

Carroll Yesteryears
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In Praise of Scharf's *History of Western Maryland*
By Mary Ann Ashcraft

Those who enjoy history cannot help but stand in awe of the work of J. Thomas Scharf in publishing his monumental, two-volume *History of Western Maryland* in 1882. The second volume covers Carroll County.

The full title of Scharf's work reads, "History of Western Maryland. Being a history of Frederick, Montgomery, Carroll, Washington, Allegany, and Garrett counties from the earliest period to the present day: including biographical sketches of their representative men." Whew! The title alone is daunting. In this age of computers able to handle huge amounts of information in spreadsheets and databases, you wonder how Scharf could keep track of what he and his agents gathered from the six counties without those tools. Typewriters had just been invented in 1874 and were big and bulky. Photocopy machines—well they were 80 years in the future.

In the preface, Scharf describes how he and his agents delved into libraries around the state, then "visited personally the entire territory...spending much time in each district, examining ancient newspapers, musty manuscripts, family, church, and society records, conversing with the aged inhabitants, and collecting from them orally many interesting facts never before published, and which otherwise, in all probability, would soon have been lost altogether." What a debt we in Carroll County owe to this man and his agents for leaving us 84 pages covering our first settlers, the early land grants, erection of the county, biographies of distinguished citizens in each election district, and on and on. The amount of information packed into those pages boggles the mind.

Scharf's flowery writing style is typical of the late 19th century. In describing the Woolery Election District, he wrote, "Some of the finest estates and most beautiful residences in the State are situated in this district, among which may be noted 'Wilton,' the present country place of Thomas C. Brown." Several paragraphs covering Brown's life follow. We learn that "Mr. Brown has ever been an active public man, and a warm adherent of the Democratic party. He has never married. By his own industry, integrity, and prudent management he has arisen to be one of the leading farmers and most public-spirited citizens and business men of the county, and largely enjoys the esteem and confidence of his fellow citizens." If Thomas Brown had left descendants, they would surely take pride in this flattering description.

Similar coverage of important men in Carroll's other districts appear, often accompanied by images from the period. These descriptions are a gold mine of information if you happen to be a descendant and avid genealogist. Otherwise, you would spend many hours searching for what Scharf already assembled 140 years ago.

Other helpful tidbits he published for each election district were the names of the public schools, their trustees and teachers, even the number of students in each school. In 1881, Laura S. Poole had 58 pupils attending her one-room Carrollton school. Poor Laura if all of them were present

every day! Teachers during that period might be scarcely older than their oldest student. They arrived each morning faced with starting the stove to heat the building. That was easy compared to a full day of teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic to a roomful of children who might not always remember to bring their slates, their books, their lunch, or had been awake since dawn having milked six of the family's cows!

Proof of Thomas Scharf's efforts to record as much as possible about each district is a list of residents who were 70 years of age or above. Where was this information available? Perhaps it came from the 1880 census, but whatever the source, a member of Scharf's team must have poured through records or conducted interviews—somehow gleaned statistics about both the Black and white citizens.

Anyone searching for his or her ancestors today will discover helpful lists of adults buried in some of the oldest and largest Carroll County cemeteries. For example, Scharf lists inscriptions for approximately 250 people buried at Pipe Creek Church of the Brethren Cemetery outside of Uniontown. Although the names of children are omitted, this information is invaluable to anyone looking for their ancestors who cannot find it when searching the cemetery. Over time gravestones disappear or inscriptions become illegible. The person who kept cemetery records may have failed to leave them at the church. Did one of Scharf's "agents" walk through that cemetery copying the inscriptions? That might be the explanation because John M. Romsport's gravestone says he "was instantly killed while on duty by the explosion of No. 4 engine on W.R.R.R.," on October 24, 1876.

Today's history researchers have so much information at their disposal thanks to what is available on the internet. J. Thomas Scharf didn't have that luxury, but in just one book, he left us with a treasure-trove of material about Carroll County. Copies of *History of Western Maryland* are available in libraries, online, and reprints are often for sale as well.

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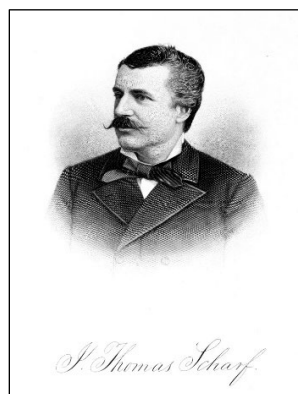


Image of J. Thomas Scharf (1843-1898) as it appeared in his 1882 publication, "History of Western Maryland." He fought in the Confederate army and navy during the Civil War, but became deeply involved in Maryland's history afterward. Source: "History of Western Maryland."