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If These Walls Could Talk...



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Historic buildings help tell stories of people and events that make us who we are today. Sometimes “if these walls could talk” moments can tell stories in ways that pages of a history book cannot. So when a building is torn down, we lose a portion of our history.

Lexington’s incredibly rich history is told by many tangible structures, but others have been lost to history. In my book, *Lost Lexington* (History Press, 2014), I explored the backstories related to some of these lost places. Some may be of interest.

193 North Mill Street



At the southwest corner of Mill and Short Streets was a home once described as “one of Lexington’s oldest, most historic landmarks.” The Hart-Bradford was identified after two of its three most influential residents.

Colonel Thomas Hart served in North Carolina’s provincial congresses in the 1770s prior to fighting for American independence in the Revolutionary War. In 1775, he and other members of the Transylvania Company signed the Treaty at Sycamore Shoals through which leaders of the Cherokee Nation ceded a vast amount of present-day Kentucky and Tennessee to white settlers. What could have resulted in the State of Transylvania was, in fact, illegal under British law. King George III’s Proclamation of 1763 prohibited private companies from purchasing land from Native Americans.

Upon Hart’s 1794 arrival to Kentucky, he commenced several successful industrial and agricultural ventures. He built his home in 1798, and its parlor hosted the nuptials between Hart’s daughter, Lucretia, and a young lawyer named Henry Clay the following year. Hart gave them a neighboring house as a wedding gift, and Clay commuted to his law office (still standing) across the street.

In 1806, Hart’s son sold the property to John Bradford, a “Renaissance man” best known as publisher of the *Kentucke Gazette* (Kentucky’s first newspaper). In its early days, it was the only newspaper within 500 miles of Lexington, and for years, state law required all public notices to be published therein. But by the time Bradford lived at 193 N. Mill, he had ceased his newspaper work. In 1830, Bradford died in his bedroom at the home. A plaque was later added to the home’s exterior, recognizing the “prominent, public-spirited and useful citizen” who once lived there.

The third significant individual to live in and own 193 N. Mill was Miss Laura Clay, who spent her life committed to the causes of suffrage and the equal treatment of women. She founded the Fayette County Equal Rights Association and was the first president of the Kentucky Equal Rights Association, which obtained legislative victories in Frankfort protecting married women’s property and wages, requiring state female asylums to employ female physicians for patient care, and requiring certain male colleges to become coeducational. Laura Clay was nominated for President at the 1920 Democratic National Convention, earning her the honor of being the first woman so nominated at a major political party’s convention.

This historic home met the wrecking ball in 1955, and its site has since been a parking lot. Outrage over the demolition led to the formation of what became The Blue Grass Trust for Historic Preservation. Lexington also updated zoning laws to aid the cause of historic preservation; in 1958, Gratz Park becoming the first district with an H-1 overlay.

The Phoenix Hotel

Captain John Postlethwait opened the first tavern at Main and Limestone’s southeast corner in 1797. Postlethwait was a “suave speaker” and masterfully entertained his guests. On Independence Day 1819, President James Monroe stayed there during his Grand

If These Walls Could Talk, Continued



Tour of the South, joined by war heroes and future presidents Andrew Jackson and Zachary Taylor.

The following year, a fire destroyed the hotel, but hope persisted that a new hotel would “soon rise, like the Phoenix from its ashes.” The line was so catchy, it stuck. The Phoenix Hotel would continue to be rebuilt and renovated until it was demolished in 1981 to make way for the never-constructed World Coal Center. The site is now the home of Phoenix Park and the Lexington Public Library’s Central Branch.

The Phoenix Hotel was also the site of a significant event in our civil rights movement. In October 1961, the Saint Louis Hawks and Boston Celtics were scheduled to play a pre-season rematch of the prior season’s NBA championship at Memorial Coliseum. A few hours before tipoff, the Hotel’s coffee shop refused service to several

black Celtics players. Four players – Bill Russell, K.C. Jones, Sam Jones, and Satch Sanders –boycotted the game. Until then, black athletes were expected to simply ignore such overt acts of discrimination. President Obama, upon awarding Russell the Presidential Medal of Freedom, said that “when a restaurant refused to serve the black Celtics, [Russell] refused to play in the scheduled game.” Segregation in public accommodation was barred by federal law when the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted.

No story of the Phoenix Hotel would be complete without mentioning the poem In Kentucky. James Hilary Mulligan (a “judge” following his short stint as judge of Lexington’s Recorder’s Court) peered over his spectacles at a group of state legislators gathered in the Phoenix Hotel ballroom in February 1902. Known for his witty satire and humor, Mulligan read his newly penned poem, beginning with “the moonlight falls the softest in Kentucky” and concluding by observing that “The landscape is the grandest—and Politics—the damndest In Kentucky.”

Yes, Lexington’s places – both extant and lost – have many stories to tell. And who among us doesn’t love a good story?

Peter Brackney practices primarily in the areas of bankruptcy, estate planning, and probate at Brackney Law Office, PLLC. In addition, he’s a history buff. His first book, Lost Lexington, is available at Joseph-Beth and anywhere else books are sold. His next book, The Murder of Geneva Hardman and Lexington’s Mob Riot of 1920, is expected to be released in January. He can be reached at (859) 559-4648 or by email at peter@brackneylaw.com.

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