

Carroll Yesteryears

23 April 2023

What Remains of the Strawbridge Home for Boys

By Mary Ann Ashcraft

A huge fire in early March 2020 destroyed the Carroll Building, the last major structure associated with the Strawbridge Home for Boys which stood on the outskirts of Eldersburg from 1924 until 1959. The COVID-19 pandemic quickly became a major topic in local news, so stories associated with the Strawbridge Home and that fire never received much attention.

Truth be told, the stories associated with the Home go back to the early 1800s, but let's just go back to 1891 when wealthy, elderly George Washington Manro (1810-1891) and his wife, owners of a 318-acre farm, died on the same day, leaving no heirs. The farm stood north of Eldersburg between today's Liberty High School and Freedom Elementary off Maryland Route 32. After their deaths the historic old house and farm buildings stood vacant until bought at a public auction by another man with the same first and middle names, George Washington Albaugh (1857-1933).

In the 1920s, G.W. Albaugh and his wife were well-known in Carroll County as philanthropists and great supporters of the Methodist Episcopal Church. They lived at beautiful Emerald Hill, the former Longwell Mansion, which overlooked downtown Westminster where Albaugh owned many important commercial buildings. In January 1919 while the Spanish flu pandemic was raging across the United States, the Albaughs lost their daughter and son-in-law, Ella and Lawrence Gillelan, to that deadly disease and were left to raise their three orphaned granddaughters, all under the age of 10.

The names Manro, Albaugh, and Strawbridge came together when Albaugh gifted the Manro house, farm buildings, and equipment to the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church to be run as a home for orphaned boys in 1922. Albaugh wanted to honor Robert Strawbridge, founder of Methodism in America. It seems more than a coincidence that he recognized orphaned boys, like his orphaned granddaughters, needed a home.

At a cost of \$20,000, the historic Manro home was renovated to house the first boys. Fifteen of them moved in during December 1924. The Manro name was dropped and the building became known as the Strawbridge Cottage. It eventually housed the youngest boys, those four to eight years of age. In 1926 the large, granite Carroll Building was constructed at a cost of \$50,000 to \$60,000 as a dormitory for the older boys. About 1950 a final dormitory, Memorial Cottage, was built to house ten of the oldest boys.

Strawbridge quickly grew to a home for 45-50 boys ranging in age from four to 18 with a support staff including a superintendent, other administrators, house parents, dieticians, and farm managers who helped run an agricultural complex which included dairy and beef cattle, horses, hogs, chickens, ducks and an extensive garden. What wasn't consumed by the boys and residential staff was sold. During the 1920s, it cost approximately \$200 to raise each youngster.

The boys attended public school in Sykesville and worshipped there at St. Paul's Methodist Church, but they also had daily chores. At one Strawbridge reunion, 93-year-old Don Smyth recalled his experiences living at Strawbridge from age five until he graduated in 1941. "I worked on the farm husking corn, milking cows and doing laundry. They taught me to get along with others and to do the physical part of helping on the farm...and with housekeeping. They also gave me assistance getting into Western Maryland College."

By most accounts, the Strawbridge Home was very successful and the boys remembered their lives there with pleasure. Over its 35 years of existence from 1924 to 1959, it hosted 344 boys. Some of those born in later years still return for reunions.

The entire Strawbridge property was sold after 1959, but elaborate plans for the land never materialized. Strawbridge Cottage accidentally burned in 1972 and Memorial Cottage was purposely burned. The farm buildings were demolished. Of the original dormitories, only Carroll Building remained and was converted to an apartment complex on Strawbridge Terrace, a residential street running several blocks west of Route 32.

Today the shell of Carroll Building is decorated with graffiti and surrounded by a wire fence with No Trespassing signs. For those still alive who spent all or part of their youth at the Strawbridge Home, it must be sad to see what is left today.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.



Image 1: Burned-out shell of the dormitory known as the Carroll Building built in 1926 at the Strawbridge Home for Boys. Courtesy photo.



Image 2: Boys who were residents of the Strawbridge Home in 1930 posed outside Carroll Building for a group photo in their Sunday best. Courtesy of Sykesville Gate House Museum.



Image 3: Presentation of the Manro estate to the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1922 for use as an orphanage for boys. George W. Albaugh, his wife, and three Gillelan granddaughters appear with church dignitaries. It opened as the Strawbridge Home for Boys in 1924. Courtesy of Historical Society of Carroll County