



Bulletin of the Kenton County Historical Society

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November/December

2020



**Nineteenth Century
Covington Suburbs to City Dwellers**

Nineteenth Century Covington Suburbs to City Dwellers

Karl Lietzenmayer

Preface

This issue of the *Bulletin of the Kenton County Historical Society* is from the research of many members through the years. The Society is combining all of their pieces into a comprehensive narrative for Society members and for the Covington citizens living in the areas of Wallace Woods; Levassor Park, and old Sunnyside [26th Street]. Many thanks to the late Dr. Joseph Gastright; the late Betty Nordheim; Lisa Gillham; Bethany Pollitt; and Arnold Taylor, present KCHS board member.

Introduction

Before these properties were subdivided into neighborhoods in the early twentieth century, four wealthy families settled here: Robert Wallace, Jr. (1789-1863); Daniel H. Holmes (1816-1898); Eugene Levassor (1789-1881); and George Phillips (1833-1873).

Pioneer Times

Visualize this area when Kentucky was admitted to the Union - 1795. The land at the mouth of the Licking River, "The Point," became an important mustering place for militia. Since Kentucky had only two pre-glacial age, north-flowing rivers into the Ohio, the Licking and Kentucky, "The Point" was easily found as there were few other landmarks. In these early times, the rivers were our highways.

By the time of statehood, Thomas and Francis Kennedy owned the land that would become the town of Covington beginning in 1815. They operated a ferry to Cincinnati and Thomas ran a tavern which stood in George Rogers Clark Park. The boundaries of Covington ended at 6th Street to the south and extended only from the Licking River west to Madison Avenue. On his farewell visit to America, Lafayette passed through Covington in 1825 with his entourage on their way to visit Cincinnati. By the

1840s, the Covington boundary had only extended several blocks south. This would progress with additional annexations.

The land that became Levassor Park and Wallace Woods was heavily forested with paths made by bison herds on their way south to salt licks. As the town grew, some of these paths became the first roads. During the first third of the nineteenth century, Madison Pike began to be hacked through the forest to the eventual destination of Lexington. These early roads were chartered by the state or county and most were toll roads, using a "pike" to stop wagons to collect the toll. The local Toll House still stands as Dixie TV. Eventually, the roads were improved with macadam - crushed stone laid over the dirt road, slightly raised in the center to encourage run-off.

Early Development

Robert Wallace, Jr., a retired steamboat captain and Cincinnati merchant, purchased 70 acres north of Mr. Levassor in 1833. After serving in the War of 1812, he married Jane Eliza Sterret in 1816.

The area was fairly accessible by the 1830s and traffic was mostly farmers making their way to the small town of Covington, population 715. Cholera also struck in 1833, which assured increased travel to the closest spa - Latonia Springs [present Highland & Madison Pikes]. Robert Wallace sold a sizable portion to Levassor that year.

Four of Wallace's sisters married prominent Cincinnati families: Ann with Martin Baum; Rebecca to Judge Jacob Burnet; Mary and Margaret married Samuel Perry and Nehemiah Wade, respectively. Robert was a law student in Judge Burnet's office.

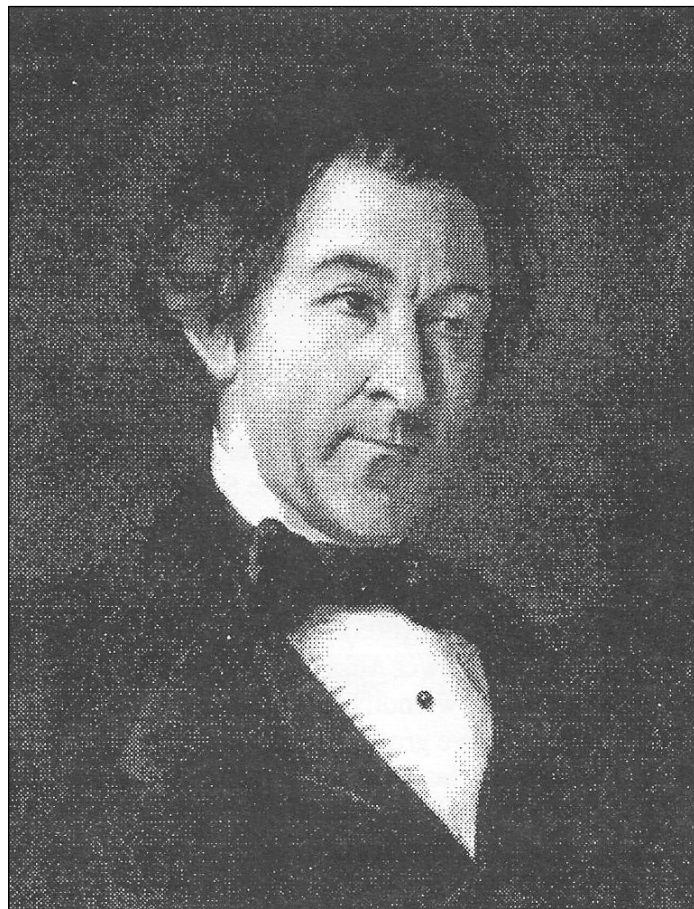
In July 1834, still living in Cincinnati, the Wallaces moved onto this Kentucky land with their five children and built a large log house, using timber from the property. Wallace's eldest daughter married

John Shillito in 1836. He formed the John Shillito Company by 1839 and it eventually grew to be one of the largest department stores in Cincinnati. The couple built on the property – known today as the Shillito Cottage – still standing. The Wallaces eventually built a fine home with a large porch surrounding it, since razed, known as Longwood.

Jean-Baptiste Eugene Levasseur came to the United States from France, after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, and settled for a short time in Virginia (West Virginia today). There, he purchased and held vast mineral-rich acreage. Arriving in the Columbia-Tusculum neighborhood of Cincinnati in c. 1820, Levassor became a dry goods merchant in Cincinnati from 1829 to 1845. In 1833, Levassor purchased 61 acres just south of the farm that Robert Wallace, Jr. had acquired the same year, parcels of which became Levassor Park. After Eugene closed his dry goods business in 1845, he retired to the Levassor property and by c. 1855, the mansion known today as the Levassor House, was erected [213 Levassor Place].

Daniel Holmes, born near Point Pleasant, Ohio in 1816, was the great grandson of Irish immigrants. His parents both died in 1818 and was raised by his uncle, Samuel Holmes. Sam Holmes and Eugene Levassor were neighbors in the Columbia-Tusculum community of eastern Cincinnati. Young Daniel played with the Levassor children and learned to speak French. Mr. Levassor also taught Holmes to play the flute. As a young man, Daniel Holmes began working in Levassor's department store, and later, in April of 1855, he went to New York as an employee of Lord and Taylor Department Store, in April 1855.

When Lord and Taylor decided to open a branch in New Orleans, twenty-year-old Holmes was chosen to manage the location, since speaking French was an essential for the Louisiana store. After six successful years, Mr. Holmes decided to open his own store. The D. H. Holmes Department Store became a great success and the main facility on Canal Street, since converted into a hotel, was a landmark. The company remained in business until the 1980s.



Above left: Robert Wallace, Jr., right: Daniel Henry Holmes in his earlier years;
On the cover: "Holmesdale" - the estate of Daniel Henry Holmes, circa 1930

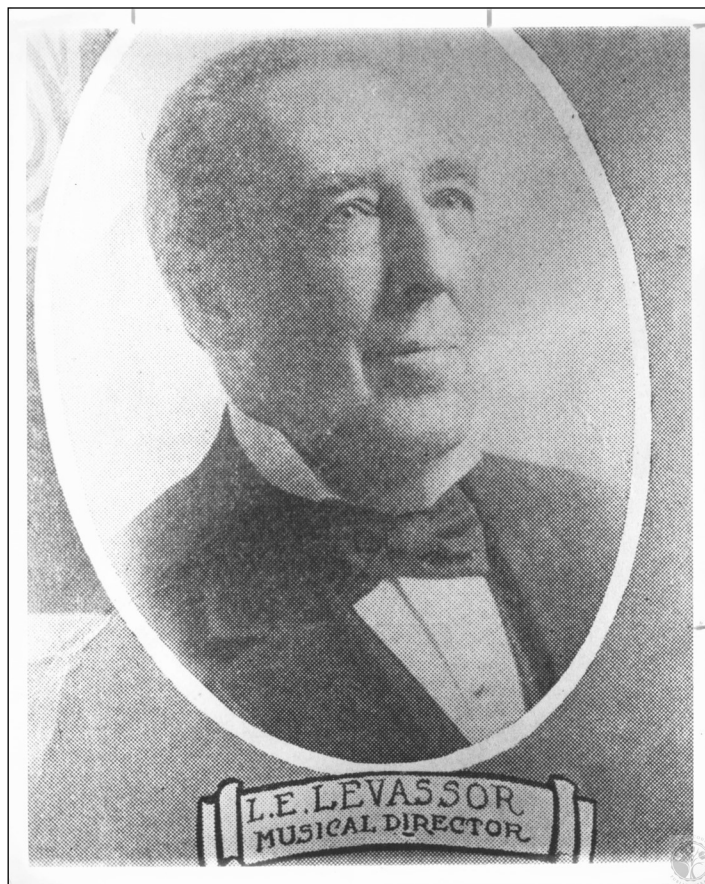
Levassor purchased property in Northern Kentucky which became Levassor Park, on which he built a Federal or Italianate style mansion (the Mansard roof was a later addition); the street was then known as Eugene Street and didn't extend all the way from Madison to Eastern Avenue.

The Daniel Holmes family wished to escape the humid heat of the New Orleans summers and, to be near his childhood friend Eugene Levassor, in 1853, Holmes purchased 17 acres from Levassor. Eventually, he built the mansion he called Holmesdale, the property now the campus of Holmes High School. After the construction of additional school buildings in the 1920s, the mansion continued as home to a few classrooms and the cafeteria, but fire safety concerns prompted the School Board to raze it in the early 1930s. No consideration was forthcoming regarding its historical significance.

The families of Wallace Woods/Levassor Park shared an active social life and an appreciation of the arts, especially music. The families enjoyed private musical performances, and several members became accomplished musicians: Robert Wallace, Jr, was a violinist; Daniel Holmes played the flute; and his daughter Georgine played the piano. Each of the families had an elaborate music room built in their homes, and because of their prominence in the community, it was not out of the ordinary for the families to entertain famous friends. Musicians, like Professor Joseph Tosso (1802-1885), often stopped by to entertain or be entertained.

The Levassors were the most musically inclined. Eugene played the piano and flute; Eugene's son, Armand, played piano and even owned a piano manufacturing business. Eugene's grandsons were the more prominent of the family, however. Charles, the younger son of Armand, was an accomplished flutist and organist. He never had the opportunity to achieve the renown enjoyed by his older brother, Louis. Charles died in 1875 at age 24.

Louis Levassor became a nationally renowned organist. The brothers had grown up surrounded by professional and amateur musicians, getting the opportunity to learn from them, play with them, and



Above: Louis Levassor (1846-1930)

Opposite page: the Levassor Home

perform with them. Like Charles, Louis played accompaniments for Professor Tosso as a child, and performed at Covington's grand Odd Fellows Hall (still standing at 5th & Madison), and gave concerts at the Latonia Springs Spa, then located at the intersection of Highland and Madison pikes.

Louis' musical acclaim stretched beyond Covington. Recognized nationally as an accomplished organist, Louis was recruited to play at the nation's Centennial Celebration in Philadelphia in 1876. There, Louis gave daily piano performances at the Exposition, reported to be well attended. Afterward, Louis returned to Covington and opened a piano store.

Eugene Levassor died in 1881 at age 92, and Levassor Place was left to Armand, who continued to reside in the home until his passing in 1906. Upon his father's death, Louis Levassor inherited ownership. He expanded on the music room built by his grandfather by adding a \$20,000 pipe organ, a sizable

sum for the time, and continued to host and perform musical pieces for audiences. No information has surfaced as to when the organ was removed or what happened to the instrument.

Louis was asked to be the musical director for Covington's Centennial Celebration in 1914 and wrote several pieces for the event: a song *Ode to Covington*, and a piece called *Covingtonia* were performed at the Lyric Theater each night during the event. Louis Levassor died in February 1930 at the family mansion, 213 Levassor Place, leaving no descendants. The mansion has since been divided into apartments.

Initial Subdividing

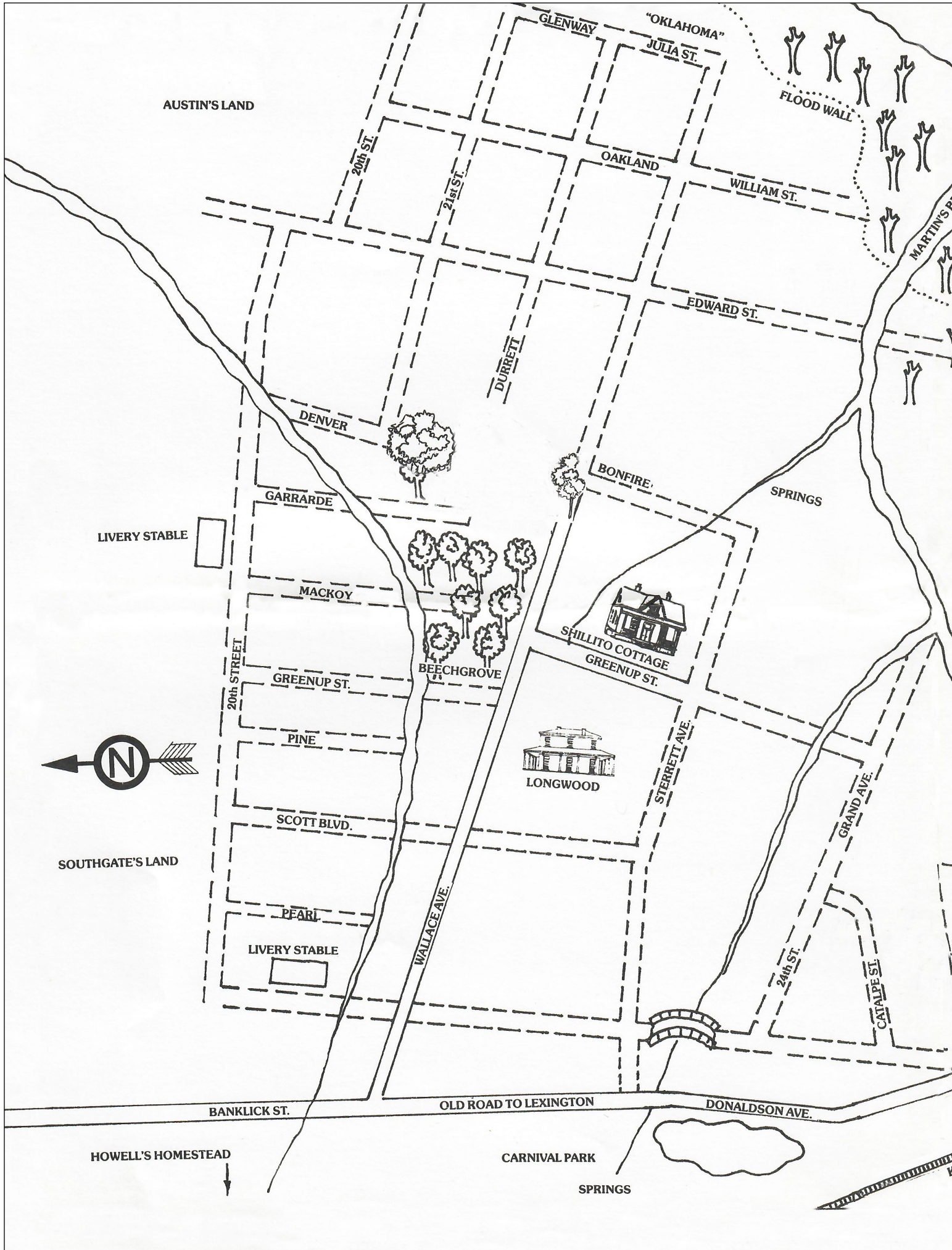
Eugene Levassor sold his acres from Madison to Greenup streets, purchased by Rensselaer Wilson Lee in 1859. Lee sold two 60-foot frontage lots at

the east-end of his property: one to Laura Culbertson (corner of Greenup & Levassor); the other to Walker C. Hall (next door). The stately homes erected on these properties still stand today.

Ten years later, Lee and his wife sold the remaining property to George Phillips, a foundry and coal entrepreneur, in 1869. It is unknown exactly when the mansion known as Sunnyside was built, or by whom, but the deed to Phillips states that the property was already known as Sunnyside. The mansion was constructed in Italianate style, popular in the early to mid-1800s.

When Phillips died in 1873, he was described as a wealthy citizen, long connected with the Blick & Phillips Iron Works. While Phillips may have been a substantial landowner, by 1875, his Executrix petitioned for sale of the real estate, as his personal prop-

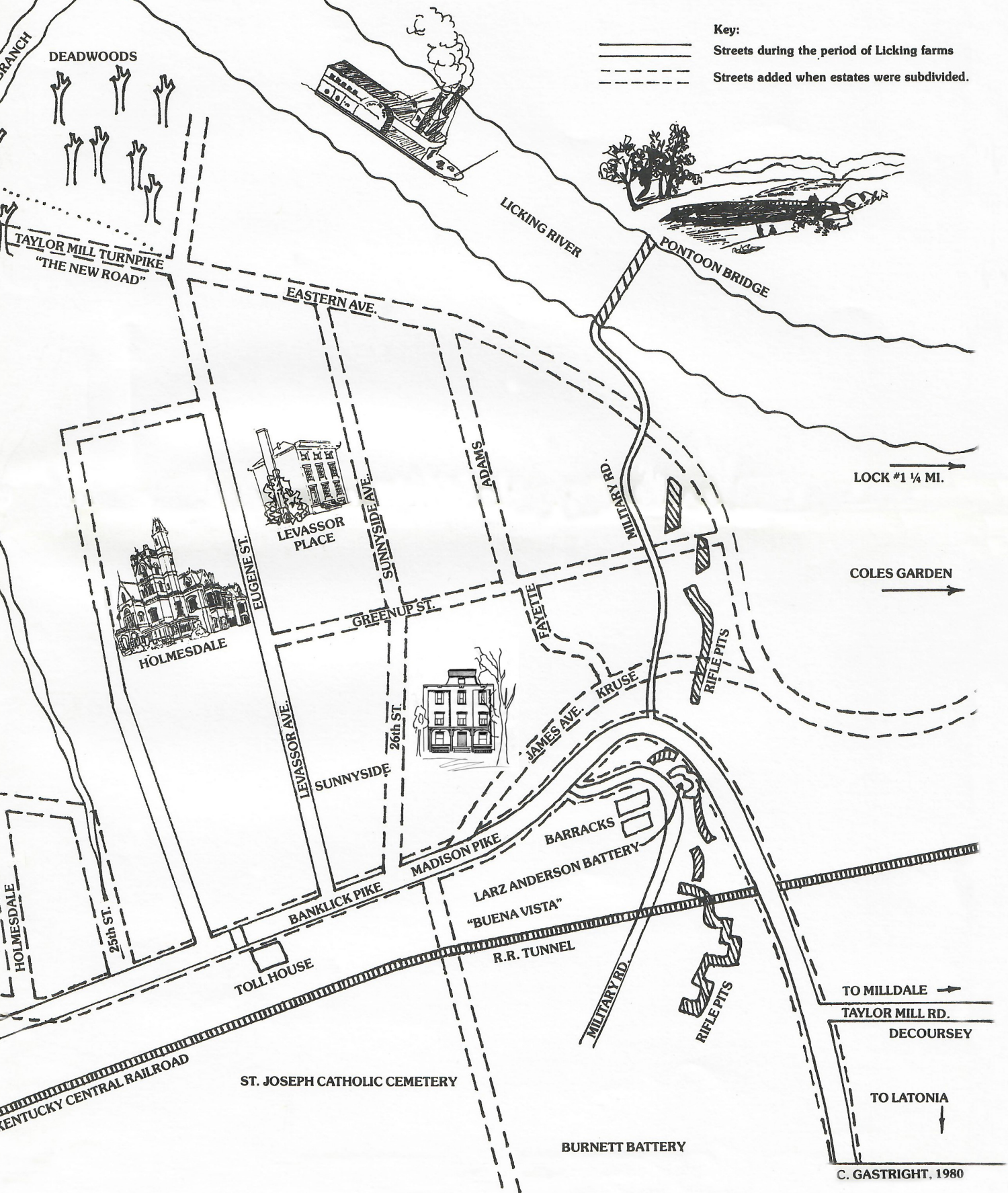




THE LICKING FARMS OF WALLACE-LEVASSOR-HOLMES

Printed by the Neighborhood Studies Project of the Cincinnati Historical Society as part of
Gentleman Farmers to City Folks by Joseph F. Gastright

© Cincinnati Historical Society, 1980



erty was insufficient to pay his debts. Accordingly, in 1877, the George Phillips Homestead near the first tollgate [present Dixie TV shop] on the Independence Pike was sold to Captain John A. Robinson, of Cincinnati, for \$9300 – less than one-half its real value.

The next and final owner was Owen J. Carpenter, a distiller and wholesaler of whiskey. The Carpenters resided in the house until c. 1914, when the property was sold to Hildreth & Beckman for development. The old Phillips mansion was torn down and the Sunnyside Park Company was formed to construct the homes we see today on 26th Street and the west block of Levassor Place.

Final Development

The remaining Levassor property: east block of Levassor Place; addition of Adams Avenue; extending to Eastern Avenue at Meinken Baseball Field [originally Cole's Gardens] was developed by Ben A. Adams, Insurance and Savings Bank, north-



Courtesy: Kenton County Historical Society

*Above: Sunnyside Mansion (note Hall mansion on left)
(originally on the southeast corner of Madison at 26th Street);*

*Below: (left) Laura Culbertson Home (corner of Greenup & Levassor);
(right) Walker C. Hall Estate
(These two structures are still standing in 2020)*



Courtesy: Kenton County Historical Society

west corner of 5th and Madison. This portion of the neighborhood has underground wiring. It is also somewhat strange that Levassor Place has no 100-block house numbers. The street addresses in the block from Madison to “short” Greenup have 2 digits but the next block east begin with 202!

Notes for the Gastright Map

Note that the Key shows which streets were early (solid lines) and which were later (dotted). Note that Levassor Place began simply as Eugene’s driveway and didn’t extend further, and was known as Eugene Street. The street today known as James was originally only tracks for the Latonia streetcars and wasn’t paved until the early 20th century, with the advent of automobiles. Latonia could only be reached by wagon or auto from this area by using the extremely steep DeCoursey Road hill until James Avenue was paved.

James Avenue was originally known as Kruse Avenue and was named for Johann Kruse, president of the Latonia Town Council before it was incorporated into Covington in 1908. Kruse was treasurer of the Bavarian Brewery and was accused of “sedition” in the anti-German hysteria during World War I. He was convicted and financially ruined while serving in Moundville Prison. Before he was even convicted, Covington Commissioners voted to change the street to honor Senator Ollie James and Kruse’s name was removed. Kruse’s story is a tale of terrible injustice during a climate of anti-German feeling.

Also note that what is labeled as a “Military Road” [now Madison Court] was constructed by federal troops in 1862 to reach the Anderson Battery as part of the defense of Cincinnati from Confederate attack, which never came. The battery was named after a Cincinnati philanthropist, Larz Anderson, who contributed funds for the fortification. A military field hospital was set up on Cole’s Garden, an early picnic and public park. Portions of the park were also used to billet federal troops during the Civil War. Presently, the area is approximately the same as Meinken Baseball Field and part of the oil storage tank property.

The military helped themselves to timber from the Levassor family land and quartered officers in the Levassor house. An officer on the scene offered to pay the Levassors for the damage done, but for over 50 years, the War Department refused to honor what they considered to be an unauthorized expenditure.

The temporary pontoon bridge across the Licking River, indicated, was one of the numerous projects constructed by the Black Brigade – free African-Americans from Cincinnati who were formed to assist in building fortifications in preparation for the threatened Confederate attack of 1862 – some of the first to serve in the war.

References for Further Reading

Note: Society *Bulletins* are scanned and accessible at: www.kentoncountyhistoricalsociety.org. Past issues of *Northern Kentucky Heritage* and Joseph Gastright’s book on Wallace Woods can be purchased at that website as well.

Bulletins of the Kenton County Historical Society:

July/Aug 2009

July/Aug 2012

Sept/Oct. 2017

May/June 2019

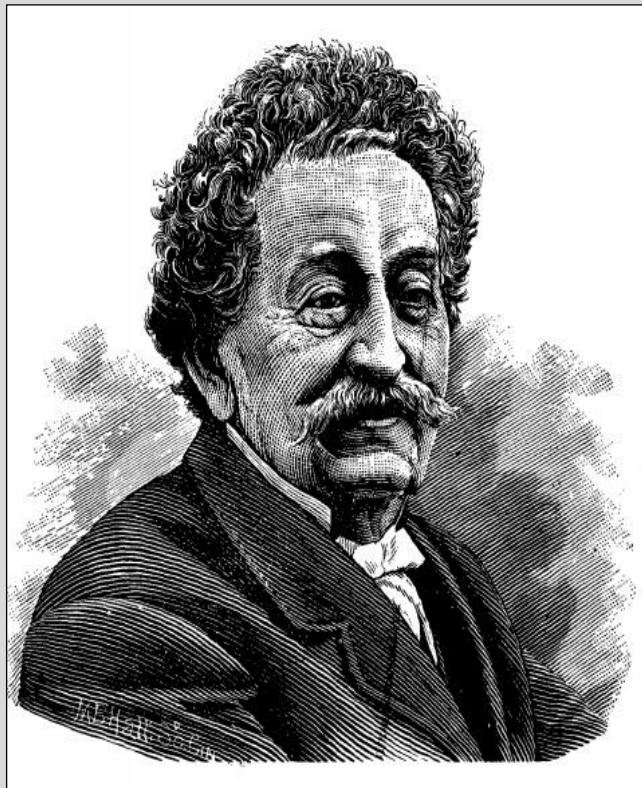
“Daniel Henry Holmes (1816-1898),” Betty Nordheim, *Northern Kentucky Heritage*, Vol. III; No. 2, p. 28 (Spring 1996)

“J. H. Kruse, War and the Terrible Threateners: Anti-German Hysteria in World War I Covington,” Lisa Gillham, with Bethany Pollitt, *Northern Kentucky Heritage*, Vol. XV; No. 1, pp. 3-38 (Fall 2007)

Gentlemen Farmers to City Folks: A Study of Wallace Woods, Covington, Dr. Joseph F. Gastright, Neighborhood Studies Project, Cincinnati Historical Society (1980)

“Kruse Ave Name is No More,” *Kentucky Post*, 9 July 1918, p. 1

Joseph Tosso (1802-1887)



The man who made the tune “Arkansas Traveler” famous was not an ordinary fiddler. He was considered one of America’s foremost classical violinists – a courtly Italian born in Mexico City in 1802. Joseph Tosso has been all but forgotten in Cincinnati musical circles, in which he worked, and in Northern Kentucky, where he lived.

His parents, Carlos and Maria Gret Tosso, were of Italian descent. Carlos was a dealer in jewels and a fine violinist. While in Mexico, Carlos played with the national theater orchestra. Young Joseph showed exceptional talent. By age eight, Joseph was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire where he studied until age 14.

Joseph Tosso came to the United States in 1817, to Richmond, Virginia. His mother died in 1818 and his father married again – to a widow, Henrietta Fiot. Henrietta’s brother G.W. Walker lived in Cincinnati and on a visit, the Tossos stayed with Thomas Carneal at his Ludlow estate *Elmwood Hall* (still standing). After moving again, this time to Louisville, young Joseph married Caroline D’Armambal, the daughter of the French consul-general in Louisville. Joseph and Caroline raised a large family.

In 1825, Tosso (age 23) joined a cavalry group called the Lafayette Guards, organized to escort General Lafayette on his triumphal farewell tour through Kentucky. During their march to Cincinnati, he and other attending musicians entertained the General at a reception at the Keene plantation in Lexington.

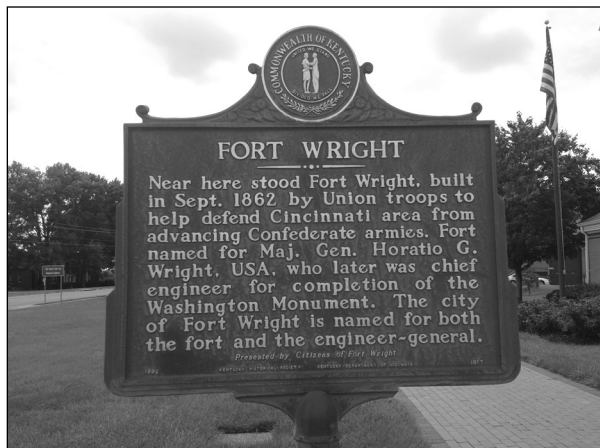
Tiring of traveling concert work, the Tossos moved to Cincinnati, where Joseph enjoyed a lively musical career. After his wife Caroline died in 1869, Joseph built a little home on the Kentucky side of the river, near Latonia Springs. He called the home “Rose Cottage” Tosso lived quietly there in semi-retirement with his daughter Louise.

His 75th birthday at Rose Cottage was celebrated in August 1879 with friends and relatives delighted to honor one of the finest violinists in America. Tosso played his beloved Amati instrument even though he was becoming blind. The guests promenaded under the trees on his property and gathered around the aged musician to hear stories of earlier days.

Due to his advancing age and approaching blindness, Tosso moved in town to Covington. A grand testimonial concert was given for him on June 12, 1885 at Smith and Nixon Hall, 4th Street, Cincinnati. Though stooped with age, Tosso still looked vigorous. Still an active musician, within a month of his death, January 6, 1887, he was still playing concerts in Cincinnati for his musician friends. He was laid to rest next to his wife, Caroline, in Cincinnati’s Spring Grove Cemetery. Today two restaurants sit on his five-acre “Rose Cottage” property: Frisch’s and Chic-fil-A, on KY 17 near Orphanage Road.

For a more complete story on Joseph Tosso, see: *Bulletin of Kenton County Historical Society*, July/August 2009, www.kentoncountyhistoricalsociety.org

Accepting Donations



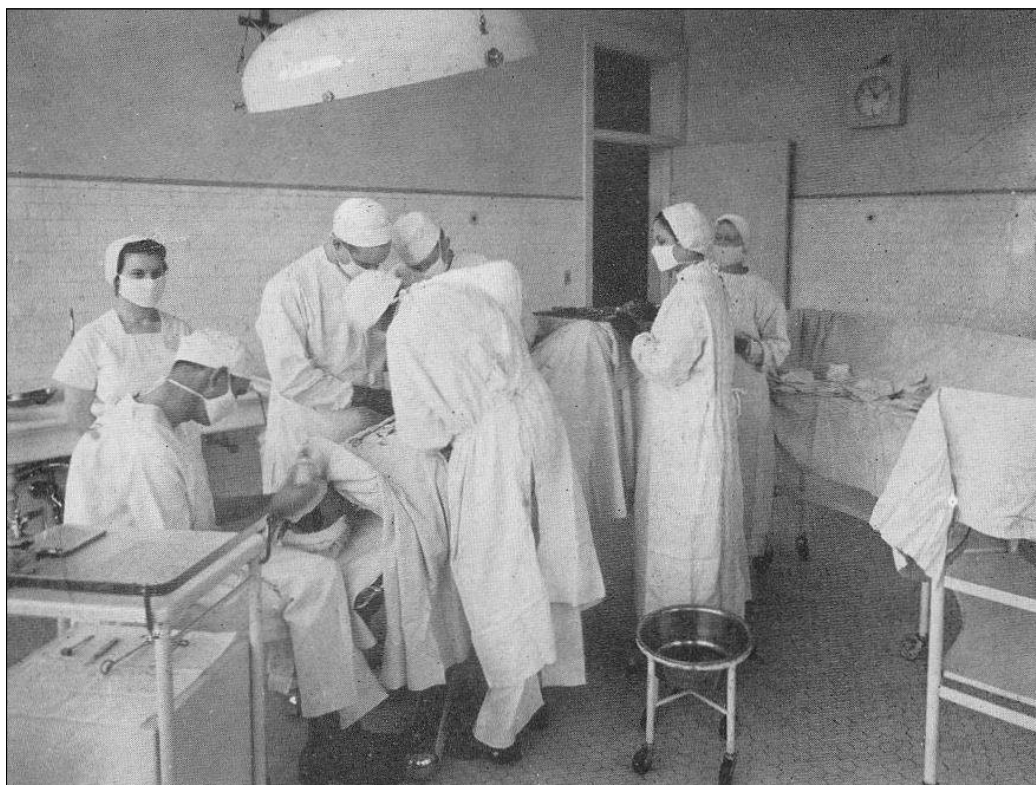
The Kenton County Historical Society has recently taken on the challenge of researching, obtaining approval for, and having installed several new Kentucky Historical Highway markers, such as the one shown here. These are excellent ways to provide the general public, as well as history buffs, with vital information on this region's past.

Please consider helping the Society by donating to this important cause. The direct link to our GoFundMe page is below, or visit our website's main page. Thank you!

<https://charity.gofundme.com/o/en/donate-widget/7737>

Mystery Photo

Can you identify the Mystery Photo? The answer is found below.



Answer:

Operating room at St. Elizabeth Hospital, Covington, 1934.

Kenton County Historical Society

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ARTICLES FROM BACK ISSUES ARE INDEXED ON OUR WEBSITE!

Published bi-monthly by

The Kenton County Historical Society

Yearly membership, including the Bulletin, \$20.00

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Ex-officio

I Bet You Didn't Know

*Tidbits from Kentucky's heritage
for every day of the calendar year*

November 1, 1793: The State Legislature met for the first time in Frankfort, which had been named the permanent capital.

November 1, 1947: Man O' War, the most famous race horse of all time, died of a heart attack at Faraway Farm near Lexington. He was born in KY and died in KY, but he never raced in KY.

November 11, 1861: *Lady Polk*, a 15,000 pound cannon mounted 180 feet above the Mississippi River at Columbus, exploded during a test fire killing 11 men.

November 23, 1966: An 11 station statewide educational television network was authorized by the FCC. By 1990, the KET operated 15 television transmitters and 9 translators.

From: *On This Day In Kentucky*, by Robert Powell

Programs and Notices

Kenton County Historical Society

In 2020, the Society presented a special educational programs and held our general membership (election) meeting. But, History Day was canceled. With in-person presentation not possible, another speaker cancelled a presentation. On October 10, Charles Bogart did a program for the Society on Kentucky railroads. Unfortunately due to Covid-19, no presentations have yet been finalized, virtually or otherwise, for 2021.

History Day 2021 in-person at the library will not happen. Being considered due to Covid-19 restrictions are virtual (ZOOM) presentations. Registration would be required but with no fee. Those with Enhanced memberships might be automatically registered.

The annual KCHS election of officers and directors on October 3 resulted in one new member on the KCHS board. She is Pam Marcum, a retired history teacher and a DAR member who is working on a booklet documenting Revolutionary soldiers who settled in rural Kenton County.

Behringer Crawford Museum

Holiday activities at the Museum will be quite different due to restrictions. Plans not yet confirmed include Devou Park carriage rides and special children's activities and a Lego exhibit.

Northern Kentucky History Hour, a program started recently, is presented weekly at 6:30 on Wednesday evenings using ZOOM digital video conferencing. You are invited to hear presenters show state and local history and art.

You are invited to register for NKY History Hour; then join the program by clicking the link at about 6:30 on Wednesdays:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/join/register/tZcsdeGtpjMiEtFOHWP1OI4tooShmMxzS0oY>

The museum is now open with Coronavirus restrictions in place including face mask wearing, social distancing and regular sanitizing of hands and surfaces. Because of Coronavirus restrictions, the annual Fresh Art auction (and "Silent Art auction") will be virtual this year. **Fresh Art** auctioning is scheduled for Sunday, October 4th.

Notice to the residents of Wallace Woods, Levassor Park, and old Sunnyside (26th Street):

This special issue is being sent to you as a free keepsake to provide a better understanding of the neighborhood in which you live. In so doing, we would like to introduce the Kenton County Historical Society. If you are at all interested in Kentucky and local history, please visit our website:

www.kentoncountyhistoricalsociety.org

There, you will see 40 years of professionally researched information about our past. Besides this bi-monthly newsletter, there are books on special topics as well as a regional magazine published twice each year. We offer several membership options, which are explained at the website. We hope you enjoy this special issue of our *Bulletin*.