

## “Mt. Ida”

Strolling down Pike Street, I noticed an elderly gentleman named Nicholas Longworth who was the homeowner of Cincinnati’s finest residence called “Belmont”. Realizing that I had stopped repeatedly in the past to admire his home, he graciously invited me to tour his property. Passing through the iron gates, we stood in front of this Federal Style mansion to appreciate its stateliness and grandeur. Located on the eastern outskirts of the city, it was noticeably larger and more elegant than its neighbors.

Like Thomas Jefferson’s “Monticello” which concealed its size by submerging the mass into the ground and hid a second floor within the roofline, “Belmont” achieved classical elegance without being overwhelming or imposing in scale.

Its clapboard siding was painted ivory with very dark green, almost black, shutters accenting the window frames as they visually punctuated its façade. The home’s main floor was raised above the ground called a “piano nobile”, helping also to allow the home to appear less impressive in size. The most noteworthy architectural details were oval windows at the Second Floor, acting more as decorative panels aligned with First Floor fenestration than as an additional level. Encircling the residence was a cornice composed of dentil moldings and block modillions below the black tin roof. In the rear, the Basement became a full story, because of the land’s downward slope. Its ground level adopted the concept of a raised “English” basement which created an appearance of a full floor.

Many people assumed that Longworth was the original builder of the home, but it was actually Martin Baum and his wife, Ann Sommerville Wallace Baum, who undertook the construction of the mansion in 1820. Mr. Baum, the city’s first millionaire and entrepreneur, was multi-talented and headed a number of community establishments which included his Miami Exporting Co., The Bank of The United States, an iron foundry, a sugar refinery, and a steam mill. He also purchased real estate here and

elsewhere in Ohio. Baum helped to organize the Western Museum, a subscription library, and the Society for the Promotion of Agriculture, Manufacturing, and the Domestic Economy.

Situated on almost 10 acres of land which extended from Pike Street to the top of Mt. Ida (now known as Mt. Adams), "Belmont" was located with half of its acreage west of the Miami and Erie Canal and where the house was built, and the rest ascended to the top of the hill to the east. This latter portion of land allowed Longworth to use it for the cultivation of grapes, turning it into a series of terraces, and made him one of America's early vintners with their transverse vines crossing the hillsides. Longworth started his first vineyard in 1823 and 2 years later planted his noted Catawba grapevines: its dryness in flavor found favor especially among Cincinnatians originally from Germany. Almost everyone enjoyed its taste except Frances Trollope who deemed it "miserable stuff", tasting more like sour cider. In 1842 by accident, he reinvented champagne or, as Longworth described it, his "Sparkling Catawba". Particularly popular with Americans, it was noted as a "Golden Wedding Champagne"---some experts felt that it was equal to France's. By 1850, Cincinnatians shipped 120,000 gallons of wine annually, noting the Ohio River as the Rhine of North America. By 1859 in fact, Ohio produced 570,000 gallons of wine per year, more than a third of our nation's total.

Having toured the exterior of this beautiful residence and grounds, Longworth led me into his home's Foyer. Lining its walls were murals painted by the noted mulatto artist named Robert S. Duncanson. Longworth was a patron to many local artists besides Duncanson, including Hiram Powers, Lily Martin Spencer, Alexander Helwig Wyant, Thomas Buchanan Read, and William Henry Powell. Duncanson and Powers, however, were the two artists with whom he was most closely associated. Longworth sent the sculptor Powers to Washington, D.C. for further artistic training, and later to Florence, Italy. Duncanson was commissioned by him to paint the murals in his Foyer. This T-shaped hall began at the front arched doorway and then turned to run parallel to the length of the home.

Eight large vertical atmospheric landscape murals lined the walls, along with five floral still life paintings, two of which were depicting American eagles on overdoor panels. Duncanson was a rather young artist (1821-1872), when he received the commission in 1850. So, Longworth took credit for the concept of these murals, since Duncanson had not attempted painting such an ambitious project prior to this date. These murals reference English and French scenes, as well as early American images such as Stephen Van Rensselaer's Hall at "Rensselaerswyck", near Albany, New York, as an example. Around each mural and still life paintings, Duncanson created elaborate trompe l'oeil gilt wood Rococo Revival frames. The style of these murals was most closely reminiscent of Hudson River School traditions, which Longworth had become familiar, as he began his early life. In order to be current in style, Duncanson painted his murals to recall sought-after French wallpapers. Half of Duncanson's murals alluded to European views with no specific locations as subjects. These images, however, generally reference Longworth's as well as Duncanson's ancestral heritages in Europe and early America. As a theme, these long murals captured the stream or voyage of life, truly a romantic concept. This wall mural project for Longworth's home of "Belmont" revealed the confidence which he held for Duncanson. Because of his relative youth, he had never created anything on this scale or complexity before this project, but it gave him the confidence he needed to accomplish this and future endeavors. In 1850, Duncanson had moved his studio adjoining that of the artist, William Sontag, the foremost landscape painter west of the Appalachian Mountains. It was from Sontag that Duncanson learned many painting techniques and began to realize his own style by creating an Ohio River variation on the Hudson River School. With maturity, his work became popular in the United States, Canada, and England during the 1850's. He became the first African-American artist to earn a national and international reputation as a landscape painter.

In this transverse hallway above the arched doorways, the two eagle vignette panels were painted, as well as several floral ones. Of great importance were eight landscape murals in the Foyer and this

transverse hallway. On the north side of the Music Room door could be found a composition of a rugged hill that rose from a ravine with a teepee in the lower right, as a pair of figures gazed at this cascade. On the south side of the Music Room door, a mural portrayed what appeared to be a Scottish scene, with a shepherd that oversaw his flock before the ruins of a medieval castle.

The panels on the transverse hall's west wall were considerably more accomplished in technique. In one, a family at the door of an English-style cottage were gathered, the setting nestled amongst trees. A group of buildings was seen in the distance, which recalled warehouses along Cincinnati's riverfront.

On the southwest side of the transverse hall, a rocky river scene had been painted with a swiftly flowing stream of rapids winding into the foreground, and large trees framed this composition.

In the Foyer section of the hall, the northeast mural offered a similar variation on this theme. Here, the river and its torrent flowed before the viewer, as it continued safely to the left. Two trees sprouted fresh foliage and framed views of buildings huddled in the rolling hillside. The rocky riverbank had been shown to be accessible with an abundance of nature to be observed. Golden light emanated from the horizon, bathing everything in this glow.

Two murals flanked the main entrance with classically inspired pastoral scenes. A grand estate could be found on the north wall which contained a group of figures boarding a boat. All of this was imaginary, but its architecture fantastic to behold. On the south side, a mural displayed the influence of European Masters' classical landscape paintings, with a scene of horse riders crossing a bridge over a winding river which flowed to a luminous horizon.

The final panel on the southeast wall depicted a wilderness scene of rotting tree trunks along a swiftly flowing river. A group of pioneers stared into the rich sunset on the horizon, as they stood atop a rocky prominence. The bright hues of the sunset and the highly expressive tree trunks set this rural scene apart from the others, and made it quite outstanding with its foliage and gnarled bark.

The Longworths, Nicholas and his wife Susan, have been preparing "Belmont" for their Golden Wedding Anniversary on Christmas Eve, 1857. One of the major improvements was the elimination of a wall between 2 Parlors on the home's east side and created one large opening accessing the enlarged room from the transverse hall. This was being done to create one commodious Ball Room (or Music Room) for entertaining and family gatherings. By doing this, 2 former Parlor doorways into the transverse hall were no longer needed in favor of just one opening to the new room. He and his wife had a large family with 3 children, their wives, a dozen grand-children, a great-grand-child, a step-grand-child, his wife and their 2 children. As one could see, "Belmont" needed a sizeable space to handle this growing family, not to mention parties with friends. Unfortunately, this meant the elimination of a ninth Duncanson mural, directly opposite the front door. This particular scene was painted to show the large Longworth property that extended eastward from Pike Street and up the hill of Mt. Ida.

The latter's curious name came from the Longworth's washerwoman and cook, Ida Martin. Since she lived on the hill and they owned the property, his children named it after her. She took up residence in a broken hollow limb of a huge sycamore tree which also acted as a chimney. Previously, she had been the laundress of Fort Washington. In 1843, Cincinnatians renamed Mt. Ida as Mt. Adams in honor of the former sixth President, John Quincy Adams. He had come to Cincinnati to dedicate the cornerstone of the new astronomical observatory atop the hill, a four acre property having been donated by Longworth for this purpose. Covered with the Longworth's Catawba grapevines, Mt. Ida offered a picturesque view, reminding relocated Germans of the Rhineland. Had "Belmont's" walls not been in the way, this would have been the sight to behold from Pike Street and Longworth's front yard. Adams had been selected to speak at the dedication, because of his keen interest in science generally and astronomy in particular. Eloquently, Adams referred to astronomical observatories as "Lighthouses in the Sky", and was deeply disappointed when Congress failed to establish one during his presidency twenty years earlier. When it

was eventually purchased at the time, Cincinnati's telescope was the largest in the United States and second only in size to the Royal Observatory at Pultova, Russia.

The destruction of this ninth mural would have been a tragedy, except that Duncanson had painted it for posterity to behold in the background of Longworth's portrait. This large painting which hung above the staircase showed a full-length view of Longworth in a dark suit with Mt. Ida as its backdrop. Known for his absentmindedness, slips of paper were pinned to his jacket sleeve as his reminders of things to do for that day. His left arm rested on top of a drapery table covered with a Catawba grapevine which further solidified the patron's interest to the viewer. To the right of Longworth was a carved molding that ran vertically which was the door casing from one of the eliminated doorways. Duncanson had painted Longworth at this very spot depicting his patron's great interest and success as a landowner and horticulturalist. The loss of this ninth mural was seemingly less tragic to Longworth, since the artist had recorded this view of his estate in the portrait.

#### EPILOGUE

As many times as museum directors, art and architectural historians, and others passed this portrait of Nicholas Longworth through the years, no one had ever noticed the significance of the wood door casing painted in the background. I discovered it doing research for my previous Literary Club paper, entitled "Stoking The Fires" delivered on April 29, 2019. This molding happened to match our Club mantelpiece's carving which originally had been located in one of the First Floor Parlors (now the Cloak Room and Restroom). This casing proved that Duncanson had painted the portrait and mural from one of the eliminated doorways. The view of Mt. Ida with its abundance of Catawba grapevines conveyed to his viewing audience the artist's masterfulness in showing the success and importance of Longworth's career. The discovery of a ninth mural also solved the mystery of why the wall opposite the front door was incorrectly thought to have been left blank, prior to the Music Room's enlargement and new

opening on this same axis. For the Club's purposes, this "Belmont" casing and our mantelpiece (now at the Cincinnati Art Museum) were most likely carved by the same craftsman (his identity currently unknown) at the time of 1820, when both nearby homes were built.

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The Literary Club

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