

## “Stoking The Fires”

“Would you like to accompany me to the Literary Club’s attic to see one of the earliest and finest mantels of the Federal Style in Cincinnati?” This question was posed to me by my host and club member at that time, Prof. Walter E. Langsam, as we sipped drinks in the Reception Room in November, 1996. Tantalizing a fellow architectural historian with such a question elicited an enthusiastic “Yes”, and we ascended the two flights of stairs until reaching the Third Floor attic. On this storage room floor, there it was: a beautifully carved Federal Style wooden mantel. Painted in an off-white color typical of the 1820 period, its carving exhibited fine craftsmanship superior to other known examples from that time. Distinguishing qualities of this mantel are a pair of Romanesque Revival rounded arched niches at either end, centered above two Tuscan Style columns. The exact purpose of these niches is unknown, but was probably to feature a pair of objets d’art of its owner for special attention. With additional enhancement, small globular balls placed in succession outline each of the rounded arches, as if highlighted by modern-day vanity light fixtures. These same globular balls of a slightly larger diameter also march in alignment across its header, reminding one of a series of cannonballs in a straight line, possibly alluding to nearby Fort Washington. Immediately, these two niches brought to mind a comparison to the Kilgour Hallway door casings from the late 1815 historic Cincinnati home called “The White House”, now partially on display in the Art Museum’s Cincinnati Wing. Above each of its door headers can be found a pair of niches similar to the Literary Club’s mantel, except these are done in the Gothic Revival Style with pointed arches instead of rounded.

The realization of these similarities earned my instant respect, because I had always admired the Kilgour Hallway. However since I was not a member of the club at that time, I simply mentally filed the knowledge of the mantel's existence for a later day.

That time came, once I was admitted to the club as a member. Several years ago, Ted Silberstein and I undertook the rehanging of the Literary Club's art collection and the updating of our inventory. It turned out that Ted and others were unaware of the mantel's existence. Peeking Ted's curiosity, we marched our way upstairs to the Third Floor attic, just as Walter and I had years earlier. What Ted and I discovered was that the mantel had since been installed on a wall, instead of its former placement on the floor. Not having seen it in many years, time can alter one's impression---either favorably or unfavorably. In this case, my respect for the mantel had only increased, having viewed many others in the interim. Ted agreed that it was of superb quality and much too fine to be relegated to an attic, where no one could appreciate its beauty and significance. With this consensus, we added the mantel to our inventory list, and then pursued the possibility with the membership that it might be donated to the Cincinnati Art Museum, where it could be displayed to the public for posterity.

The Art Museum's Curator of Decorative Arts & Design, Amy Dehan, and its Director and club member, Cameron Kitchin, were equally enthusiastic about the club's mantel and definitely wanted it for their Cincinnati Wing's earliest display section. Also, it is appropriate that it should be installed there, since former Director and club member, Timothy Rub, was responsible for the Wing's creation. With the Board of Management's and members' approval, along with the generosity of The Decorative Arts Society of Cincinnati who contributed funds for its conservation and installation, the mantel made the move to the Art Museum on a warm, sunny day on May 10, 2018 with their skilled crew. As the mantel was being removed from the attic's

wall, old calling cards and invitations fell to the floor, having slipped between the mantelshelf and chimneybreast at least 140 years ago. Amazingly, these cards must have adhered themselves by means of fireplace heat and the cards' ink acting as glue onto the mantel's back side. Their survival is truly remarkable, since the mantel was moved in 1930 from the First Floor to the attic, and then again when it was repositioned from the floor to the wall. In an effort for tidiness, the Museum's crew was about to throw these cards away. Before that happened, I immediately grabbed them, so that they did not become a part of the dust heap of history. These calling cards and invitations are a part of the mantel's Cincinnati history and reveal a bit of the home's occupants' daily lives. Although some are only in fragments, others survived intact for our perusal. One of the calling cards is that of "McLean & Goodman"---a linseed oil manufacturing company located at Symmes Street and the Miami & Erie Canal and owned by Civil War General Nathaniel McLean, son-in-law of Judge Jacob Burnet. The latter was my great, great, great, great grandfather, who purchased this home on December 15, 1842 for his daughter Caroline and her husband, General McLean. It remained in the family until 1912, a 70 year timespan. Also of importance is an invitation to a millinery fashion show of Paris creations, dated September 19, 1879, at Bee, Rolfus & Co. of 142 West Fourth Street; this company was unknown to the Art Museum as it was not listed in their late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup>-century fashion catalogue, A Separate Sphere. Since the cards have historical significance and managed to survive all of these years attached to the mantelpiece's back side, they, too, have been donated as a part of its story.

These donations are not the end, but simply a new chapter. Having arrived at the Museum, the mantel was placed in quarantine for a few months by their Conservation Department to make certain that no insects, termites, wood worms, or borers had been transported with it. None

found, the next step was to do careful scrapings of the mantel's layers of paint to determine its original 1820 color. As the conservators removed these layers, one of them revealed that it had been painted black at some point, probably during the 1850-1870's design period when to do so was fashionable. As the Art Museum and I had expected, the original color turned out to be off-white or ivory, consistent with the Federal Style.

While this paint analysis and painstaking removal of surface layers were being conducted, Amy Dehan and I have been researching the history of the club's mantel, as well as examining other Cincinnati woodcarving examples which have survived. One of the most intriguing questions has always been: "Where was the mantel's original location in the club's home?" Initially, we thought that it might have been designed for the Library, where the current Negro Marquina marble mantel is today. Clearly, this marble mantelpiece is not original to the ca.1820 date for the house; however, its classic clean lines and stone material make it more difficult to ascertain the age. Spanning approximately 90 years of potential stylistic design creativity from Greek Revival to Art Deco, this marble mantel, we thought, could have been installed conceivably in 1930 by the architectural firm, Elzner & Anderson: they remodeled the home to become our club headquarters, at which time the wooden one was banished to the attic. Our thinking was that a more "masculine-looking" Art Deco mantelpiece might have been desired by the architects and the club for the Library, and that this would have been accomplished during the renovations. If so, the architect's working drawings for the project would note this change. One Monday evening in September, 2018, our Club Librarian, Rick Kesterman and I unrolled these plans, and my eyes immediately focused on the room identified as "Library" on the First Floor. My heart sank, though, when I realized that there was no mention of any alteration to that room's chimneybreast at that time. About to roll up the drawings in defeat, Rick and I noticed

the notes on the plan in the room adjacent to the Library. Consistent with the Federal Style's symmetrical balance for design, there originally had been another room of equal size to the Library, located in the home's northwest corner which included a fourth mantel (the brick chimney can still be seen on the exterior from the alley). On the First Floor Plan, the notes state "Mantel removed" and "Present fireplace flue continued to Basement". On the Basement Floor Plan, another note was discovered directly below this former room: "Fireplace flue brought down for water heater vent". These notes written on the drawings confirmed the location of the wooden mantelpiece and its move in 1930 to the attic. Furthermore, since there were no notes on the Library's marble mantel during the remodeling, other than for its cleaning and polishing, this meant it was of an earlier vintage---Greek Revival Style (ca. 1840-1850's). Most likely, the McLean family installed it to be up-to-date with society's taste, when they moved there in 1842. Ironically, the marble mantel replaced another 1820 wooden one original to the house, which may have survived and been reinstalled elsewhere, yet to be rediscovered.

Regarding our mantel being donated to the Art Museum, much information has been learned by studying other Cincinnati mantelpieces and woodwork from residences dating to this same time period. Most similar is the earlier mentioned David Kilgour home called "The White House" (1814-1815) with its unique Gothic Revival arched niches in the door headers. In addition to this similarity, there was something else: our mantel has fluting on both sides, rather than on the front face which would be the norm. The uniqueness of this detail, therefore, makes it a woodcarver's idiosyncrasy. On the large archway spanning the width of the Kilgour Hallway, there are pilasters with their fluting on the sides, too, rather than the front face. Considering these similarities, the homes' proximity to each other, and their 1815 and 1820 dates of completion, it seems likely that the same woodcarver had done both.

Locally, there are additional examples identified for comparison purposes. The Baum-Longworth-Taft House (earlier named “Belmont”, but now known as The Taft Museum of Art---1820) has in its Foyer similar globular balls placed in succession for each of their door lintels, like the one’s outlining our mantel’s niches and marching horizontally across its header. Globular balls are such an unusual design motif, that it is probable that the same woodcarver had been commissioned to do these as well.

While examining The Taft’s woodwork, I also inquired about the whereabouts of their Museum’s one remaining original mantelpiece to the house. When posed with this question, the museum staff did not know of its existence. Luckily, photographer Alice Weston with author Walter Langsam had captured its image, when they were compiling their book entitled Great Houses of the Queen City, published in 1997. In this photo, the mantel is shown in its former Ground Level Entry Hall location at the base of the staircase. When The Taft underwent its remodeling and addition in 2001- 2004, the mantel was removed and its importance lost in the shuffle. The Taft’s Deputy Director and Chief Curator Lynne Ambrosini, her assistant Ann Glasscock, and I went on a search to find it, as well as two other period mantels but not original to the house (formerly located before the recent remodeling in The Taft’s two front parlors). The original mantelpiece to the house was found in the Docents’ File Room and Library on the Ground Level: there on its mantelshelf were papers and files, with little surrounding space for its appreciation. Finely carved, it features flanking pairs of Tuscan columns at each end providing classical symmetry, while supporting a header with a sweeping arch spanning from side-to-side. Centered above the fireplace opening is a recessed horizontal elliptical sunburst shell, balanced by two vertical ones over each pair of columns. Along the undulating mantelshelf’s edge and chair rail banding, Chinese fretwork was carved into their wood surfaces, adding to its overall

sophistication. The other two mantels in their collection were found in the Basement Storage Room and have a connection with our club. Former Museum Director and Literary Club member, Walter H. Siple, had purchased both of them, when he was transforming the Taft's residence into a museum. The previous owners of the house, the Longworths, had replaced the original ones (except the one described and rediscovered) with arched white Carrara marble ones of the Italianate Style in accordance with tastes of the 1850's---probably installed around 1857 at the time of the Longworth's 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Striving for authenticity, Mr. Siple wanted to find wooden mantels consistent with the ones original to the Martin Baum-era of the home. According to his records and a Literary Club paper, he located mantels with exquisite quality and style from the neighborhood and the surrounding Cincinnati area of this ca.1820's time frame. Unfortunately during the most recent reinterpretation of the galleries, these two Federal Style wooden mantels acquired by Mr. Siple were replaced with ones of King of Prussia marble of the later Greek Revival Style (ca.1840-1850's). Contrary to the opinion of former Taft curator David Johnson, the home's original mantels could not have been carved in marble, because there were no stone carvers residing in early Cincinnati, nor was there the means to transport them from the East at that time. Additionally, their one surviving mantel was made of wood: this inconvenient truth was disregarded by Curator Johnson, and so he banished it to the Docents' File Room and Library, where it is off-view to the public. Further insults occurred to the two Federal mantels acquired by Director Siple, which unceremoniously were removed completely from sight and placed in storage. This enabled Curator Johnson to acquire the marble mantels for the front parlors, which he really desired. In the future, hopefully, these three beautifully carved wooden mantels will be allowed to be placed back on display, since they directly relate to the history and architecture of the house, the neighborhood, and early

Cincinnati, whereas the marble ones do not. In review, although The Taft's wooden mantels are quite handsome, they really did not closely resemble the club's for our comparison purposes and, thus, may not have been made by the same woodcarver.

In this continued quest to observe, study, and compare mantels of the 1820 period, Walter and I visited a little-known museum in a very unlikely place: Woodward High School in Bond Hill. The first Woodward School (and Cincinnati Public School's earliest, while being at the same time the oldest, continuously operating free public high school in the world) was founded by William Woodward in the downtown area. Dating back to 1816, many of the contents of his home and school were saved, when the move to the suburbs occurred in 1953, and a museum was established to celebrate their heritage. Recently, a new Woodward High School was constructed, and this treasure trove of decorative art objects and architectural fragments made the move to a gallery honoring Mr. Woodward. Prominently on display is his 1816 Guest Room mantelpiece, which presents certain similarities to the mantels of both the Literary Club and The Taft Museum. Reminiscent of ours, the Woodward mantel has two rounded arched niches above its flanking columns, but these are open both on the face and the sides. Like The Taft's original mantel, the Woodward one has a large sweeping arch carved into its header. Also, comparisons were found matching it to those located at "Elmwood Hall" (1818) in Ludlow, Kentucky. As a brief aside, this remarkable house had been built by Thomas Carneal for his family, later purchased in 1827 by William Bullock (brother of the famous London furniture maker, George Bullock). Eventually, the house became the Thomas Candy Co. factory, then acquired by my cousin and artist, Thomas Gaither, who always admired its architecture. This home-turned-factory was transformed into a 2-family residence by him and rented to Walter in one half, the other portion becoming Jack Meanwell's artist studio. In time, architectural historian Patrick

Snadon purchased “Elmwood Hall”, and he has been respectfully and lovingly restoring it back to its original condition as his single family residence. Returning to the mantel comparisons, Woodward’s is similar to “Elmwood Hall’s” with their columns of ringed capitals and tapered shafts, which also closely resemble a game table leg detail designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, now in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Other similarities between Woodward’s and “Elmwood Hall’s” mantelpieces are the carved recessed sunburst shells in their headers, but they do not directly relate to the Literary Club’s.

What this investigation has revealed is that Cincinnati from its earliest days was blessed with geographical and military advantages, unique to our locale, which led to extraordinary growth and development with the city’s population more than doubling every ten years. At its beginnings in 1788, Cincinnati’s superiority over other Midwestern cities can be attributed directly to the protection that the government’s military encampment, Fort Washington, offered to settlers from marauding Indians. Although surrounded by steep hillsides, Cincinnati’s basin area contains one of the largest sections of flat terrain for building and farming along the Ohio River, another major attraction and advantage. In addition, Cincinnati was the location of a number of mouths of rivers and creeks, providing an early and convenient form of transportation flowing into the heartland of the states of Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana. Besides the mighty Ohio River, these included the Little Miami, Great Miami, Licking, Whitewater, Mill Creek, Deer Creek, and the Miami & Erie Canal. The latter linked Cincinnati with Lake Erie and the Eastern seaboard, allowing much improvement in speed, ease, and comfort for travellers and farmers’ livestock alike. People, products, cattle, and agricultural crops moved with relative rapidity to and from Cincinnati, which further encouraged our city’s prosperity, growth, and prestige.

Around 1815, building of steamboats was established here, and Cincinnati became one of the nation's principal boat building centers by constructing more than 20 steamboats per year. This industry attracted fine artisans and carpenters, capable of carving elaborate boat decorations, to seek employment in our city.

Many of our settlers were wealthy second oldest sons from the East who were accustomed to the finer things in life, including the enjoyment of the arts and culture. Moving west to Cincinnati, they reestablished themselves in the fastest growing city in America during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Since their older brother had inherited the family business and property, they hoped to apply their knowledge and expertise in a new venture to make their own fortunes. If they were not going to live in Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, or Boston, then they were going to bring their cultured lives with them to Cincinnati. As a consequence, museums, libraries, clubs, historical societies, music, opera, plays, churches, synagogues, and fine mercantile shops soon populated the city, giving it a clear advantage over other cities west of the Alleghenies in attracting people of means. Residents of Cincinnati had discriminating tastes for the very best, which allowed craftsmen to create quality of the highest order. From architecture to furniture, silver, clocks, glassware, clothing, and many other things, they all combined to make a vibrant community, which we still enjoy today.

No discussion of Cincinnati's development and quality of life at this time would be complete without considering Frances Trollope and the publication of her book, Domestic Matters of the Americans. This English lady arrived here by boat in 1828 and stayed for two unhappy years. Her frank distaste for America and its inhabitants' manners (or lack thereof) was focused on Cincinnati, since she resided here. At great expense, Mrs. Trollope erected "Mrs. Trollope's Bazaar", a mercantile establishment four stories high, containing eclectic curiosities assembled

from all over the world. Designed by Seneca Palmer, he was Cincinnati's first professional architect known to have settled here. Its exterior façade was as curious as its contents, with tall slender arched fenestration several floors in height, each separated with columns, and the whole creation recalling the Near East in design. Double curved stairs on the outside led to its piano nobile, with a sinuous interior staircase rising from floor-to-floor to a rooftop rotunda monitor. Reminiscent of a Turkish bazaar, its roof's undulating crenelated parapet added a playful arabesque touch, in an otherwise conservative city with buildings of a neo-classical style during this period. With her ill-fated business venture, it clearly soured Mrs. Trollope for Cincinnatians not appreciating sophisticated tastes as defined by her. Similar to other failed businesses, she misread her clientele and what they desired. Customers in our city had money and taste, but obviously were not interested in what she was providing. In spite of everything, the fact is that Mrs. Trollope settled here and not elsewhere, so even she believed in the city's potential in exposing its citizenry to exotic, international merchandise. Her shop did not long survive, but her building lasted for many decades as its own curiosity.

In spite of Mrs. Trollope's protestations, it still is not surprising that the quality of architectural detailing and products produced in Cincinnati far exceeds those from other Midwestern cities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Confirmation of this can be realized simply by strolling the Art Museum's Cincinnati Wing. Sometime this summer, the Literary Club's mantel will be unveiled there for visitors to admire and for us to be rightfully proud of our generosity in sharing in perpetuity this piece of Cincinnati history. Its installation will be adjacent to the Kilgour Hallway, where it will reside under the watchful gaze of Judge Jacob Burnet's bust by Hiram Powers. Fittingly, Judge Burnet will be reunited with our mantel from the 500 East Fourth Street home, which he acquired in 1842 for his daughter and son-in-law. Best of all, the triumphs of the

as-yet unidentified craftsman, who carved our mantelpiece and likely the Kilgour Hallway, will be featured together--- highlighting the outstanding talent available for hire in our Queen City of the West, as it blossomed at its very beginnings.

By: Stewart Shillito Maxwell, Jr.

The Literary Club

April 29, 2019