

IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society



**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

Remembering William Henry Fry

One of the many Indian Hill artists who have illuminated the people of Cincinnati was William Fry, the distinguished woodcarver. Born in Bath, England in 1830, William was fascinated as a youth by his father's woodcarving and became skilled in the basics of this art form at a young age. In his teenage years, seeking adventure on the high seas as a sailor, he survived being icebound off the coast of Ireland, and shipwrecked off Newfoundland. On one transatlantic crossing in 1850 he met Mary Dobson of London, whom he married at the port of Galveston, Texas. They moved to New Orleans, and Fry became a government post rider. In 1857 he carried the message that sent troops to Utah to quell the Mormon uprising. During the Civil War, he joined an Indiana regiment and served with Ulysses Grant in the southern theatre.

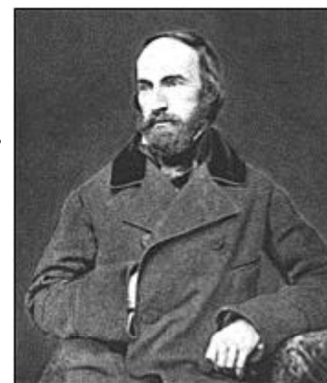
After the war, Fry joined his father (who had since immigrated to Cincinnati) at a studio in the Wiswell Building on 4th Street, where they planned and completed many notable carved pieces. Early steamboat decoration opportunities supplied a good amount of work for the few carvers in southwestern Ohio at that time. The two Frys were commissioned to carve the black walnut interior of the First Presbyterian Church (now Covenant Presbyterian at 8th and Elm Streets). Their style of work, very different from the typical classic Greek copies seen about town, drew considerable attention; and soon the architects of Cincinnati brought them numerous orders for employment.

At least four Presbyterian, two Episcopalian, one Methodist, and the Swedenborgian churches contained considerable specimens of their work. Later, for three years, father and son with other assistants worked on the State House in Columbus. Public buildings in Cincinnati were adorned with Fry carvings depicting lions, griffins, and eagles – often above the entrances to commercial establishments. Examples of their handiwork still exist in the Art Museum and Music Hall. The interiors of then prominent Cincinnatians, such as Henry Probasco, John Shillito, and Nicholas Longworth contained Fry's decorative furniture.

William Fry lived in Indian Hill at the dead end of what was called Buckingham Pike, where he resided on a 100 acre farm. The woodcarver and his wife raised four daughters and six sons in the place he chose "because of the beauty of the scenery from here - the hills and vales and winding Miami River." Inspired by Nature, many of the carvings at his home depicted flora and fauna in the area. His ability to accurately copy living things was evident in pieces such as candlesticks, panels, letter openers, and mantelpieces. In his early years, his style was Italianate, but he later mastered the Acanthus method, and established a personal style with an imaginative touch. He became adept with each type of wood from ebony to mahogany. Fry, a master in his field, was called the "Ghiberti of American decorative art".

Besides performing his art, William Fry instructed students at the Art Academy for more than 40 years, retiring at the age of 96. Several of his students exhibited their work at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial, winning their teacher a bronze medal and diploma, awards for their decorative work. His pupils received national recognition; and later his carvings on Baldwin Pianos won first prize at the Paris Exposition of 1900.

Once, when asked about his philosophy of life, he quoted a poem: "Work thou for pleasure; paint sing or carve; the thing thou lovest; though the body starve. He who works for glory, misses the goal; he who works for money, coins his very soul." Leaving behind a legacy of woodcarvings, William Fry died at his Indian Hill farm one month before his 100th birthday and was buried in Miami Cemetery, just over the river from his home. His visions of Nature, which he transposed to his wood creations, continue to impress viewers today.



Wood Panels at Music Hall