

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Carroll's Yesteryears
19 July 1992

Focus Section: The Way We Were
By Joe Getty

NOTE: Newspaper article is missing, copied from Joe's original

Historians have developed theories of American history that view the United States as the great "melting pot." These theories follow the evolution of our history from its multicultural beginnings during the settlement period through waves of emigration during the 19th century to the distinctly American culture of the 20th century.

In viewing Carroll County today, one might think that our local history is fairly homogenous. The population and cultural features of 20th century Carroll County appear to be fairly uniform, suggesting that our history has lacked cultural diversity. This would be an inaccurate assumption.

In fact, the early history of this region does reflect elements of the cultural "melting pot." There were distinct differences between the two predominant settlement groups – the Pennsylvania Germans and the English. In addition, early settlers derived from other European ethnic groups including the Scotch-Irish, French and Swiss.

These European settlers brought with them diverse cultural traditions of their homelands. A sharp contrast was likely to exist between the neighbors in the towns and on the farms of the region that later became Carroll County, especially between the Pennsylvania Germans and English. They spoke a different language, practiced separate religions, and displayed their own cultural traditions in other areas such as decorative arts and architecture.

During the early 19th century, these distinctions between cultures were beginning to break down. In a recent research project supported by the Maryland Historical and Cultural Museum Assistance program, the Historical Society studied probate inventories of the German and English residents of Westminster during the period 1800 to 1830.

A Pennsylvania German scholar, Pastor Frederick S. Weiser, analyzed the inventories of household furnishings, tools and other personal belongings to determine cultural patterns between the two primary settlement groups. This information is particularly useful in developing the furnishing and interpretation plans at the Historical Society's house museum, the Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House at 206 East Main Street in Westminster.

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Probate inventory entries show that the Pennsylvania Germans of Westminster retained some distinctively Germanic traditions in the early 19th century. Jacob Sherman, who built the Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House in 1806, had a probate inventory taken after his death in 1822. It indicates that he had a first floor bedroom that was conservatively furnished with two feather beds and bedsteads, a painted chest and a German bible. These furnishings follow an 18th century Pennsylvania German tradition and may, in fact, be the same furniture acquired by the Shermans for their wedding day in 1779.

Items located in the kitchen, pantry and cellar kitchen on Sherman's inventory relate to distinctly Pennsylvania German food traditions, such as "2 crout tubs" for sauerkraut. In his dining room, Sherman had a tall case clock (popularly known today as a "grandfather's clock"). A comparison of the Westminster inventories shows that the Germans had a cultural preference for clocks (there are a number of Pennsylvania German sayings that stress the importance of well-spent time) while the English did not have these expensive clocks in their households.

Conversely, the English inventories contain items of furniture not used by the Germans. Dressing or toilet tables are found in English homes, illustrating the English concern for personal appearance. On John Cockey's inventory, the bedroom contains "1 Dressing glass and Toilet table." However, this furniture type does not appear on any German inventories.

The inventories clearly show, however, that the Germans were adopting English characteristics. An English furniture type, the chest-of-drawers or "bureau," was replacing the lift-lid chest as a preferred piece of bedroom furniture in Pennsylvania German homes. On several of the German inventories, the chests are designated as old; in one instance it is called a "Dutch" chest.

A new type of case furniture becoming popular at that time is the sideboard which was English in origin. There are only two listed on the inventories. Jacob Sherman has one, and this reflects his desire to display English tastes in the same manner in which he built his fashionable house on Main Street. The other sideboard was in the household of Dr. George Colgate, Sherman's English neighbor who lived at 210 East Main Street which is now the Historical Society's Kimmey House.

The persistence of some ethnic cultural traditions continued through the 19th century but many factors were at work to dilute this local heritage. The desire to become more "American" and to obtain and display modern furnishings increased with each generation. Local vernacular traditions, such as language, decorative arts and architecture, were replaced by a far-reaching

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

national culture especially during the American era of conspicuous consumption at the turn of the century.

The Industrial Revolution provided the foundation for many changes in the national culture. Mass produced goods became readily available in the local marketplace and slowly displaced the crafts traditions of Carroll County's small towns and villages. National magazines and publications became readily available introducing the local population to contemporary products in fashion, household goods and styles of furnishings and architecture.

In Carroll County, a major impact occurred with the establishment of railway line in the mid-19th century. The railroads brought new channels of commerce and communications for local communities. It also created a new mobility for local residents to travel and visit other areas of the state and nation.

The impact of the railroads was profound, in the same manner in which the automobile has more recently altered cultural patterns in Carroll County. Other influences in the 20th century that have created a more homogenous local culture include mass communications (radio and television) and suburbanization of our communities.

People today enjoy the amenities of Carroll County that provide the links to our local heritage. Unique aspects of our physical and cultural environment occur because of the persistence of local traditions that have refused to yield to the pressure of our modern national culture. The continuing traditions of our community bands, parades and festivals, church socials and other customs in Carroll County are elements of this heritage that our residents cherish.

In the future, Carroll County will continue its slow evolution that has occurred for most of the 20th century moving from a rural to a suburban community. What keeps the county attractive is our ability to retain many rural traditions and the personal characteristics of community life. The challenge of the future will be to preserve and weave this fabric of our traditional communities into the context of a suburban county.