

HISTORICAL PAPER

Prepared and Read

by

Hon. Allen H. Bagg

Mayor of Pittsfield

at

DEDICATION OF THE HOME

of the

WOMEN'S CLUB OF PITTSFIELD

42 Wendell Avenue

Thursday Evening

September 16, 1937

To the Officers and Members of the WOMEN'S CLUB of Pittsfield, and to MR. SIMON ENGLAND, I bring to you the Greetings and Best Wishes of the City of PITTSFIELD, and congratulations upon this happy occasion—the dedication of a permanent home for your most helpful organization.

I appreciate the honor of your officers and committee have shown me by asking me to bring to the members of the Women's Club a short story of this property, which, through the generosity of Mr. Simon England, one of Pittsfield's honored and most beloved citizens, is to become the permanent home of your fine organization.

It would be an easy matter to simply mention cold facts and dates—for I might say:

“This house was built in such a year—owned by such a person—sold on a given date, and here we are September 16, 1937—celebrating.”

That might be a story all right, that could be used, but I am quite sure that it would be neither fair nor right. I am, therefore, going to ask you to bear with me for just a few moments while I go back into history—in fact, I want to take you back to a date before the erection of this building and give you some facts about the early history of Pittsfield that will tie into the history of this building something of its surroundings at the time of its completion.

I have always heard—and the records prove it to be true—that this house was built in the years 1864 and 1865. This will permit me to go back at least seventy-two years to these dates, and I ask you to bear with me while I attempt to bring you a word picture of what we would have seen in the year 1865, had we been walking through our beautiful little Park and around Park Square. I want to tell you something about the people, and the buildings, that were neighbors to this one we are dedicating this evening as the new home of your Club.

It is just possible that there may be a few citizens still living who can remember when the land on which this building stands was vacant—but the greater share of those who lived at that time have passed on. Since 1865 was two years before I came around, I, personally, cannot remember back that far, but I can well remember many of the buildings that were a part of early

1 |History of Pittsfield, a paper presented by Hon. Allen H. Bagg at the Dedication of the Women's Club of Pittsfield, September 16, 1937. Typed manuscript in collections of Berkshire County Historical Society.

Pittsfield—many of which have made way for progress and are gone, while some are still standing, tho amid much different surroundings.

In order that I may bring to you a true picture, with correct historical facts—not only about this building, but about Pittsfield—I have spent some time among city and town records, and studying such plans as I could find. Then I walked around Bank Row—South Street—and Park Square; then to the Court House lot—and tried to visualize how it all looked in 1864 and 1865.

Then I went to the Park—walked around the Soldier's monument—then went to the length of the Park—that delightful open space which, in part, was made possible through the generosity of that noble couple—Mr. and Mrs. John Chandler Williams.

It is not my intention to wander around too much, or to go too far back into history, but since I have been asked to prepare a paper that can be kept as part of your Club records—I am sure that I will be forgiven if I try to write a comprehensive story worthy to be placed in the archives of your Club, in order that you may have it to refer to in future years.

We are interested in Wendell Avenue, which in 1865 was a narrow way and known as Williams Avenue, so named without doubt, for John Chandler Williams who owned the property where the Court House now stands. Town records show that Williams Avenue (sometimes called Williams Street) was not accepted as a town way until 1871. The name proved to be confusing because of the town having a Williams Street in the south part, but it was not until 1878, according to the old town records, that the name was changed to Wendell Avenue, the records describing it as extending from East Street to East Housatonic Street, and having a width of sixty feet.

What we know as the PEACE PARTY HOUSE, on the corner of East Street and Wendell Avenue, stood in 1865 on the present Court House grounds.

After years of dispute over the question of removal of the Court House from Lenox, it was finally decided in 1868 to make the change on condition that Pittsfield furnish a suitable site for a building, and furnish accommodations

compiled with these conditions. The John Chandler Williams property was purchased at a cost of \$35,000; the building erected and dedicated in 1871—and at that time it was said to be one of the finest court buildings in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In passing, it might be of interest to state that the Williams, or PEACE PARTY HOUSE, which is one of the oldest (if not the oldest) house in Pittsfield, was erected by Col. James Easton of Revolutionary fame, who intended it as a residence for his son, but owing to pecuniary difficulties it was sold about the close of the Revolution—and before its completion—to Mr. Williams by whom it was finished.

Mr. Williams died in 1831 and Mrs. Williams died December 11, 1834. In order to make room for the Court House, the Williams house was moved to its present location, which was the easterly side of the John Chandler Williams property, and next to what was known as the Capt. John Strong property.

In later years, the Williams house became the home of Hon. And Mrs. Edward A. Newton. Mr. Newton first came to town on a visit in 1815, and married a daughter of John Chandler Williams, returning to Pittsfield in 1825 to make it his permanent home. His father-in-law, Mr. Williams, having died about this time, he purchased the interest of the other heirs in the Williams homestead, and continued to reside there until his death.

Mr. Newton identified himself closely with all the interest of the town, and was foremost to advocate the grading and care of the Park, as we have it today, and better protection of the “OLD ELM.” Mr. Newton’s first wife died in France in 1835, and in July, 1837, he married Miss Susan C. Tyng of Boston. Mr. Newton died August 18, 1862.

An interesting fact is recorded in Smith’s History, which says that the first carpet covering a whole floor was laid in the parlor of the John Chandler Williams house, and was plain brown and green ingrain. After doing duty on the parlor floor for a time, it was for years afterward used on the floor of the choir loft in St. Stephen’s Church.

Although a little way from the building which we are dedicating this evening, I desire to tell you about a house that was on the site of the present home of Mr. Denis T. Noonan on East Street. Erected by Captain John Strong of Revolutionary fame, it was kept for many years by him, and by his son of the same name, as a tavern. In the year 1800, when it was purchased by Lemuel Pomeroy, it was a two story gambrel roof house very similar in appearance to the John Chandler Williams house which stood next west of it. Mr. Pomeroy substituted a third story for the gambrel roof attic, and his son, Robert Pomeroy, who succeeded him, built a large wing on the southeast corner. Years later, the main house was demolished, but the wing was moved to a lot on lower East Street, at about No. 680, and is still being used as a tenement house.

In addition to the Capt. John Strong property which Mr. Robert Pomeroy owned, he became the owner of other valuable property nearby—and I copy from the Berkshire Hills Monthly of February 1904—

“In 1860 he (Robert Pomeroy) made a shrewd purchase of real estate, having acquired of the Edward A. Newton estate all of its extensive holdings on East Street, but the residence grounds, now St. Stephen’s rectory (this means from East Street to the Shipton property.) From the west end of this he sold to the County the present site of the County Court House (\$35,000.000), and through the property to the south laid out Wendell Avenue for the sale of lots, on which he acquired a handsome revenue.”

This means that Mr. Pomeroy became the owner of all that portion of the John Chandler Williams—and later the Edward A. Newton—Property southerly from the Court House south line and southerly from the south line of the Edward A. Newton home property. Through this he opened up a sixty foot street, now Wendell Avenue, and that left him with attractive building lots each side of Wendell Avenue. Included in this purchase was the land on which this Club House now stands, and about which we will have something to say later. Now you will understand just why I wished to mention in this story the valuable homestead real estate owned by Mr. Pomeroy on East Street, thus giving me an opportunity to tie

it in with the purchase from the Newton estate, which included the land now owned by this Club.

Now I want to call your attention to two houses that are opposite this one on Wendell Avenue.

The WHITE TREE INN was the former home of Col. Walter Cutting, and WENDELL HALL was the home of Gen. William F. Bartlett, that wonderful soldier of the Civil War and the father of Mrs. Henry A. Francis and Miss Edith Bartlett of our city. Both Mrs. Cutting and Mrs. Bartlett were daughters of Robert Pomeroy, and these houses were built about 1870 on land that was acquired by Mr. Pomeroy in his purchase of the Newton estate property. The land on which the PEACE PARTY HOUSE now stands was the north-easterly portion of the John Chandler Williams Property, and later when Hon. G. A. Newton's remaining real estate was sold to Mr. Pomeroy, this was reserved as the homestead lot, and remained in the Newton family until the death of Miss Elizabeth Newton, who willed it to St. Stephen's Church.

From the southerly line of the Newton Property, this was south of the present Christian Science Church property, the Pomeroy land extended southerly down the Avenue and included land on which the houses of the late John W. Thomson, Mrs. D. M. Collins, and Judge Burns now stand. This I remember as an open lot where the cows were pastured. I was often a trespasser in this pasture because it was one way in which I could go to the home of my Grandmother, who lived on Pomeroy Avenue.

As a boy, it was always a great temptation to walk the coping of the Court House; jump the pasture fence, chase the cows, and then over the fence to Grandmother's.

Now shall we leave the Court House corner for just a few moments and glance across East Street, remembering that we are looking backward seventy-two years to 1865.

Just east of St. Stephen's Church was the spacious and elegant mansion of the Hon. Thomas Allen, which he started in 1855 and completed in 1858. There

may be some here this evening who will remember it, since it was destroyed not a great many years ago.

Then came St Stephen's Church—not the present building, but a modest building consecrated December 7, 1832—built of stone with dimensions of 67 X 43 feet, and with a wooden tower 80 feet high.

In 1851, this was remodeled and enlarged. An addition of thirty feet was made and a stone tower replaced the wooden one. This was the building we would have seen in 1865, and which was replaced by the present church building, the corner stone of which was laid July 11, 1889.

The next west came the Town Hall, built in 1832. While this is the same building we have today, it was not in size as large as the present building, but included just the front portion, with Town Hall on the second floor and Town and lawyers' offices on the first floor.

Then came the present FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, the corner stone of which was laid May 28, 1852. The church was dedicated July 6, 1853.

In 1865, the land where the Berkshire County Savings Bank building stands was the site of West's Block, built in 1850, with stores facing Park Square, but later these were changed so that the stores faced North Street.

The present BERKSHIRE COUNTY SAVINGS BANK BUILDING was erected in 1894 and 1895.

But we must hasten on. In 1865, the site of the present BERKSHIRE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY BUILDING was still occupied by the old Berkshire Hotel, owned and conducted for many years by Williams B. Cooley.

Across West Street, and on the Wendell Hotel corner, was the old Exchange Hotel building, which was afterward changed and made into stores and offices. And just below on South Street, on the southerly line of the present Wendell property, was the building in which the Pittsfield National Bank was located.

Just across the street on the corner of South Street and Bank Row was the Backus Plumbing Store, which is the present Park Building owned by the Pittsfield Coal Gas Company. It has a changed roof, and the small building known as the Dunham Building was added, the Dunham store having been located directly east of the Backus building.

Then came the Martin Block, built in 1850, and in appearance much the same as it is today. This building stands on the former site of the OLD PITTSFIELD COFFEE HOUSE, which had been moved to the corner of South and Broad Streets to make place for the Martin Block.

Then came five buildings—the first one, the present Wood building where Dr. Higley is located—has been changed by adding another story and a flat roof. In 1865, there were four other buildings east of the Wood building, all of which were removed or destroyed in later years to make way for that splendid institution—the Berkshire Athenaeum, which was built in 1871. One of these buildings, occupied by the Agricultural National Bank for thirty-five years, was moved to Franklin Court, off lower East Street, and is still doing duty as a dwelling.

Another one of these buildings was the Warriner store, in which for a while was located the few books known as the Public Library.

A third one was the so-called New Agricultural Bank Building, built on what had been known as the Female Academy lot, and this is where we would have found the Agricultural National Bank in our stroll around the Park in 1865.

Now I have taken you for a trip around the Park and have tried to visualize what we would have seen in 1865, and I am sure that it would hardly be fair to return to the story of this building we are occupying this evening without saying a word about the Park itself.

It will be impossible to give a complete story—for a whole paper could be written about the Park, and mine will be very brief. Let me suggest that, if interested, you find a first volume of Smith's History of Pittsfield and turn to pages 438-439 and 440 and read the story.

The early picture shows the Park space as a simple triangle with the “OLD ELM” standing alone. When it was decided to build the new Bulfinch Church, about 1790, (the one now on the Maplewood grounds) if located as recommended by a Town Committee it would have necessitated destroying the OLD ELM, a beautiful tree—and as Smith says in his History “fairer than any work of man’s hand, and which had been spared by the first settlers for its conspicuous beauty.”

So intense was the feeling against cutting this “OLD ELM” that when the woodsmen appeared, and after three strokes had already fallen, Mrs. John Chandler Williams threw herself between the tree and the axe and stopped its destruction.

But I have wandered from my original story, and my date of 1865, and gone backward another seventy-five years to 1790. Will you forgive me and allow me to ramble on for a moment more.

With the danger of losing the OLD ELM past, Mr. Williams completed the good work which his wife had begun by proposing to give the town as much of his land south of the Elm as the town would leave space between that space and the meeting house. Smith’s History says:

“The offer was accepted and thus Pittsfield acquired the ground for the beautiful little Park, so attractive with its graceful circlet of Elms and its sparkling fountain, and so hallowed by patriotic memories.”

So much for early History—and I must come back to 1865.

In 1865 the Old Elm was not standing, although there seems to be some discrepancy in dates about its destruction. On page 633 of Smith’s second volume it says that “in 1861 the Old Elm had fallen.” This, I believe, is incorrect, as I find in the Pittsfield Sun, recorded in chronological happenings of 1864, that the OLD ELM was cut, I find recorded in the Berkshire Hills magazine for August 1903—and also on the bronze tablet on the sun dial in the center of the Park, the date given in both these records as July 25, 1864.

In 1865, the Soldiers’ monument had not been erected, and it was dedicated seven years later—September, 1872.

With this word picture of what we would have seen in 1865, I must leave the story of Pittsfield's Public Square and return to the building you are dedicating this evening as your Club home.

This property now owned by the Women's Club—and the gift of Mr. England—is 170 feet wide. The land owned by Allen Bagg is about 166 ½ feet wide. Together with a strip ten feet wide of the Stanley Club holdings (formerly the Hinsdale property) these were a part of the Williams-Newton property bought by Robert Pomeroy, whom I referred to a moment ago. Mr. Pomeroy sold it in three parcels:

No. 1 to David Campbell, October 1, 1863.

No. 2 to Thomas Colt, October 31, 1863.

No. 3 to Thaddeus Clapp, Jr., October 31, 1863.

Later on the other owners sold their land to Mr. Colt, and he became the owner of 346 ½ feet on land on Wendell Avenue.

On this property Mr. Colt built the house we are in this evening. Later a coachman's house and stables were added, but whether by Mr. Colt or some later owner I do not know. But at any rate, this estate became one of the show places of Pittsfield.

Mr. Colt was the son of Ezekiel R. Colt, and was born in Pittsfield, June 28, 1826, and died November 28, 1876. His wife was Catherine M. Cooley, a daughter of William B. Cooley who owned and managed the Berkshire Hotel on the corner of North and West Streets. Mr. Colt was a graduate of Williams College in the class of 1842, and was a leading citizen of his day. In 1856, he purchased an interest in the paper mill in the eastern part of the town on the site of the present Government Mill, and in 1862 he became its sole owner. That part of Pittsfield known as Coltsville was named for Mr. Colt. Mr. Colt died in 1876 and the mill property was purchased by Crane & Company of Dalton, and the building burned in 1892. Another building was at once erected and is now the Government Mill.

Sometime during the years 1863-64-65, Mr. Colt erected this building we are dedicating tonight. Thomas Colt must have been a man of great vision for evidently he had in mind the building of a home that would last for many years, and how well he succeeded will be proven when I tell you that to this day never a crack or a settle has been found in any part of it. He called in the best workmen of the day. Mr. George W. Foote, the father of Attorney Nelson A. Foote, was the mason employed, and the result of his work is a tribute to his sterling character and superior workmanship. In making repairs, I found the foundation walls practically three feet thick almost impossible to penetrate. The walls of this building are as plumb and true as when first built, and joints between the brick are laid in what is called a case-knife joint. Before Mr. Foote died he told me that the brick in all outside walls were laid by one man—(this, of course, would not take in the new wall erected by the new owner in 1915.)

I have tried to find some record of the purchase of this brick, but cannot. However, Mr. Foote told me that they were Philadelphia pressed brick and that they came to New York City on flat cars and then he sent a man there to watch the transportation and to get them to Pittsfield in safety. We have all heard the story—whether true or not I cannot tell—that the brick came done up in paper, packed in straw, and cost ten cents each.

There is a story that I have heard a good many times from old residents to the effect that when the last course of brick was laid, Mr. Colt had a great many pennies imbedded in the mortar under the roof plate. Whether true or not I do not know. I only know that in trying to follow out some of Mr. Colt's ideas, I placed a good many pennies on top of the walls when I had charge of building an extension to the south side in 1915, so if you want to find them—look there. These pennies I am sure of, but the others may be only hearsay.

The heavy woodwork construction was in charge of John K. Strong, who was one of Pittsfield's most active builders of that day, and many of our city buildings show the result of his good workmanship.

The roof timbers and the floor joists are extra heavy, and all floors are fire-proofed between the joist with cinders and cement or plaster.

The first plumbing was the work of John Feeley, the popular plumber of the day, but this in 1916 was considerably out of date, and was all replaced under the direction of Allen H. Bagg.

The steam was originally by Rice, Robbins & Company, or Robbins & Gamwell, and this, too, was replaced in 1915.

The interior woodwork was in charge of Col. H. H. Richardson, one of the best builders Pittsfield ever had, and the painting and wood finishing by John Holland, who had a store where the Grand Union store is now located at 33 North Street.

I might continue giving many facts about the construction of this building but must not do so.

Under date of February 28, 1874, Mr. Colt sold this property to Alexander C. Joslin, who was a former hotel owner in Cincinnati, Ohio. After the death of Mr. and Mrs. Joslin, who died in France, the property came into the possession of a son, William L. Joslin, and from him was bought by Mrs. Edwin Clapp under date of June 14, 1901.

The high days; the grand days; and the big days of this property were during the earlier portion of the Joslin ownership—twenty seven years—from 1874 to 1901. Mrs. Joslin died March 3 1895, and from that date until sold to Mrs. Clapp the property was closed much of the time, William L. Joslin, the son, living in France, where he died.

One of my boyhood memories was hanging over the beautiful wooden fence which enclosed the property, and longing and wondering if I would have a chance to go inside—(but I won't say how many times I did later when pears and plums were ripe.)

The Joslins were royal entertainers, and on Fourth of July, it was no unusual sight to see a fine display of fireworks, much to the enjoyment of all the boys.

One of my memories as a newsboy of three years, was delivering papers at the Joslin home—for when the house was open, they always had the paper. Being

only a young lad, I recall I was very much afraid of a big China dog that was on the front lawn—to say nothing of the real dogs running about—almost always of the poodle variety. The Joslins always had dogs.

Whether the stables were erected by Mr. Colt or Mr. Joslin, I do not know, but the barn stood almost on the sidewalk line, where my house now stands, and no family in Pittsfield turned out a better or more up-to-date rig—with coachman and footman, and silver-plated harnesses.

In 1901, the speaker had charge of moving the barns to their present location on land that was a part of the Calvin Martin estate adjoining the Joslin property on the west.

As you may already have already discovered, all of the windows—and a good many of the doors—of this house were fitted with electric burglar alarms. The control board was at the head of Mr. Joslin's bed. Although these are now gone, when I first had any connection with the property, some of them were still in working order.

During the ownership of Mr. Joslin, Sr., this alarm system was often out of order, and in those days the only electrician in town was Fred F. Robinson, who was the Western Union telegraph agent, with an office in the Berkshire Life Insurance Company building over the back stairs and beyond the news stand of John G. Holland. Working for Mr. Robinson was a large-framed, good-natured son of Ireland, who always went out to make repairs. On a particular morning, he was ordered to go down to Joslin's and fix his bell system. It so happened that morning, that Mr. Joslin had been bothered with tramps and beggars, and forgetting for the moment that he had called for someone to repair his burglar alarm, and seeing Jerry Bergen sauntering down the street in a sort of don't-care fashion, Mr. Joslin started down the walk to meet Jerry, exclaiming "Get out of here. We've had all the tramps and beggars we can stand. Get out of here or I will call the police, and I'll set the dog on you." Jerry straightened up and asked: "Is this Mr. Joslin?" and receiving a reply in the affirmative Jerry said: "Well, Mr. Joslin, Mr. Robinson has sent me down to fix your burglar alarm." The scene changed, and Mr. Joslin said: "Oh, yes, come right in this way. I'll show you where I think the trouble is." And

the reply from Jerry, as told to me, was: “Mr. Joslin, take your burglar alarm and go to ---- (well, you know where) with it.” I cannot tell whether the alarm ever worked after that or not, but I do know that 37 years ago I ripped most of it out.

My father was a farmer and worked for Edwin Clapp, and it was from Mr. Clapp that the Joslin’s bought hay for the horses. It was Father’s job to deliver the hay, and boy-fashion I was always around waiting for a ride. I remember on some of these trips—bare footed, and none too much cloth in the seat of my trousers—being on hand, and having Mr. Joslin—who always seemed to me to be a stern, severe man, say to me: “What are you doing here? Why don’t you get up into that loft and tread down the hay?”—which I promptly did, and received ten cents each time, which was quite a sum for a boy in those days. I have repeated this story to assure you that I have known of—and can recall—this property for a period back more than sixty years.

During Mr. Joslin’s ownership, a beautiful circular conservatory was erected south of the house, with entrance from the back parlor. This was always filled with ferns, palms, and flowering plants, and was allowed to remain until changes made in the house in 1915 called for its removal.

I wish I had the time to tell you more about the property during Mr. Joslin’s ownership, but lack of time forbids, but in passing let me add that in those days no street or section of Pittsfield had better houses; better times; or better represented the good old New England hospitality than Wendell Avenue with its fine homes and families on both sides of the way. In this list of neighbors already mentioned, I should include the Thaddeus Clapp and Hinsdale families on the south, and just over the fence on the west—and facing South Street—the Cooleys. The Browns, the Parkers, the Talcotts, and the Ezekiel R. Colt families; also, the Girl’s School which stood on the present site of the Berkshire County Home for Aged Women, afterward used by Mrs. Viner as a boarding house. And then the Calvin Martin property, whose house was a most beautiful example of the architecture of that date, and which the writer had charge of removing to No. 14 Broad Street where the house lot adjoins the property of Mr. Simon England.

The Joslin property was purchased by Mrs. Edwin Clapp in 1901 and extensive repairs made by the new owner. Mrs. Clapp never occupied the house as she died November 4, 1901. The property came to her daughter, Mary Campbell Clapp, and after her marriage on February 24, 1903, to Allan H. Bagg, Mr. and Mrs. Bagg made it their home until 1915 when again many changes were made by the owner. The front stairs were removed and replaced by new ones farther back. Walls were removed to make larger rooms; and by the installation of steam heating plant; complete new plumbing, bell system, new porches, and new addition on the south, the house became modernized as we have it today. The work was not fully completed however, as Mrs. Bagg was taken from us July 27, 1916, and, except during the last three months of her sickness, she never lived in the new changed house.

The property then came to Allen H. Bagg, who never occupied it as a home after his wife's death, and except for a few years when the property was owned and used by Miss Ruth Mills as a private school, it had been unoccupied until Mr. Simon England purchased the property and presented it to the Women's Club of Pittsfield as a permanent home, and as a gift in memory of his wife, Mrs. Simon England.

Pittsfield rejoices with grateful hearts—and to Mr. England, one of Pittsfield's most loyal citizens the members of this Club and all of our citizens give grateful thanks.

You have a wonderful home; one of the best and choicest places of property in Pittsfield. May Heaven's richest blessing be ever with you, and may the good work you are doing continue to prosper for the benefit of your members and the good of Pittsfield.