

Fall/Winter 2020

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Strasburg Heritage

Journal of the Strasburg Heritage Society



Gonder Mansion

The Washington House

Thanksgiving Day Poem

Hotel Guest Registers

A message from the Editor

Joe Deery



Welcome to the first fall/winter issue; we hope you enjoy it!

I would like to share a few thoughts that have come into focus as my experience with this magazine has grown. First, can say that I'm enjoying the new friendships that have re-

sulted from the effort. At first, the new friends were Heritage Society members who contributed, supported, and advised. I've since met many friendly Strasburg residents who have generously shared their knowledge and personal experiences. For somebody who has only lived in Strasburg for eight years, this has really helped me to feel connected to the community.

Based on that experience, I can recommend searching out a local community organization that might interest you, and getting involved. It's a great way to connect with your neighbors. Just in case you hadn't guessed, we would love to have your help with this magazine! We have jobs that allow you to maintain your "social distance," like research, creating artwork, writing, or selling ads.

Something else that I've noticed is that local history from the 20th century is not as accessible as I had expected. Much of this knowledge is (was) in the heads of our elders. No doubt there are boxes of photos, documents, and artifacts in attics and under beds, and only the senior generation can decode the box's contents for us. And I've found that seniors *want* to tell these stories before they're lost!

Make time to talk to family members or friends who have spent some or all of their lives here, and record what you learn. Or dig through those forgotten dusty boxes to see if you can discover historic treasures. Whatever you uncover, the Heritage Society would like to hear about it and document it. We can scan photographs and documents, and return them to you. We would be glad to add written or recorded oral histories to our collection.

Working on the stories for this issue, we found a lot of interesting material that didn't quite fit into the articles. We will share this material periodically on Facebook. Be sure to look on Thanksgiving Day, to find out more about our last-page poet Grub S. Arts!

Lists of references used in writing the articles in this issue can be found in the online electronic (.pdf) copy of the magazine at strasburgheritatesociety.org/shs-journals.

A collage of four photographs showing the interior and exterior of the Shear Fade Barber Shop and Hair Salon. The top-left photo shows the shop's entrance with a woman standing in the doorway. The top-right photo shows a woman holding a pair of scissors, with the text "New Barber Shop and Hair Salon in Strasburg" overlaid. The bottom-left photo shows the interior of the shop with two red barber chairs and a wooden counter. The bottom-right photo shows the exterior of the shop at night. In the center, there is a circular logo with the text "Shear Fade", "717-288-2887", and "Kimberly Pantano owner". At the bottom, there is a dark blue banner with the address "11 South Decatur Street" and the hours "Monday-Friday 9-7 · Saturday 9-2".

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Victorian Elegance
the Gonder Mansion

130 WEST MAIN ST

French Room

The Heritage Society thanks Pat and George Desmond for opening their home so we could present this article. We hope that the readers appreciate this glimpse inside their amazing house. Remember that the mansion is a private residence, and is not open for public viewing.

Please respect the Desmond's privacy.

Magazine cover photo by Pat Desmond. Text and color photos by Joe Deery

Riding through the bucolic Lancaster County farmland on the Strasburg Rail Road, it's easy to forget that at the end of the 19th century, railroading was big business. Railroading was central to economic vitality and growth. The 50 years following the end of the Civil War in 1865 were railroading's "golden years." During that period, the nation's rail network grew from 35,000 miles to more than 250,000 miles. There was work to be done, and money to be made doing it.

Building railroads was the business of Strasburg's Gonder family. Strasburg natives Benjamin B. Gonder, Sr. (1814-1887) and Ann C. Hoffman (1816-1898) married in 1840 and settled into the house at 136 West Main St. where they would raise their family and spend the rest of their lives. Benjamin was known for his bright and active mind, and as a young man, he entered into the business of contracting and building. His first contract was to build a portion of the then-new Strasburg Rail Road. Business grew and he worked on a variety of projects including canal building and other public works projects. But most of his work focused on building and upgrading railroad roadbeds and tracks. The Pennsylvania Railroad provided him with frequent contracts. He found work with many other railroads as well, both in Pennsylvania and out of state.

The Gonders had seven children. Four sons and one daughter survived to adulthood. The senior Gonder involved his boys in his work, and eventually sons George M., Joseph D., and Benjamin B. Jr. became capable partners in the business.

As he reached his 70s, Benjamin B. Gonder, Sr. suffered declining health, and passed away in 1887 at age 73. The three brothers joined forces and

continued to operate the company. They worked on a variety of challenging jobs, but their time working together was limited. The two eldest brothers were beset by health problems, and sadly first George Gonder passed away in 1888 at age 43, and then Joseph Gonder passed away in 1890 at age 48.

On his own, but with the business on a strong foundation, Benjamin B. Gonder Jr. continued the family business and prospered. He had married Mary Maynard of Strasburg around 1883. B. B. Jr. and Mary had one son and were expecting a second child, when father, B. B. Sr., died. The couple and their children moved into the house at 136 West Main, in which B. B. Jr. had been born. There, they lived with his mother and unmarried Aunt Annie. Within a few years, the house echoed with the voices of their four children: Walter, Katharine, Joseph, and Evelyn.

As the 20th century dawned, the “Victorian Era” had been in full swing for a quarter century, with its ornate styles in architecture and the decorative arts. Benjamin had surely seen some fine estates as he “rubbed elbows” with business leaders who were spending on expensive projects. In that environment, the old Gonder family house did not reflect the family’s growing wealth. The Gonders were probably forming

visions of what could be.

Oral history has it that the reserves needed for the Gonders to build their dream house came from a financial windfall during work on the railroad bed at the curve in Gap, Pa. The story is that Gonder provided a high estimate to cover the cost of removing hidden rock. No rock was found, so the job was highly profitable.



A typical railroad construction job in the late 1800s



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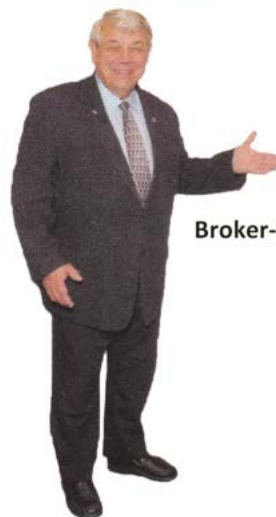
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However, the details of this story may be in error. The grading work at Gap was done between 1881 and 1885, when B. B. Sr. and the brothers were still alive. A more likely fit for the story was a contract awarded to B. B. Jr. at the end of 1902. Newspapers reported that work to add a second track between Bolivar and Blairsville, PA (about 50 mi east of Pittsburgh) would require the removal of 400,000 cubic yards of material. The timing suggests that this job is a more likely setting for the story.

The decision to build a “suitable” new home was apparently made by late 1903, when Gonder purchased the lot to the east of his home from John Herr. The brick house that stood there was thought to be one of the oldest structures in Strasburg. The Strasburg Weekly News reported that it

appeared shorter than its 1½ stories, as the ground around it had “filled up” since it was built. When Gonder had it demolished, the paper reported “it is going now, and since it was no longer useful nor pretty, we are glad of it.”

The identity of the architect for the new mansion is not known. Construction of the new mansion was underway in early 1904, undertaken by local carpenters Holl & Book. The slate roof was the work of Benjamin Dull. The Weekly News reported in August of 1904 that Gonder had provided 10 mules and carts from his railroad work to haul earth to raise the front yard. “Strasburg boys are doing the driving and hauling 130 loads a day.”

Imagine the talk in town as the mansion began to take form...

“Did you see the crane that Gonder brought in? Probably from his railroad job.”

“The newspaper said that they just brought in three carloads of pressed brick!”

“I think it’s shameful. It’s all too much! Why would anyone need such a big house?”

“That’s none of your business. If ol’ Gonder can afford it, I say he should build whatever he wants!”

“Well, it certainly will be different!”

“Different? Why, it will be the grandest thing ever built in Strasburg!”

At a cost of \$70,000 (approximately \$2 million today), by the spring of 1905, the work was finally drawing to a close. The family occupied the house for the first time on May 24, 1905. The newspaper reported that “In the evening, the mansion was ablaze with electric lights.” For the first July 4th celebration at the mansion, on a pleasant evening under a bright moon, the Gonders provided the townspeople

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with “the finest display of fireworks ever given in Strasburg.”

The new mansion embodied the latest in Victorian high style and luxury. The Historic Preservation Trust of Lancaster County identifies its style as a blend of the “Queen Anne” and “Chateausque” styles. A hallmark of the exterior form of the Queen Anne style is the use of projections, overhangs, towers, and differing textures, thereby avoiding the appearance of large unbroken flat surfaces. The Chateausque style is based on 16th

century French chateaus or castles. Aside from these identifiable style themes, the house design included a multitude of unique details. Follow Benjamin and Mary Gonder as they show you their new home...

Climbing the steps in front of the mansion, you are greeted by Mr. and Mrs. Gonder on the spacious porch. Featuring unique inverse tapered posts in pairs, the porch provides a comfortable outdoor space where the Gonders enjoy card parties and a relaxing shade. Beautiful leaded beveled glass flanks the large front door.

Past the doors, you enter through a vestibule with a stenciled flame motif on each wall; this motif is repeated just inside on heavy horsehair velvet curtains that frame the doorways to the adjacent rooms. Through the doorway are a paneled hallway and an elegant staircase, finely crafted from choice

mahogany wood. Carpeting made of English wool with a floral design on a black background cascades down the stairs and flows through the hallway, into the adjoining rooms on either side.

The room to the right is a parlor called the “French Room”, featuring a fireplace and furnished in a French style. A comfortable circular bay, formed by the west tower, extends from the front corner of the room. A broad opening leads from the French Room to the “Music Room.” Sliding pocket doors, hidden in the walls, can



*Benjamin B. and Mary Maynard Gonder,
and the newly-built mansion.*





be used to separate the rooms; similar doors can be pulled out in between the other downstairs rooms as well. The star of the Music Room is a 1902 Mason & Hamlin baby grand piano, which daughter Evelyn plays. She even teaches aspiring pianists here.

On the opposite side of the hallway, mirroring the French room, is the “Library,” which features its own cozy bay within the east tower. Books and objets d’art fill shelves in the Library. Another fireplace provides a focal point while sitting and reading. As with all of the downstairs rooms, light filters through delicate Belgian lace curtains that hang in the large windows.

The “Sitting Room” is a comfortable room with less formality. It’s a central place for the family to gather, and connects to the Library, the Dining Room, and to the second floor by way of its own staircase.





At its end, the hallway terminates at the dining room. The mahogany woodwork of the front rooms changes to quarter sawn white oak in the dining room. The heavy furniture is suited to the large room. Against the walls rests a massive oak sideboard and server with carved lion tops and ball and claw feet. A pretty collection of delicate tableware is on display in the bow-front china cabinet.

The dining table rests on a split carved pedestal, and the ten chairs have carved crests and leather backs. A fireplace straddles one corner of the room, and above it, a mirror framed by the carved mantle reflects the scene.

A door leads from the dining room to the kitchen, and stairs in the kitchen lead up to four rooms for live-in servants. Back in the dining room, adjacent to the fireplace, another dramatic set of stairs winds through a landing to the second floor.

There are seven bedrooms upstairs, and normally, the second floor would be off-limits to visitors, but the Gonder's new bathroom is not to be missed. The bathroom is paneled in mahogany wood. The morning sun streams in through large stained glass windows with a

flame motif, and the same design is repeated on the outside of the large claw foot tub and the base of the shower. To make sure that the tile floor is not cold, hot water pipes have been embedded in the floor to provide heat! But the eye-catching feature is the shower standing in the corner. Custom-made using nickel-plated pipe, its shape is reminiscent of a bird cage. Water floods out of a ten inch shower-head directly overhead, but it also sprays inward from tiny holes in five horizontal pipes circling the bather at four levels! This is a bathroom unlike any other!

The bathroom has a door that leads to an adjoining upstairs porch. From the porch, the garden comes into view at the rear of the house, and the barn stands to the east.



By the time the family moved in, the children were approaching adulthood. Son Walter was a college student at Boston Technical School, and daughter Katharine had graduated from high school. Soon Joseph would be off to Lehigh University in Bethlehem, and Evelyn would attend New England Conservatory of Music in Boston.

Benjamin continued his contracting work, but also found time for his farming avocation. He cultivated crops in several fields around Strasburg, and always kept chickens and three or four cows. He was always ready for conversation about his favorite pastime.



On a Saturday in March of 1915, Benjamin was up in the morning and making his usual rounds to various stops near his home. The "Strasburg Weekly News" recounts that "about four o'clock in the afternoon while out in his barn he remarked that he felt short of breath and went into the house and sat in a chair, and when one of the family came to see him a short time after it was seen that he had passed away." Gonder was 67 years old, and had had only ten years to enjoy his new home.

In the years that followed, various members of the family lived in the mansion. Benjamin's wife Mary continued to live there for the rest of her life. After Benjamin's death, son Walter and his wife Bess bought the home. They spent summers there with their son, until Walter's passing in 1940. Next Katharine and her husband "Jack" Childs bought the house. Jack passed away three years later, and Katharine remained there, living with her mother. Matriarch Mary Gonder died in 1959 at age 95. Katharine remained at the mansion until her passing in 1968 at age 81.

Upon Katharine's death, the mansion and nearly all of its contents were purchased by Abram and Claribel Keener. The sale included most of the furniture, paintings, lamps, curtains and draperies, crystal, and even some Gonder family photos and books. The Keeners kept most of the original furnishings, even leaving some of the items in drawers or on shelves where they were found. They were able to blend their own things into the house without trouble. In a 1973 interview for the *Intelligencer Journal*, Mrs. Keener explained "I especially like to dust and clean the many treasures in this house... in handling them they become part of me. Otherwise it would be like living in a museum... and that is not my idea of living."

A few tasteful updates were made to accommodate changes in lifestyle since the mansion was built. The original old-fashioned kitchen was intended to be staffed by servants, with simple cupboards painted an institutional green, and a blue linoleum floor. It was updated without changing the basic layout, so that it could better serve as a family kitchen. One bedroom gained a built-in closet, and additional bathrooms were added.

A restoration of the dining room and some of its furnishings became necessary soon after the purchase, when an original pipe in the upstairs bathroom burst. The family was away at the time, and daughter Julie returned home to find water cascading down the glass chandelier and onto the dining room table! Wallpaper and carpeting were replaced, but today, there is no obvious evidence of the disaster.

The Keeners had five children, and when they first moved in, daughter Debra became the youngest-ever resident at eight years old. The parents understood the significance of the

house, and managed to convey this to their children. After Abram Keener passed away in 1989, the house was purchased by daughter Patricia (Pat) and her husband George Desmond. Daughter Julie has been a regular presence, first for her parents and now for her sister, helping to care for the house, to decorate it for special occasions, and to tell its story.

On taking ownership, the Desmonds spent two years taking care of necessary repairs, including repairs to the porch woodwork, exterior painting, and electrical updates. They still keep the original Victorian decor and Gonder family heirlooms in place. The originality of the home and its contents is what makes the mansion so special. It hasn't been restored; rather the original home has been preserved nearly in its entirety. The high Victorian style on display is truly authentic. Pat is committed to maintaining the originality. Using the carpeting as an example, she explains, "There are places where the carpet is 'rag-tag', but I want it that way because it's real." Beyond that, the Desmonds are fastidious in performing the ongoing maintenance, which is so critical for preservation. She sums up her perspective on "ownership" by saying, "We're just caretakers. This house is part of the town's heritage, and we hope that future generations will continue to preserve it."



Benjamin B. Gonder's Hat

What makes Strasburg history so interesting? A few reasons come to mind. One reason is that so much historical “fabric” survives. The historic district is full of original buildings, situated in a streetscape that has remained constant for ages. As you begin to learn some of the history, you can walk around town and imagine how people lived in the town, and understand how they adapted to changes in society, politics, technology, and the economy. As with most learning, seeing real examples fosters real understanding.

One problem though is that some key elements have gone missing. When public buildings are lost, the past functioning of the town becomes harder to grasp. Standing in center square, at the intersection of Main and Decatur Streets, three of the four corners are anchored by historic buildings. But the northeast corner is occupied by a modern bank. What happened there? The Washington House tavern and hotel that previously stood there was important to life in Strasburg, and was part of the story of America. Its evolving use during its 170 year lifespan reflected changes that were taking place locally and across the nation. This article will attempt to tell its story.

Following Washington’s inauguration and tour, the decade from 1790 to 1800 saw an explosion of the construction of what would become the “first generation” hotels. In 1794, English traveler Henry Wansey described the new American architecture: “In respect to their buildings, I date a new era from their acceptance of the federal Constitution. They then began to feel themselves united as a nation, and all their public works and undertakings seem to have commenced in a more important style.”

While the exact date of construction is not documented, most accounts give 1793 as the date that a new tavern was constructed of brick on the northeast corner of the square; it was known as the “Sign of the General Washington.” Sometime after 1815, a major transformation took place when the building size was more than doubled by an addition on its west end. The enlargement seems to indicate an expanded focus on lodging. By 1836, the name had been updated to the “Washington House.”

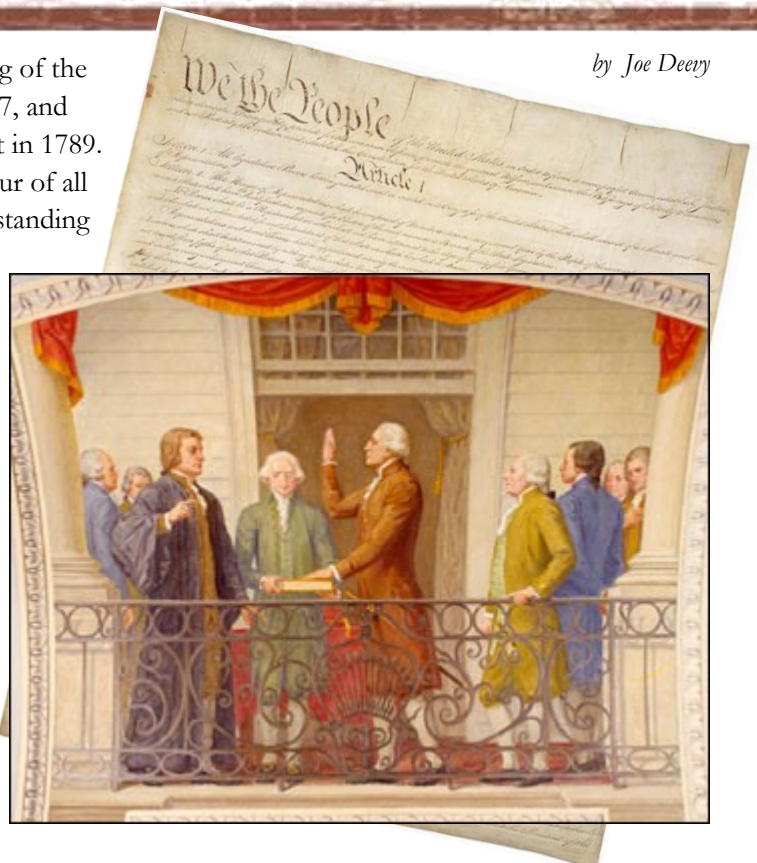
The early Washington House is shown in the circa 1850 engraving shown at right. The portion of the building to the right of the hanging sign was the original section. In the expansion, architectural details were updated to reflect the



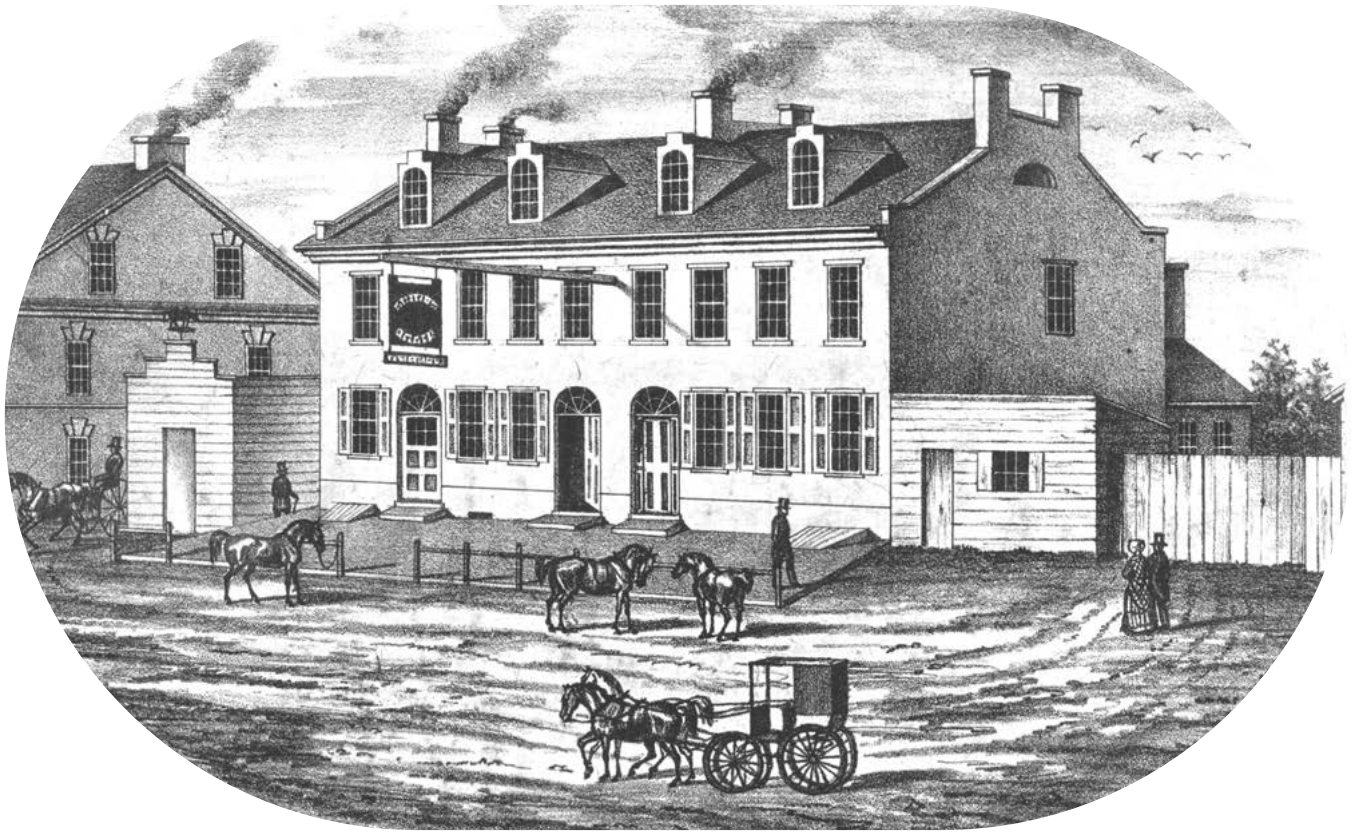
The story of the Washington House starts with the founding of the United States of America. The constitution was drafted in 1787, and George Washington was inaugurated shortly after it took effect in 1789. Within months, President Washington set out on a personal tour of all thirteen states. His purpose was to develop a first-hand understanding of the strengths, limitations, and politics of the states, and above all, to convey a message of national unity.

To avoid the appearance of favoritism or elitism, Washington resolved to lodge only in public houses, avoiding stays in private homes. Unfortunately for Washington, his experiences in these public houses were uniformly underwhelming. The President was held in high esteem throughout the new country, and the poor state of lodgings was often a painful embarrassment for the towns that he visited.

At the time, taverns were the only accommodations for travelers. Local governments issued licenses to sell liquor on the condition that these public houses also provided sleeping quarters for their patrons. Most taverns were adapted private homes. Since the real money was in liquor sales, it was said that they generally spent more on chairs than on beds.



by Joe Deery



latest fashion, which would come to be known as the “Federal Style.” Characteristic of this style, the new hotel featured semi-circular “fan-light” transoms above the entry doors, and lunette windows in the attic end walls. Roof dormers were added, featuring windows with round tops. The Federal style is also characterized by more delicate features in construction of windows and trim as compared to the previous “Georgian” style.

It’s interesting to realize that the Fireside Tavern building on Historic Drive was built as a loose replica of the early Washington House. It’s overall size, proportions, and placement of windows and doors give the viewer a reasonable impression of the appearance of the Washington House after the enlargement.

In 1848, the Washington House was sold at auction to settle the estate of its deceased owner. The advertisement for the sale, shown at right, gives an interesting description of the hotel. People who remember the building have provided additional details. Through the main entrance (the door of the original building section), a visitor entered a foyer, where the hotel clerk’s desk may have been situated. The ground level had high ceilings and included public rooms such as a dining room, parlor and barroom. At the back of the foyer was a graceful open circular staircase. Its curving banister was of varnished wood, said to be mahogany.

At the top of the staircase, a door opened into the third floor “attic” space. This space was entirely open from end

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to end, and was lit by sunlight through the four south-facing dormer windows. This may have been the inexpensive sleeping quarters where wagon drivers, drovers, or people of meager means could spread their bedrolls for the night.

The experience of the more affluent Washington House patrons in the early days is unknown. In general, early hotel rooms were rather sparse, with minimal furniture and probably no heat. But the separation from other travelers, who might be dirty or intoxicated, was surely a welcomed improvement. Guests generally spent more



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time in public spaces than in their rooms.

Hotel "hospitality" as we know it today had its roots in the 19th century hotels. Hotels provided safe public spaces for the travelling "outsiders." The hotelier, as host, served as a link between the guests and the community. Below, the 1852 ad from the Strasburg Bee newspaper clearly shows the emerging role of hotel hospitality.



Like other early hotels, the Washington House served an important role as a center for public services, meetings and events. It was a venue for all sorts of auctions, regularly selling everything from livestock to real estate. Newspapers advertised auctions on a weekly basis. The Washington House hosted meetings and banquets for of all kinds of groups including business, civic, and political organizations, to name a few. At election time, it served as a polling place.

Hotels can be considered part of the transportation infrastructure, and the fortunes of Strasburg and its hotels were tied to developments in transportation technology. From the beginning, Strasburg's economy relied heavily on the business brought by traffic passing through town along the Great Conestoga Road, between Philadelphia and the Susquehanna River. Strasburg's location at about one day's travel from the river town of Columbia made it an ideal overnight stopping point. In the late 1700s, demand for lodging and services was at an all-time high, and Strasburg rivaled Lancaster in size.

But travel was difficult, slow, and expensive, and people were searching for better solutions. Traffic through Strasburg had begun to decrease when the gravel-paved Philadelphia-Lancaster turnpike (now Route 30) opened in 1794, bypassing Strasburg. The expansion of the Washington

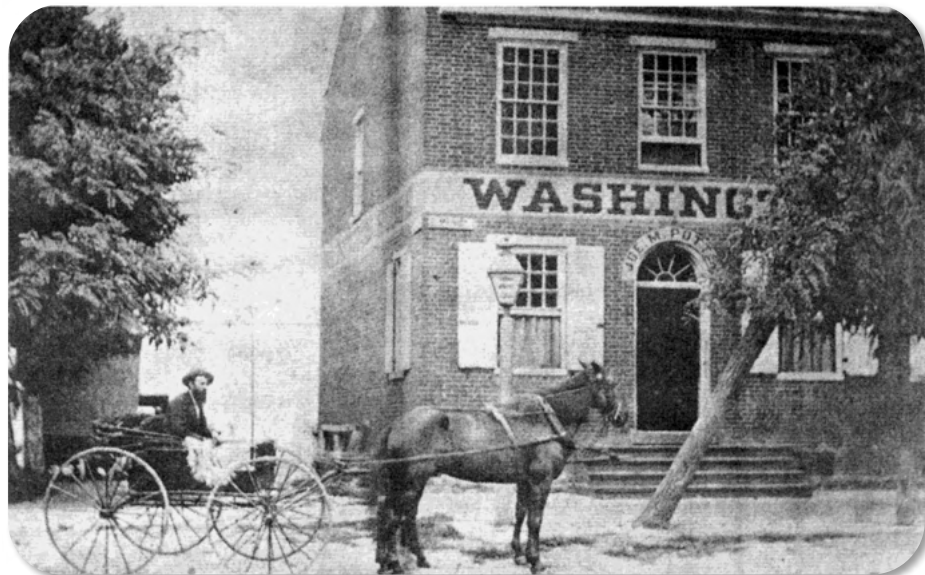
House seems to show that demand for improved lodging was still strong. However, in 1834, the Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad began operations, drawing even more of the long-haul traffic away.

For the Strasburg hotels, the result was a reduced demand in the second half of the 1800s. While other growing cities were building the next generation of hotels, the Washington House was approaching its 100th year. Styles were changing and clientele was beginning to expect better amenities. Maintenance issues were probably mounting.

In 1884, a newspaper announced new owner “Mr. W. W. Nissley, proprietor of the Washington House, is about to repair the same, making it more comfortable and accommodating to patrons.” It was probably at this time that the Washington House received a modernizing facelift. The most obvious change was the addition of a porch across the entire façade. The original windows were beautiful, featuring twelve panes in both upper and lower sash. But changing them to single-pane sashes probably reduced the maintenance needs and fit with the style at the time. Also in keeping with style trends, the downstairs front windows were enlarged to a full floor to ceiling height, bringing in more light and improved air circulation. The fan windows in the east and west walls were replaced with double-hung windows. The three original paired chimneys were removed and replaced with two single chimneys, suggesting updates to the heating systems. The east and west gable-end walls had originally extended above the roofline to form parapets. These were removed, and the roof was extended past the gables with overhanging eaves. The photos at right show the hotel before and after the renovations.

Electricity came to Strasburg in 1899, when L. J. Bair set up a steam engine and generator behind the Washington House to provide power to light the hotel.

In 1901, Benjamin Fritz purchased the hotel. Fritz and his son William would operate it successfully for the next twenty years, drawing on a long family history in the hotel business. During those years, the stage was being set for the Washington House’s next act.



*above: Proprietor Joe Potts circa 1883, before the renovations
below: The renovated Washington House around 1900*



A few doors to the east, John Martin (J. M.) Hagans had built a thriving enterprise centered on the horse. He bred horses, sold horses, and operated a livery stable for overnight boarding of horses. He built, repaired, and sold wagons, carriages, & sleighs. But Hagans could see the writing on the wall; the automobile was the future. In 1916, he made the switch, converting the livery into a garage and becoming a Ford agent, selling Model T's.

Dallas Hagans joined his father’s business in 1920. To accommodate their growing business, they purchased the Washington House from Benjamin Fritz in 1921. They converted the downstairs to serve as the dealership, adding large windows to create a showroom facing the square. Garage space was added to the rear of the building and can be seen in the circa 1940 aerial photo on the following page. A smaller space was leased to other businesses—initially it was a barber shop, and later a dentist’s office.

Dallas and wife Christine lived in a large apartment on the second floor, and leased additional smaller apartments.



Aerial view showing the dealership on Center Square, with garages added in the rear, circa 1940

In the mid 1930s, Hagans switched brands to sell Chevrolets, and then switched again to the Plymouth and DeSoto brands. During World War II, the Hagans' son, John served in the Pacific theater, commanding a PT boat. The dealership had to survive by selling used cars and service, as new car production halted during the war. The post-war years saw high demand for cars as Americans returned to normal life.

In the late '50s, trouble loomed as the dealership approached its 40th year. Nationwide sales of DeSoto cars declined precipitously and finally, the announcement came that the brand would be discontinued after 1961. The Hagans family faced a dilemma. Dallas had reached retirement age, and they had no product to sell. They could find no way forward except to sell the property.



The Washington House on its final day (photo by Ellis Bachman)

The eventual buyer was The First National Bank of Strasburg, whose plan was to replace the old hotel with a new bank building. The Hagans family did what they felt they had to do, and sold the property in 1964. Soon afterward, the Washington House was gone. The beautiful staircase was salvaged, to be installed in a home in Lancaster, but the rest of the building was unceremoniously dumped over the south side of the hill along Hilltop Road, near Bunker Hill Road.

The loss was felt heavily by the Hagans family, who had made their lives and livelihoods there for 43 years—more than twice as long as any other owner. It was the place where Dallas and Christine had raised a family, and where their grandchildren had come to visit. The building—their home—had still been in reasonably good condition. But there was no going back.

The loss also weighed on many others for whom the Washington House had been a part of daily life. Anyone who appreciated its historical significance mourned its passing. While the center of Strasburg was never quite the same again, the experience provided a lesson as the town worked to control its destiny in a changing world.

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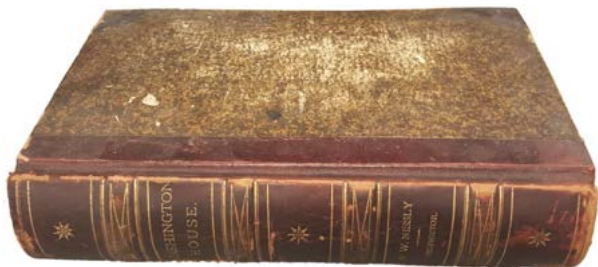
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From the Collection: Guest Register Books from the Washington House

by Joshua Stauffer

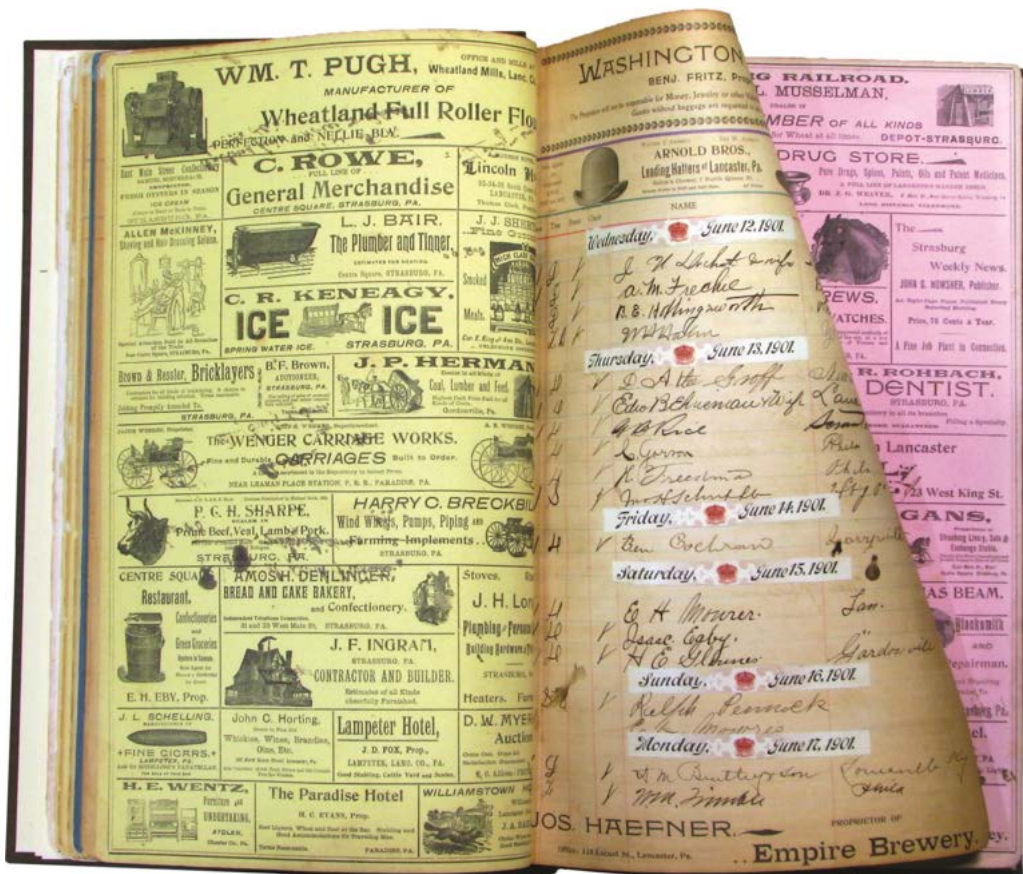


Tucked away in the collection of the Society is a stack of books that were generated by the daily operations of the Washington House from 1884 to 1918. The books are guest registers that document the visitors who stopped at the hotel for business or pleasure during those years. While the registers do not give us an abundance of information about the hotel or about the people who worked or visited there, they are fascinating artifacts that attest to the vibrant small-town life that existed in Strasburg during that period over 100 years ago.

Journey back in time with me to Strasburg's center square on the quite chilly morning of January 23rd, 1890. Let's say that you have come to town from Gap, Pa., your hometown, with one Jonas Eby, a business partner of yours. The carriage you are traveling in pulls up to the hitching post in front of the Washington House on Main Street just as snow begins to fall, around 9 a.m. Having just spent a little over an hour on the road, you are eager for a warm breakfast. Entering the foyer, a clerk greets you from behind a counter upon which sits a large, open, leather bound book. After inquiring about your manner of business, he spins the book around and hands Jonas a fountain pen. Jonas signs his name and place of residence before spinning the book back around to the clerk. After receiving direction to the dining room the two of you head eagerly towards a warm meal.

While some of the particulars of this scenario are obviously fictitious, the Washington House register books give us evidence to reconstruct at least a little of what was happening there at that date in history. Guest registers were and are, strictly speaking, business documents. They recorded and tracked a hotelier's patrons allowing them to keep their business in order. While managers of hospitality type businesses have likely used some sort of system for documenting their guests for much longer, the practice of using large leather-bound guest registers like our own appears to have started gaining traction in the mid 1800s. Companies, most notably the American Hotel Register Company, emerged as designers and printers of the new books which were increasingly in demand across the nation.

A fairly standard format emerged to serve the needs of hotel businesses, and the registers from the Washington House are excellent examples of that design. At the top of each page is a header that displays the name of the hotel and it's proprietor at the time. In many of the books this is followed by an advertisement: at one point for a local political candidate, at another for a hat retailer in Lancaster City, and another period displays a promotion for a local brewery. The body of the page has 6 columns: Check, Name, Residence, Time, Room, Horses. The pages are broken up into days—sometimes with the date hand-written in a flowing script, at other times dates are denoted by pre-printed stick-on tags with a small advertisement for a stove manufacturer. In between each register page are pages that double as blotter paper—to absorb extra ink left on the page from the fountain pen—and advertising for local businesses.

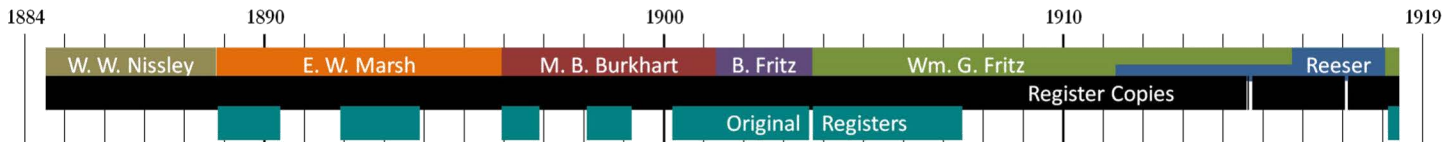


The hotel register would have been stationed on a desk or counter in the foyer. It appears that guests would have signed the book for themselves—name and residence—before handing it back to a clerk who would note any additional relevant details. It does also appear that the register would have been signed not only by those who were taking a room, but also by those who were just stopping for a meal or drink. The registers are filled with names from a variety of locations, some surprisingly distant, like Hartford, Connecticut, Louisville, Kentucky, Dayton, Ohio and Coldwater, Michigan. Most visitors, though, are quite local: Philadelphia, Bird-In-Hand, Gap, Lancaster, Strasburg. The pages of advertising show that the books were not only used as a gateway to the house, but attempted to be a bridge to the town and surrounding area as well. In these visitors were beckoned to visit a variety of local shops and employ professionals in a range of services. For example, in Strasburg, in November 1889, guests of the Washington House could walk to Herr's Saddlery, D.L. Whitticar "Fashionable" Merchant Tailor, The People's Shoe Store, and—my favorite—an establishment that sounds as if it would be right at home in any of today's hippest East Coast cities: W.W. Mason's Oyster Saloon and Confectionary Store.

The registers came to the Society through the family of one-time Washington House owner Benjamin Fritz. His descendant Gladys Fritz married Huber Hess and had a son named Fritz Hess. Fritz and his wife Catharine were founding members of the Heritage Society and donated the books now in the collection. The original registers have been rebound, with their original red leather bindings saved and stored with the registers. The books are large, 12 inches wide and 18 inches tall, and are now wrapped and stored in



protective wax paper. Also included in the collection are hardcover-bound copies of the original registers, although these duplicates do not include replications of the blotter page advertisements. Presumably, the copies were made so that the registers could be viewed and studied without disturbing the sturdy but quite old originals any more than necessary. While the range of duplicate books spans almost the entire period from 1884 to 1918, the collection of originals covers only about 40 percent of that time, mostly between the years 1889 and 1908.



Washington House original and copied registers in the Heritage Society collection, by year & hotel proprietor

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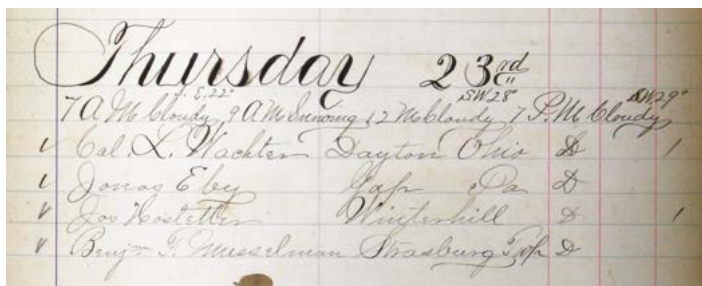
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As historic artifacts, the books do give us a window into Strasburg's past. Upon initial inspection though, the window appears louvered, allowing a frustratingly narrow scene. The books are, after all, not much more than a list of names and places. The names themselves are interesting, but most are hard to attach significance to, many of their identities lost to time. Paging through the books you may come across a name that is recognizable today (J.L. Ranck of Strasburg visited on Monday June 5th, 1899, for example) but it is challenging to find people with whom to make connections. The design of the registers is formal and spare—intended to facilitate the business of the hotel, not tell stories to future inquirers. This is true of most objects left by history, however, and some patience and work opens the blinds of history a little wider.

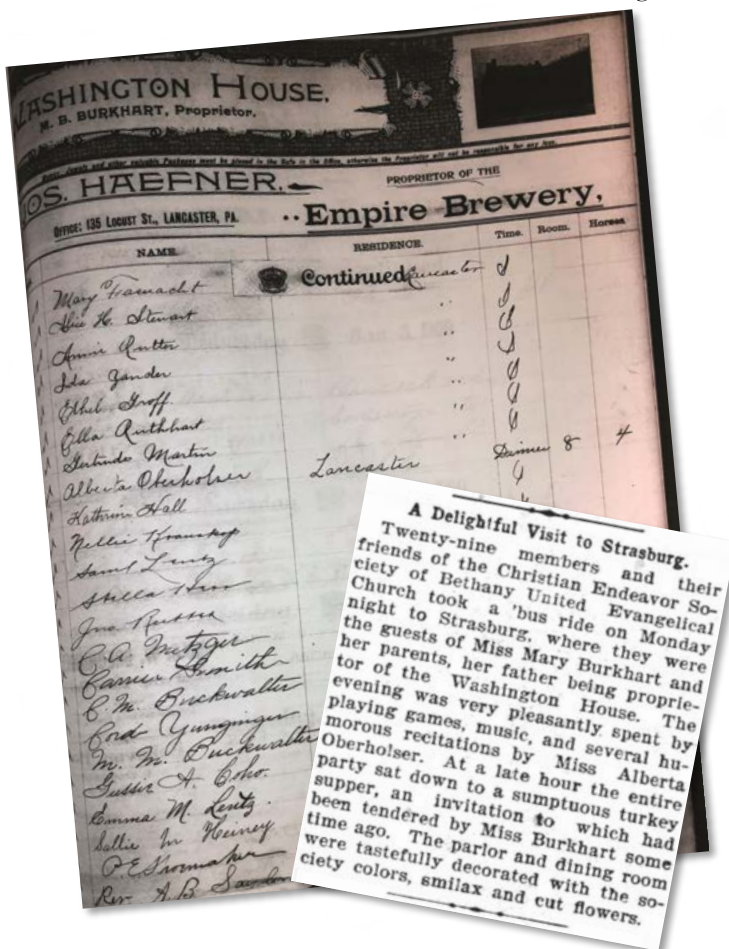
Take my scene from earlier, for example, regarding Mr. Jonas Eby's visit on January 23rd, 1890. One very interesting thing that appears at various times in the life of the books are daily weather reports penned in the register margins, presumably by the desk clerk. At intervals through the day temperature and weather conditions are noted briefly. On January 23rd, the day Mr. Eby was in town, the register notes that at 7 a.m. it was 22 degrees and cloudy, and that by 9 a.m. it was snowing.



We can also see that Mr. Eby was from Gap, Pa. If we combine the data from the book with research from online archive sources, we learn that Jonas S. Eby from Gap, Pa. (b. December 4, 1845, d. September 13, 1937) worked in the banking industry for Gap National Bank. From here it is not a stretch to envision Jonas traveling to town on that cold January day and stopping at the Washington House before crossing the street to do business at the Strasburg National Bank.

One reason that the books are an important part of the Society's collection is that their presence illuminates the past life of this town. The Washington House was an integral part of the town's culture during its time and the books help us to *confirm* its historic existence and influence. Another reason that the registers are significant is that, in conjunction with other sources and artifacts, they can *corroborate* local stories that have been or will be told. As noted before, it is hard to look through the books and quickly pick out an obvious plot line. But if you begin with an event from a different source, the registers' record can help assist with the data. For example, a report found in Lancaster's Semi-Weekly New Era on January 3, 1900 recounts a dinner party hosted at the Washington House two days prior by a

by a Miss Mary Burkhart for a group from the Christian Endeavor Society of Bethany United Evangelical Church. Turning to that date in the registers the crowd is plainly signed in to room 8 for the evening. The books are a part of the constellation of sources we are able to use to tell Strasburg's tales.



Thirdly, the books are important because they bear witness to the human lives and human endeavors that took place in the very same space as our own. In doing so, they *cultivate* an appreciation for Strasburg as a gift—built in the past, and inherited by us who are now suspended in the provisional present. This is to see Strasburg as a heritage. And I think that appreciation encourages us to live and work in it now in such a way as to pass it on well to the future.

I had a couple opportunities to flip through the original books in the cool and quiet storage space where they are now held. I was moved, as I sat with them, by the ink marked pages—the flowing scripted names, the playfully decorative dates written by the clerk, the spots and stains in the margins. The books, particularly through the penmanship, exhibited a kind of historic presence unlike any other piece of history that I have observed. The lives once lived, and now gone, seemed to endure in some way on those pages through the personality of their handwriting. The Washington guest registers appear at first glance to simply be a list of names and places. When considered thoughtfully, however, they are a significant and important part of the Society's collection and deserve our best efforts to preserve and promote them as a part of our local heritage.



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That happy time is drawin ny,
 Wen we begin to dreem
 Of turkey brown an punkin pie,
 An peeches canned an creem;
 An taters masht an stewd tomats,
 An corn an selry, too
 An uther kinds of things than that's
 Witch Ime now tellin you.

I yoost to think wen but a boy,
 That eetin was the thing
 That cawsd the thanks an all the joy
 The cummin day wood bring.
 But I have changed my idees sum,
 Since I have growd a man,
 An if them idees now will cum,
 Ile tell them if I can.

Ime thankful that our weet was good,
 An thankful fer the ry;
 Ime thankful that the wether shood
 Be wet an sumtimes dry.
 Ime thankful fer our tater crop,
 Tho few and far between,
 An yet our herds we had to prop,
 Wen they begun to leen.

Ime thankful fer our crop of corn,
 An punkins witch we sold;
 An witch had gleemd on dewy morn,
 Like lumps o' shinin gold.
 Ime thankful fer the appels, piled,
 An fer the sour crows;
 An fer the appel butter biled,
 I told you all about.

Ime thankful fer my daly breth,
 The sunshine an the rane,
 An that Ime thus far spard from deth,
 An uther sorts of pane.
 Ime thankful I can heer an see,
 An taste an feel an smell,
 With all these yool now agree,
 Weer gittin on quite well.

Ime thankful that Ime on a farm,
 Ware I have time to think,
 Ware I don't feel temptations harm,
 An be afrade Ile sink.
 Ime thankful fer our horse an cow,
 An fer our pigs, — a pair.
 An fer the hay upon our mow,
 An corn an oats to spare.

Ime thankful that our land is free,
 That evry mans a king,
 As long as no ones injoored we
 Can do most anything.
 Our property is all our own,
 To do with as we will,
 Our valued lives are God's alone,
 An none dare mame or kill.

An Lord Ime thankful fer my home,
 An Pap an Mother kind,
 An thankful that neeth Hevens dome
 No better can I find.
 An Lord Ime thankful most of all,
 That Thou so kind hast been,
 To cum from Heven at our call,
 An save us from our sin.

So wen Thanksgiving Day is heer,
 Be not with swine compared,
 But with a thankful hart draw near
 to take of food prepared.
 An just before you eet it say
 A thankful prayer, an then,
 A blessing ask upon the day,
 An close it with "Amen."

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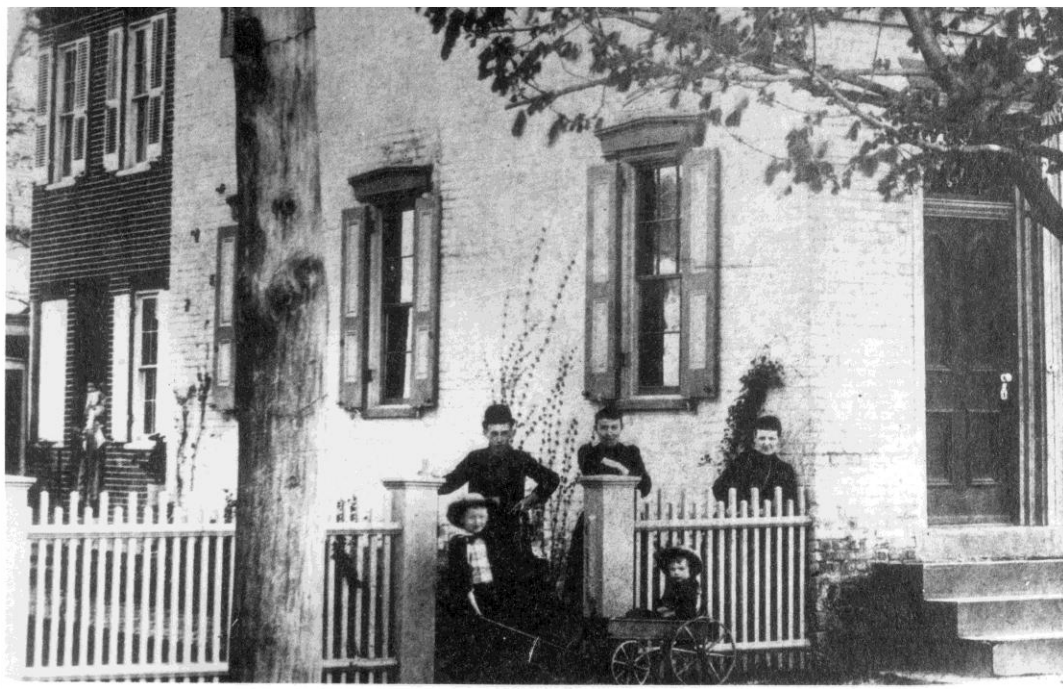
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Gonders at their home at 136 West Main, circa 1890 (before the mansion was built)

left to right: baby Joe Gonder (back doorway), Walter Gonder (pulling wagon), Lanny Murphy, Aunt Annie Gonder (B.B.'s sister), Katharine Gonder (in wagon), Mary Maynard Gonder

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1873 business card, from the Heritage Society's collection

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