunately we don't have a lot of say as to who buys it," said Bernard, of the historic society. "The worst case scenario would be that the college decided it needed another parking lot, in which case we hope to publicize it and shame them into preserving the building.

"I haven't heard that the college is planning anything like that, but it's just that anytime there are plans to sell a historic building, we get a little panicky."

That kind of panic is well-placed, given Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania's penchant for tearing down individual historic homes - or even entire neighborhoods - for the sake of creating additional parking lots for university students and staff.

In the early 1990s, when the dike-levee flood protection system was built, the university lost two parking lots on its lower campus and used eminent domain to purchase a cluster of working class homes on Susquehanna Avenue to develop new parking.

Almost all of these homes were occupied by student renters, and none of them, it should be pointed out, were necessarily historically significant, though one of them later showed up in Allison Bechdel's best-selling graphic memoir "Fun Home."

The university's "East Campus" was similarly ripped down by the university to provide additional parking at the site. The Christ house was by many accounts one of the most significant historic structures in the city.

Today there are plans to tear down a half-dozen houses on Fairview Street, including the much-beloved Cluster House (more recently the university's "International House") to develop a megalithic four-story student housing complex and parking lot stretching from existing university dormitories to the former silk mill site.

But while the historic society's hand-wringing may be justified given the university's apparent devotion to flat asphalt, city zoning officer Cindy Walker said it's extraordinarily unlikely that the Simpson house will fall to a similar fate.

"In order to be torn down, it would have to go through the historic review board, and to do any kind of demolition, there's certain criteria that you have to meet for that," said Walker. "You'd have to have an engineering study that shows that it's structurally unsound. You can't just buy it and demolish it."

And as far Walker knows, the house is structurally sound.

"It's inspected every five years by the property maintenance program, but I think (City Code Enforcer) Dave Romig went through it with prospective buyers more recently and there were no issues."

So, she is asked again, nobody could come in and tear it down and build a parking lot there?

"It would be a tremendous amount of hurdles. Tremendous. Number one, parking lots are not a permitted use there. The only permitted uses are residential. To tear it down and build a parking lot we're talking about a ridiculous amount of hurdles."

Even a casual observer will note that there are significant issues relating to the interior and exterior of the home, which potential auction bidders will be able to see for themselves during a public inspection that is planned prior to May 25.

Birds, for example, fly freely through holes in rotted portions of the home's roof. Myriad wood patches have been nailed over cracks and holes in the building's exterior and - according to a Water Street neighbor once interested in purchasing the house - the plumbing was damaged when pipes burst during the cold winter months.

"If (the potential buyer) intends to use the house, they're going to have to deal with that," Walker said. "If somebody is going to buy it and let it sit there unoccupied, we can't make them fix the roof, for example, until it becomes a structural issue."

"But if it's going to be occupied, that's when the owner is going to have to deal with some of these issues. If it's going to be used as apartments, it's going to have to conform to the residential property maintenance program, and they look at all of those things, interior, exterior, everything."

And so many of us wait, with a mixture of hope and dread, to see what the next few weeks will bring to this irreplaceable piece of Lock Haven history.

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