

Who Is In A Name?

"Each of Us Has a Name" by the late Israeli poet Zelda.

Each of us has a name
Given by God
And given by our parents

Each of us has a name
Given by our stature and our smile
And given by what we wear

Each of us has a name
Given by the mountains
And given by our walls

Each of us has a name
Given by our sins
And given by our longing

Each of us has a name
Given by our enemies
And given by our love

Each of us has a name
Given by our celebrations
And given by our work

Each of us has a name
Given by the season
And given by our blindness

Each of us has a name
Given by the sea
And given by our death.

Many years ago I came across a curious and intriguing statistic that probably has never been scientifically proven. According to this bit of trivia, less than one in ten of us can name the *first* names of all eight of our great grandparents. Most in response to this question seem rather perplexed, apologetic and tend to make excuses as to why they are so ignorant of their immediate ancestors. So, what does this say about most of us? One interpretation is that within three generations, even your own family will not likely be able to identify you by name much less recall any distinguishing attributes pertaining to your life.

Lest you think that this is the beginning of a dark, depressing dissertation on the insignificance of our existence, I propose to do just the opposite. This is an opportunity to celebrate the extraordinary lives of several people who, while gone for more than three generations, are names that are still known by most of us who have spent even a few years in Cincinnati. They are individuals whose names are synonymous with streets we have often driven down or at least heard of before. However it is unlikely we know much about the depth of character or principles of those people associated with these streets. What accomplishments did they achieve? What did they do during their sojourn in our town that has outlasted them and continues to have an influence on us and the quality of our community? How easily we take for granted that these were people who led extraordinary lives. It is my hope that you will gain a fuller appreciation of these individuals and a better understanding of "Who Is in a Name".

A few comments as to who was selected. First these are people, who may sound familiar, but are not so well known that most of us have a working knowledge of what they accomplished. Second, they departed our midst well over 100 years ago thereby meeting the three generation test mentioned earlier. Third, and most important, they left a lasting impact through tangible enduring evidence of their civic leadership and exceptional transformational philanthropy resulting in the betterment of the community - not only during their own lifetime but for many generations that succeeded them.

The primary source for the profiles of their lives are drawn from two publications found in our library: "Centennial History of Cincinnati and Representative Citizens" published in 1904 by longtime Literary Club member Charles Theodore Greve and "Cincinnati the Queen City, 1788-1912" by Reverend Charles Frederick Goss published in 1912. In perusing the pages of these volumes, more than 100 familiar street names jump out, but of course time does not permit including but a handful. Thanks also goes to our historian, Robert Vitz, who has been invaluable with his publications and personal conversations in bringing these people to life.

Before delving into the individuals we will meet in greater depth, here is how Goss introduced his sketch of William Henry Harrison, albeit not the President. It truly sets the bar for those we will hear about.

“The standard by which a man should be judged, according to many thinkers, is not the amount of wealth he possessed, not the official position he may have held, not his education or family connections, but the good he did to his fellow beings. To what extent was he unselfish and what efforts did he make to promote the comfort or happiness of others?”

We will now meet several individuals who measured up to this stellar standard.

Judge Jacob Burnet Sr. 1770-1852 - Burnet Avenue

Jacob Burnet was one of the ground-breaking settlers and pillars of early Cincinnati. Born in Newark, New Jersey in 1770, his father Dr. William Burnet was the Surgeon General for the eastern division of the Revolutionary army. The father was a friend of Captain John Symmes and Israel Ludlow and invested in land they had purchased on the banks of the Ohio in the Northwest Territory. Dr. Burnet intended to visit his investment but died prematurely in 1791. Son Jacob, was educated at Nassau Hall (now Princeton University). In his formative years he had had frequent exposure to several of the framers of the United States Constitution including John Jay and James Madison. He also had the privilege of attending George Washington’s first inauguration. After getting his law degree in 1796, he promptly decided to seek opportunity in the West and get a first-hand look at his late father’s property holdings. When he arrived in what was then Losantiville, it consisted of 15 log cabins and a crude fort. Within a short time he was appointed an appellate judge to cover the entire Northwest Territory. He travelled from one seat of justice to another becoming familiar with all elements of the population including many Indians. His familiarity enabled him to write “Notes on the Northwest Territory” which was the only eyewitness text of the early history of the area.

In 1803, when Ohio became a state, Judge Burnet singlehandedly wrote the first constitution. He continued his legal practice alongside being a judge and in 1821 was elected to the Ohio Supreme Court where he served until 1828 when he was appointed to represent Ohio in the US Senate. His desk mate was Daniel Webster. He also had become a business partner of William Henry Harrison and it was Burnet who put Harrison’s name in nomination for the Presidency at the Whig convention of 1840.

Burnet accumulated extensive property including what is now Burnet Woods, the land where the Zoo is now located and Mt. Auburn. He continued to practice law until his death in 1853 and was considered the most respected barrister of his era. He had a

lifelong interest in building up the infrastructure and general welfare of the city. For instance he was one of the early promoters of an observatory and contributed most of the funds to build and equip it including the telescope still in use today. Burnet was instrumental in bringing his long-time friend and congressional colleague John Quincy Adams to be the key note speaker at the dedication of the Observatory on Mt. Ida which was promptly renamed Mt. Adams. He was also an early proponent and activist for improving public school education for the youth of Cincinnati having the foresight to recognize the importance of preparing a well-educated labor force to satisfy the needs of the rapidly growing city.

In his later years the old judge was a conspicuous and picturesque figure on the streets of Cincinnati. He was the last of the old school gentlemen of the city to wear his hair pulled back in a "queue" a la Revolutionary War soldiers and carry a tall cane from an earlier era wherever he went. As a contemporary remarked at his passing "He never swerved in a course from that which he believed was right. Few of the early lawyers of the city have so largely left their individual impression on the legal fabric of Cincinnati and the State of Ohio bar than Judge Jacob Burnet."

David Sinton 1808-1900 (Sinton Avenue)

Goss began his sketch of Sinton as follows: "While for many years David Sinton occupied the position as one of the wealthiest, most successful and best known citizens of Cincinnati, he earned an enduring place in the esteem of the community by reason of his extraordinary philanthropy and public spirit. His success in life was attributed according to Goss through "his devotion to high ideals and manly principles". His career was never self-centered, his success never came due to another's loss but as a result of constructive effort intelligently applied. Moreover the generous use which he made of his extensive means in assisting others, and in improving the city marked him as a man of not only kindly spirit but of someone who fully met the responsibilities of his wealth."

A native of Arbright Ireland, Sinton immigrated with his family to a small town in Northern Ohio when he was 3. At age 13 he struck out on his own leaving home with only an extra shirt tied up in a large handkerchief and a silver piece in his pocket worth about six cents. Over the next several years he worked in a variety of jobs including a tavern in Sinking Springs, Ohio where he got to know many travelers who inspired him with their stories of the outside world. At 18, he went to work for an iron foundry in Hanging Rock, Ohio for \$40 a month plus board. For the next four years he absorbed every aspect of the business laying the foundation for a great fortune. By age 22 he and a friend leased a foundry and began the manufacture of iron on his own account. He worked side by side with his employees even accompanying the shipments by flatboat from Cincinnati to Louisville, standing watch and sleeping on top of the iron

bars as they made their way down the river. This venture proved to be lucrative from the outset and in 1849, after 20 years of growth, he decided to move his offices to Cincinnati. He quickly became involved with a myriad of other business enterprises; accumulating substantial real estate holdings and constructing commercial buildings and factories of all kinds. He also built and owned the first opera house in town.

It is said that good fortune followed David Sinton wherever he turned. One example is a story told of when he supplied the iron for the Cleveland Gas Works. Unable to pay in cash, they offered Sinton stock instead. At once he negotiated to sell the stock for a price equivalent to the amount owed him only to have the deal fall through. Begrudgingly he held on to the stock for a time eventually selling it for four times the amount originally offered. He was the chief financier of the Cincinnati division of the Cincinnati and Cleveland Gas Company and singlehandedly kept electricity out of the city for many years to protect his investment. Similarly he held on to his inventory of iron during the early years of the Civil War until the price had skyrocketed in 1864 to a level that provided Sinton a fortune.

It was remarked that there was never a man easier to approach than Mr. Sinton and he was described as "simplicity itself". However he was also described as "blunt in speech, careless in dress, and in spite of being the wealthiest of anyone, had a reputation of pinching pennies." But any negative criticism was diluted by his giving away huge sums. He gave liberally to charitable organizations including a gift of \$100,000 to Cincinnati Union Bethel in 1872 and years later The Anna Louise Inn (owned by Cincinnati Union Bethel) was named for his granddaughter Anna Louise Taft Semple. As an aside, it was her mother, Anna Sinton Taft, who in 1931 invited the Literary Club to lease this club house for \$1 a year. Other gifts included \$75,000 to the Art Academy for their building, the forerunner of the Art Museum, \$100,000 to the University of Cincinnati for the David Sinton Chair of Economics, \$30,000 to the building of the first YMCA and many other significant gifts too numerous to recite.

In 1868 Sinton purchased the mansion on Pike Street now known as the Taft Museum of Art, originally built by Martin Baum, Cincinnati's first philanthropist and later owned by the Longworth family. He lived there with his daughter Anna until she married Charles Phelps Taft and then shared the residence with both of them until his death at age 92. He read extensively, making up for his lack of formal education. He became familiar and conversant with science, art, poetry the Bible and history as well as taking a keen interest in current events, especially as they pertained to the welfare of Cincinnati.

Goss concludes his profile of Sinton as follows “he was spoken of as the most prominent of Cincinnati men and the wealthiest. His prominence was not due alone to his splendid success in business but to his sterling traits of character and the kindly spirit which prompted him to give a helping hand whenever aid was needed.”

Andrew Erkenbrecker – 1821-1885 (Erkenbrecker Street)

Born on July 4, 1821 near Coburg Germany, Andrew Erkenbrecker at age 15 along with his father, mother and sister, made their way to the new world. After a brief stop in New York City, they settled in Cincinnati. Serving as a farm hand for a few years on Colonel Gano’s farm near Carthage, at age 22 he took his savings and erected a small grain mill which he quickly combined with a starch factory. His unusually shrewd business sense enabled the business to grow dramatically allowing the building of a much larger factory near Morrow. However, after 16 years of hard work, a massive fire in 1860 wiped out the entire enterprise. In spite of having no insurance to compensate for the loss, he never became discouraged and six years later he built a new factory on the banks of the Mill Creek near St. Bernard. Erkenbrecker developed new methods of efficiently manufacturing corn starch so that it would not quickly spoil. His innovations in the manufacturing process resulted in great demand for his products throughout the United States and Europe and he became widely known as one of the most successful and prominent in this industry.

Erkenbrecker had a lifelong interest in animals of all kinds but especially birds. He was a member of the Acclimatization Society which imported song-birds from Europe and assured they were properly acclimatized to the local environment. Stimulated by several trips to the larger cities of Europe as part of his business interests, as early as 1868 he started having serious discussions with his friends Otto Marmet, William Resor and Julius Dexter about building a zoo in Cincinnati. However the real origin of the zoo can be traced to a plague of caterpillars which descended on Cincinnati in 1872 destroying almost everything green and leaving the trees “as naked as the dead of winter.” His love of the beautiful foliage of Cincinnati’s streets, which were quickly being destroyed, caused him to take decisive action. With Mr. Erkenbrecker’s sponsorship, an agent was hired to travel to Germany to purchase insect eating birds. Among the over 1,000 birds procured were: English larks, nightingales, goldfinches, robins, orioles’, starlings and several other varieties. The birds arrived in the fall and were housed over the winter in an old abandoned mansion in Burnet Woods. In the spring of 1873, Erkenbrecker personally supervised the release of the rather hungry birds from captivity. Success was immediate and he delighted in the vindication of his efforts in eradicating the caterpillar infestation. With this act of civic heroism, public interest was sufficiently aroused in creating a zoo. He singlehandedly pushed forward the creation of a \$300,000 stock company to financially support the opening of a world class zoological and botanical garden. He personally put up the funds for the purchase

of 60 acres of land in Avondale and leased it back to the Zoological Society for 99 years. He was intimately involved in every aspect of the grand opening in 1875 featuring over 760 animals and charging admission of \$.25 for adults and \$.15 for children.

In addition to founding the Zoo, Ereknbrecker was President of the Telegraph Company and the first President of the newly created subsidiary, the City and Suburban Telephone Company. He was also treasurer of the great Cincinnati Industrial Exposition of 1871 and one of the prime movers of the first Sangerfest in Cincinnati, the forerunner of the May Festival.

An acquaintance said at the time of his death in 1885 "Few men have done more for Cincinnati than Andrew Erkenbrecker, few citizens have done more toward relieving poverty and sorrow, few enjoyed in private life as well as in business and philanthropic circles such a spotless record as this man."

Henry Probasco 1820-1902 – (Probasco Street)

Born July 4, 1820 in Newtown Connecticut, at 14 Henry Probasco moved from Philadelphia with his family, first to Lebanon Ohio and then Cincinnati. Within a year he had secured work as a clerk for Tyler Davidson's hardware store; remaining at the store in spite of his parents moving to Indiana a year later. He quickly displayed a great aptitude for the business and at age 20, not only earned a junior partnership in the business, but also married Davidson's half-sister - Julia Carrington. The hardware business growth tracked the burgeoning building boom occurring in Cincinnati in the 1840's as the city became the fifth largest in the country by 1850. Probasco urged expanding into a much larger five story building on Main Street south of Fourth. Within three years sales had more than quadrupled and by the early 1850's, Davidson Hardware ranked as one of the largest stores of its kind in the west and both men had become extremely prosperous.

Davidson and Probasco often spoke of how they wanted to repay the city by making a significant gift for the good fortune that had befallen them. Their conversation centered on a grand fountain that would be in the center of the city but the outbreak of the Civil War sidetracked any serious consideration of following through with this idea. In 1865 Tyler Davidson died unexpectedly. Within a year Probasco sold the business to a junior partner and retired, attaining the lofty status as one of the wealthiest citizens of the city through inheriting most of Davidson's estate as well as from the proceeds from the sale of the business. Probasco and his wife embarked on a yearlong trip to Europe during which he purchased many works of fine art by European masters as well as an assortment of rare books including First, Second and Fourth Folios of Shakespeare and a 1497 edition of Dante's Divine Comedy. While in Europe, he rekindled the idea of finding a suitable gift for the city as a fitting memorial to his

late brother-in-law Tyler Davison. Probasco was resolute in wanting a practical fountain that in addition to being more beautiful than any erected in the United States, would also provide water to the citizens for drinking. In Munich he found what he was looking for at the Royal Foundry. By coincidence when he began describing his intentions, the director, Ferdinand Mueller, recalled the drawings for a fountain celebrating the uses of water that had languished in a drawer for over 20 years. After seeing the plans, Probasco immediately sent an offer to the city by mail from Europe. The offer was quickly accepted and the fountain was commissioned, built and shipped in pieces from Germany to Cincinnati – entirely paid for by Mr. Probasco.

Through sheer tenacity, Probasco overcame many obstacles facing the installation of the Fountain including court cases and violent opposition by merchants who owned businesses on the property he had designated. The Fountain was finally dedicated October 6, 1871 with a crowd of over 100 thousand in attendance. Governor Rutherford B. Hayes gave the keynote address and Rabbi Max Lilienthal, a native of Munich, spoke glowingly of the great progress in Cincinnati exemplified by the Fountain. Both were members of the Cincinnati Literary Club at the time. Over 40 years later it was stated by Goss that “Probably nothing has ever been given to the city that has excited so much enthusiasm and civic pride as the Tyler Davison Fountain.”

Probasco made numerous other contributions to the welfare of the city. In 1867 he gave Calvary Church in Clifton the funds to build the spire and bell that still adorns the church. He also donated the fountain in front of the old Clifton School that functions today and is referred to as Probasco’s Fountain. As early as 1843 he was one of the organizers of the Cincinnati Horticultural Society which soon thereafter established Spring Grove Cemetery. He sat on Spring Grove’s board for 30 years and served as President longer than anyone. He was also a charter member of the Cincinnati Society of Natural History and an early supporter of the Mercantile Library from which he received a lifetime honorary membership in 1871. In addition he was a director and manager of the Public Library and for 30 years was President of the Children’s Orphan Asylum. He was a devoted member of the Clifton City Council for 20 years and served as Mayor from 1877-1889. He adamantly opposed the annexation of Clifton by Cincinnati in 1895, but to no avail.

After the death of his wife in 1886, at age 66, he found happiness in less than a year through marrying a woman some 34 years his junior and fathering two children soon thereafter, having been childless during his first marriage. Sadly Probasco’s fortunes took a nosedive late in life due to a series of financial calamities and the tragic accidental death of his young son. He was forced to liquidate his library of over 10,000 printed volumes and manuscripts, sell his 30 acre Clifton estate with its 4,000 rose

bushes and rare imported trees and shrubs and live out his days in relative obscurity. When he died he was buried in Spring Grove Cemetery in a plot alongside his son, his first wife and Tyler Davidson. According to cemetery records there was no charge for the burial because Probasco was an “employee” having gone back to work as a supervisor at Spring Grove shortly before he died.

Julius Dexter 1840-1898 (Dexter Ave and Dexter Place)

To meet our final luminary, I have chosen a few excerpts from a 44 page volume of tributes and eulogies published upon his untimely death. His families’ mansion was next door to the Literary Clubhouse where the Western Southern headquarters is located now and depicted in a handsome picture in our library. After just two years of practicing law, following graduating from Harvard, he chose to devote himself entirely to the affairs of his native city of Cincinnati and the State of Ohio, taking no compensation, nor ever marrying and starting a family of his own. His community was his family. As exemplified by the following tributes, Julius Dexter may well have contributed more time and strength to the betterment of Cincinnati than any single individual who has ever called Cincinnati their home.

The Cincinnati Price Current – October 27, 1898

“The sudden death of Julius Dexter, of this city, on Friday evening last, was a profound shock to this community. Cincinnati suffers a loss by his death, the severity of which could scarcely be equaled by the passing away of any other individual. He was as near being the first citizen as any other in our midst.

Mr. Dexter for over 20 years has been the President of the Board of Sinking Fund Trustees, a body having charge of the debt and finances of the city and whose province it is to certify to the rate of taxes necessary to provide a sinking fund for the future payment of the city’s obligations. This is a position of great responsibility and for which Mr. Dexter had an exceptional fitness all the while devoting his service without compensation.

We know of no one to take his place, no one in whom are combined such elements of power for usefulness and of devotion to the common good, all governed by the highest order of intelligence, of sincerity, of simplicity of manner, of the fullest sense of integrity, and consideration for others. He was a scholar, a student, a business man, a financier, a philanthropist-ever moved by impulses to bring betterment of conditions to others – without wish for reward, without desire for recognition or praise, without consideration for self. There was no halting of action, no wavering of purpose, no doubtful position in the career of Julius Dexter. His personality was one of strength, of vital energy of purpose, of virtue and his was in its highest significance a noble life.”

Cincinnati Art Museum Association – January 1, 1899

“From the beginning, Julius Dexter was among those most responsible in all the undertakings that gradually led up to the establishment of the Cincinnati Art Museum. Upon its incorporation in 1881 he became a trustee, was elected treasurer and served in that capacity until his death...we hesitate to weigh in too heavily upon his devoted service of those long years and thus we follow his inclination and respect his wish when we accept in silence this premature closing of such an illustrious career so intimately associated with our Association.”

Chamber of Commerce – October 28, 1898

“Julius Dexter, a member of the Chamber of Commerce and Merchants Exchange deserves the following suitable memorial. He was a member of the Ohio Senate, President of the Ohio State Board of Commerce, and nominee for Governor of the State of Ohio on the Gold-Democratic ticket in the most recent election. At various times he was: trustee of the University of Cincinnati, of the Cincinnati Observatory, of the Music Hall, of the College of Music, of the Cincinnati Music Festival Association (May Festival), Treasurer and Director of the Cincinnati Art Museum Association, First President of the Cincinnati Zoological Society, President of the Commercial Club, Treasurer of the Queen City Club, President of the Literary Club, of the Harvard Club, Founder and President of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, Treasurer of the Archeological Society, President of the Cincinnati, Hamilton & Dayton Railroad, and the first President of the Fidelity Safe and Deposit Company. At the time of his death he was President of the Sinking Fund Trustees of the City of Cincinnati rendering invaluable service to the financial affairs and credit of the City.

He was a man of dignified and courtly bearing, of marked simplicity, accessible to all, and ever ready to respond to any call for advice or assistance. He was noted for his uprightness and his character was without spot or blemish. Criticism, often unkind did not swerve him; his mentality was as sturdy as his body. The purity of his life was exceptional and in that respect alone he set an example of the noblest type of manhood.”

The Literary Club of Cincinnati – December 10, 1898 (120 years ago tonight)

“From the date of his election to the Literary Club in 1864, the members recall with pleasure his regular, punctual attendance at all club meetings during the sixties and seventies, his rare conversational powers, his unflinching courtesy, his intellectual discussions of all questions affecting the interests of the Club and his frequent valuable club papers.

He gave his time, his strength and his brain to Cincinnati without any pecuniary reward. Success or defeat made little difference, as he simply stood for the vindication of a principle, which for him, was far better than a personal triumph.”

These sketches exemplify the fullness of lives well lived. Each, in their own way, truly helped transform Cincinnati. While reading the hundreds of others profiled by Goss and Greve, one cannot help but be overwhelmed by the richness of the business, social, civic and philanthropic fabric of our city in the last half of the 19th century. But alas the details of their lives has been all but forgotten - even by their own descendants.

But a fair question could be posed – so what? Why dwell on the past, we cannot bring them back to life? Except for historians, is there any intrinsic value in practicing ancestor worship? My response is yes, we do have an obligation to honor these people with much more than just street names. We need to derive personal inspiration from the principles and drive that made them unique in what they did for our city. We need to replicate their desire to do more for their community than be satisfied with the trappings of material success. Viola Davis, the actress, when recently asked what success would look like for her in five years, said “At this point I am not concerned with success because the No. 1 thing that people feel is that you live to get to that ultimate level of success, and once you reach it, you've got the sweet elixir — you've gotten the answer, and you have it. You crumble because you haven't thought of significance. Significance is something completely different. It's: What are you going to do with your dash of time that you have on the earth, because we all have an expiration date ... What legacy are you going to leave on this earth?”

This resonates with me. Upon entering my current profession, it was explained that the job of an endowment professional is to help people go from “success to significance”. It has proven to be a most helpful guide enabling many so called “successful” individuals to find a new level of personal fulfillment by striving to leave something of lasting impact.

Viola Davis’ comment also contained a reference to a favorite poem of mine by Linda Davis. Having begun this Paper with a poem about the essence of a name, it seems fitting to close with a poem, “The Dash” which hopefully challenges us to think about our own dash of significance and how we will be remembered 100 years from now.

The Dash

I read of a man who stood to speak at a funeral of a friend. He referred to the dates on the tombstone from the beginning...to the end.

He noted that first came the date of birth and spoke of the following date with tears, but said what mattered most of all was the dash between those years.

For that dash represents all the time they spent alive on earth and now only those who loved them know what that little line is worth.

For it matters not, how much we own, the cars...the house...the cash. What matters is how we lived and loved and how we spend our dash.

So think about this long and hard; are there things you'd like to change? For you never know how much time is left that still can be rearranged.

To be less quick to anger and show appreciation more and love the people in our lives like we've never loved before.

If we treat each other with respect and more often wear a smile...remembering that this special dash might only last a little while.

So when your eulogy is being read, with your life's actions to rehash, would you be proud of the things they say about how you lived your dash?

James J. Friedman
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