

Nuggets of History

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THE HOME OF AN EARLY-DAY BANKER by Martha Mangas

Chester C. Briggs, born in Dover, Vermont, September 6, 1817, was the son of Calvin and Lucy (Washburn) Briggs. He grew to manhood in Dover. After receiving an excellent education at Dartmouth College, Mr. Briggs established and carried on the GREEN MOUNTAIN FREEMAN, a newspaper which did an immense good in the cause of anti-slavery. When the Biographical Publishing Company published an account of Mr. Briggs in 1892, the paper was still in existence, although the cause it first advocated no longer needed its active help. In every way possible Mr. Briggs urged the abolition of slavery. He was a conductor of the underground railroad for freeing slaves and had charge of one of the leading "depots" in New England. With his own money he purchased one slave in order to give him his freedom. He found great pleasure in recounting his thrilling experiences during the days of slavery. He was especially proud to relate that the man he bought out of slavery rose from his degraded condition to one of honor and influence, and was one of the under clerks in the State Treasury at Boston for thirty years or more.

As a young man Briggs had fought the liquor traffic, feeling it was his duty to mankind. During his old age he was still enthusiastic in the cause of temperance. He had the personal friendship of many men who were influential in creating a sentiment among the people against the liquor traffic.

In Montpelier, Vermont, Chester Briggs married Miss Emeline M. Peck. They became the parents of five children. James and one unnamed child died in infancy, and a daughter Emma died when she was a small child. Charles E. Briggs married Anna Loree of Vinton, Iowa, and made his home in Rockford. George S. married Miss Mary Taggart and was connected with Waverly and Company of Rockford. Mr. and Mrs. Briggs adopted and raised a daughter, Lizzie M., who died after her marriage to D. H. Ferguson of Rockford.

In 1853 Mr. Briggs moved from Vermont to Rockford. He became president of the firm of Briggs, Spafford and Penfield, bankers. He continued as the head of that private bank for ten years, until the business was merged into the Third National Bank. Mr. Briggs then became financial manager of the company which was organized to build twenty-eight miles of the Kenosha Railroad. He was a supporter of the railroad throughout the crisis of 1857 and until the railroad was completed in 1859.

Mr. Briggs became a real estate dealer and was the owner of eight improved farms in the vicinity of Rockford and also much valuable city property.

In 1868 he became a partner in the firm of Briggs, Mead and Skinner, dealers in agricultural implements. The firm name was changed to Briggs, Enoch and Skinner Manufac-

turing Company, and after James B. Skinner's death in 1872 was known as Briggs and Enoch Company. In 1880 the firm was organized as a stock company under the name of the Rockford Plow Company. This business, first started by Mr. Skinner in 1840, was one of the oldest in the state of Illinois. They manufactured gang and single riding plows, stirring and breaking plows, sulky and walking cultivators, and vibrating rolling coulters. The offices were in the area along the west side of Rockford, below the dam, known as the Water Power district.

In 1857 the Briggs address was given in the earliest city directory as a home on East State Street between Kishwaukee and South 5th Street. In 1863 he built his large home. There were no house numbers on State Street at that time. The 1866 City Directory lists the home as "residence N. side State Street between Longwood and Summit Streets." In 1869 the house was numbered for the first time as 1206 East State Street. Apparently the house then became number 1216, and in 1894 was again renumbered, with the new address being 1244 East State Street, and has the same number today.

Mr. Briggs had times of depression and times of prosperity in his business dealings. In 1886 Mr. Briggs sold out his interest in the Rockford Plow Company and declared bankruptcy. He could not keep up the mortgage payments, and he lost his large home on East State Street. The Briggs family moved to 604 West State Street. Mr. Briggs then became an insurance salesman, representing a large number of the leading companies. He died in Rockford on January 24, 1892. Mrs. Briggs lived until 1911, her residence at that time given as 608 West State Street. The biographical sketch of her described her as "having a host of friends in the community, and being of such a hospitable nature as to win the esteem of all whom she entertains beneath her roof."

The Briggs home at 1244 East State Street stood vacant for a number of years in the 1880s. According to an article in the Rockford Register-Republic September 13, 1963, Harry Barnard, in an interview, said "my father-in-law was invited to live there rent free after his retirement and the family has been there ever since." In the same article Mr. Barnard said his father was a carpenter who had helped build the house between 1861 and 1863.

The man invited to live in the house in 1892 was James Linnus Sherman. Living in the house also was George Vaughn Sherman, a son and carpenter by trade, and Miss Mabel Pearl Sherman, a daughter listed in the city directory as a milliner. The descendants of this family are the owners of the house at the present time.

James Linnus Sherman married Emily Alice Holdridge. They became the parents of five children, four sons and a daughter. George V. Sherman married Dorothy Graves, also known as Dottie. He owned the George Sherman Company at 127 W. State Street, listing its wares as confectionery, fruit, restaurant, caterers, bakery, etc. At times in the city directories George was also listed as a carpenter. For



THE C. C. BRIGGS RESIDENCE.
One of the hospitable homes of East State street. Still standing, but with a row of new houses across its front lawn.

a period of time he had a machine shop listed at the rear of 1244 E. State. George and his wife Dorothy, lived in the home from 1892 until 1915, at which time their residence became 425 South 1st Street where they operated a grocery store.

Starting in 1901 James Garfield Sherman is listed as living in the old Briggs home. He was first a machinist for Cormack and Company and in 1903 became a toolmaker for Barber-Colman Co. and later the Rockford Steel Fixture Company and the Whitney Metal Tool Company. He was also a boat builder and gunsmith. James' wife was Bessie E. They had one daughter, Alice Evelyn. Alice married Herbert William Fernando Buetsch in 1930. It is their son, Gordon, who is the present owner of the home. The last listing of James Sherman and his family at 1244 East State Street was in 1917.

James Linnus Sherman died before the turn of the century. His widow, Emily Alice, continued to live in the house until her death in 1918. Robert H. Sherman had a wife named Daisy. There is no record of their ever living in the home. The fourth son, John, died.

Mabel Pearl Sherman married Harry Spafford Barnard in 1901. In the newspaper interview Harry Barnard said, "I became part owner of the house when I married Mabel Sherman in 1901. Gradually I bought out the other owners." Mr. Barnard also referred to the house as a fifteen-room three story mansion. Harry Barnard was a carpenter. He also bought up mortgages and was on the election board for many years. The polling place was in the carriage house behind



Carriage house behind 1244 E. State Street; G. V. Sherman's machine shop

the main house. Mabel Barnard loved to garden. She liked exotic plants and wildflowers. She kept a diary of her gardens. A tulip tree was planted in the beautiful gardens in front. She had formal gardens, ornate bird baths, and trellises. At one time she planted 500 tulip bulbs. Harry Barnard continued to occupy the house until he died in 1972 just six months short of his 100th birthday.

At various times other relatives have also occupied the home. Starting in 1927 Mary A. Barnard, the widow of David A. Barnard, and the mother of Harry Barnard, lived there. During another period of time starting in the mid 1920s the George Dannenbergs lived in the home. Mrs. George Dannenberg was the daughter of George and Dorothy Sherman who had occupied the house from 1892 until 1915.

Alice Evelyn Buetsch, the daughter of James G. Sherman, purchased the home shortly after Harry Barnard's death in 1972. Mrs. Buetsch in turn sold the home to her son, Gordon, in 1975. Gordon and Annette Buetsch and their children now occupy the home. Sherman and Carol Buetsch and their children also live in the home. The children are the fifth generation of the Sherman family to occupy the residence. They are Christopher, Brian and Susan, the children of Gordon and Annette Buetsch, and Holly and James, the children of Sherman and Carol Buetsch. A part of the upstairs is now rented as small apartments.

This Italianate style home at 1244 East State Street was built between 1861 and 1863, and occupied by 1863. The house sits on slightly less than an acre of land. Contrary to popular opinion, no property has been sold; the house



Carol, Sherman, Annette, and Gordon Buetsch in the foyer of the Briggs-Sherman-Buetsch mansion

was always reached by a narrow corridor of land extending from State Street. Early maps show the area as one of residential buildings laid out in rectangular blocks. On either side of the corridor of land leading to the Briggs home were other homes.

The materials for the building were reportedly brought from Milwaukee to Rockford, including the bricks, marble fireplaces and cast iron hoods and grates, and the woodwork. If the home was designed by an architect, his name has apparently been lost to history, but Harry Spafford, Barnard's father, was a carpenter who worked on the home. Harry Barnard later became the owner of the property.

As Mr. Briggs was reportedly active in the underground railroad, there is a belief that he used his home to hide escaping slaves. A part of the basement is floored; the other part is not. A brick enclosure is under the first floor staircase. There is conjecture but no proof this was the area used as a refuge. According to Ruth Lunde, the term "underground railroad" was a misnomer; the fugitive slaves could have been hidden anywhere on the premises either in the main house or the outbuildings.

The main portion of the home is a two story brick structure with a hip roof; the back wing of the home that housed the kitchen and the servants' quarters is also brick but with a gable roof. The brick walls are 18 inches thick; this thickness of wall is also present between the main portion of the house and the servants' portion. The



The Briggs residence at the head of the narrow corridor of land extending from East State Street

walls are solid brick, having no framing members. To the right of the front entrance is a bay window; the left portion of the house, both front and side is surrounded by a veranda. The roof of the veranda is supported by square pillars; sometimes they are single pillars, while others are placed with two in close proximity. There is no railing. The upper portion between the pillars is partially arched. Brackets are under the eaves. The lower windows are approximately 10 feet tall with small panes. The upper windows, although shorter in length, have the same small panes and arched top. Above each window is a decorative cast iron hood molding. The first floor moldings over the double windows are semi-arched, and the second floor moldings over the single windows are fully arched.

An old photograph, not absolutely identified, but thought to picture the Briggs family in front of the house, is owned by the Buetsch family. This picture shows that originally there were shutters and a balustrade around a portion of the roof, but they are no longer present. Under the wide overhang of the upper roof were large brackets, which were in a state of disrepair and were removed, but some were kept as a pattern for possible restoration.

The entrance to the home is through a porch with four square wood pillars. Above the pillars and below the porch roof are carved wooden scrolls. The doorway is heavily arched above the two solid wooden doors. Above the double doors is an arched panel of glass with intricate flowers and scrolls etched into it.

The entry hall is very large with the main staircase to the left. The large staircase curves to the second story. The stair spindles are carved out of walnut and oak



The Briggs mansion as it appeared in 1965

wood. A large window supplies light on the stair landing. The hall is completely closed off from the rest of the house by double arched doors with wide arched moldings. This portion of the house was originally unheated and is today. On the ceiling of the front hall is a large plaster medallion. These original medallions are present and in perfect condition in each of the rooms on the first floor. Beneath the wallpaper in the hall is fresco, the hand stenciling painted on the walls.

The formal living room and dining rooms are to the right of the front, through double arched doors. The ceilings of these rooms are 12 feet high; those on the second floor are 10 feet high. Ceiling medallions are present in all rooms and there are also heavy cove moldings around the ceilings. There are six marble fireplaces, all different, in the home. The fireplaces are in the formal living and dining rooms and in the family living and dining rooms, and in the two large bedrooms on the second floor. Five of the fireplaces are of white marble; the sixth in the formal dining room is of gray marble. All are European style with the cast iron burning grate and cast iron hood sitting well out into the room for maximum heating efficiency. All draw well and are operable. The fireplaces were designed for burning coke and originally provided all of the heat for the house. According to Harry Barnard, the first central heating system installed burned 35 tons of soft coal each winter. The floors are parquet.

A unique feature is the ten foot high windows. These windows can be raised completely into a space between the walls of the second floor. Then they become a doorway to enter the solarium on the east side of the house, or to go

Old photograph of the Briggs home; probably a photo of the Briggs family in front of the house



on to the veranda on the west side.

The family living and dining rooms are to the left of the entrance hall and similar to the formal area of the house. The large kitchen is in the back gabled portion of the house. This room and the servants' quarters upstairs are set at a slightly lower elevation than the main portion of the house. The large kitchen has been remodeled, and a family room has been made in back of the kitchen in a portion of the house that was originally used for storage and a possible enclosed outhouse.

There are two back stairways in the servants' area; one, an open stair with a railing around the top; the other, totally enclosed with a very narrow and steep stairs. The upstairs also has a large central hall with large double arched doors opening from it. This area is now rented as small apartments. In the vicinity of the staircase some of the brass gaslight fixtures are still present.

A very narrow and steep stairway leads from the second floor to the cupola above the main portion of the house. The cupola is entirely surrounded by small glass windows, again with curved panes in the upper portions.

The wooden carriage house still stands on the back of the lot. At one time the shed on the side was used as a chicken coop.

The legal description of the property is as follows:

Plat of out lot s 9 & 10 Secs
23 & 24-44-1 E 14 ft W 32 ft
S 14 D ft Lot 9 & W 82 ft N.

Rockford is so fortunate that the house was not destroyed. When Mrs. Buetsch bought the house from Harry Barnard, it was necessary to have it appraised. The men who came to give the appraisal told Mrs. Buetsch that it was more valuable as land without the house. They suggested

that Mrs. Buetsch get a demolition estimate, which she did. This was used as an appraisal of the house.

The present owners are very aware of the historical and architectural significance of their home. They, too, have done research. The fact that their children are the fifth generation of the family to live in the home is very meaningful to them. The house had not been maintained as well during Mr. Barnard's later years, so the restoration costs have been very high.

Many pieces of lovely antique furniture are in the house. They have been passed down through the generations of the family who have lived in the house, and are highly valued by the present owners.

OUR BANKS - THEN AND NOW
by W. Ashton Johnson and
Robert H. Borden

(The following article was originally written by the late W. Ashton Johnson, former editor of NUGGETS OF HISTORY. Mr. Johnson's wording has been used as much as possible, but as he passed away late in 1964, much new material had to be added. This was to have been one of the chapters in Mr. Johnson's book about the history of our community.)

The town of Rockford had grown from a pioneer village in 1834 to a settlement of 2,250 souls in 1848, when Thomas D. Robertson and John A. Holland started the first banking firm in a low frame building on West State Street. John S. Coleman joined the firm in 1851. It continued in the same location, next to the old Emerson Hotel, until a new building had been completed in 1855 at the northeast corner of South Main and Elm Streets. When Mr. Holland died in 1855, Melancthon Starr was admitted to the firm, and after Coleman's death in 1864 the name was changed to Robertson and Starr. A year later it was reorganized as the Winnebago National Bank, with Robertson as president, Melancthon Starr as vice president, and Spencer Rising as cashier.

William T. Robertson succeeded his father as president in 1903, and continued until January, 1920, when the bank was dissolved, so during its entire 72-year history, the presidency was in the Robertson family. Chandler Starr, son of Melancthon Starr, was cashier for many years. When The Winnebago National Bank was dissolved, its assets were purchased by the Rockford National Bank. William Robertson then retired, but Chandler Starr became a vice president of Rockford National. The building which had housed the Winnebago National Bank since 1855 soon became the E. & W. Clothing House, and still stands at 124 South Main Street, occupied now by Masters' Shoe Company.

In October, 1852, the "Bank of Rockford" was organized with Charles I. Horsman as president and Charles C. Wilcox as cashier. Levi Moulthrop, Jr., who would in later years



ROCKFORD'S FIRST BANK.
Opened in 1848 by Thos. D. Robertson and John A. Holland.

be the proprietor of one of Rockford's well-known stores, began working as a clerk in this bank at the age of twelve, and continued until he was seventeen. The bank went out of business in 1857.

Our present First National Bank possesses the distinction of having been in operation since 1854, when it was founded by Messrs. Chester C. Briggs, Amos C. Spafford, and David S. Penfield. The first bank to be in "East Rockford", it received a national charter in 1864. It was then named Third National Bank and did business under this name until 1958. At that time, under the guidance of President Philip Peterson, the corporate name was changed to its present designation, although a slogan adopted many years earlier was retained. That slogan is "Rockford's Oldest Bank".

The Second National Bank grew out of the early-day firm of Dickerman, Wheeler & Company, begun in 1855. It was changed to Lane, Sanford & Company in 1856, and in 1865 became the Second National Bank. It was at one time the largest banking house in Rockford, and was located on the southeast corner of West State and South Main Streets. In 1873 the firm erected a new building on the same site, but it suffered great losses in the 1892-93 panic. In 1896 the bank closed its doors as a direct result of the panic.

Rockford National Bank opened for business on West State Street, near the river, in May of 1871, with Gilbert Woodruff as president. Their three-story building was located at 109 West State. It, too, grew to be the largest bank in the city in the early 1900s. On May 15, 1907, the bank moved into the first floor of the new Rockford Trust



OLD SECOND NATIONAL BANK BLOCK.
Built about 1843 by Nathaniel Loomis, on the southeast corner of State and Main streets.

Building at State and Main Streets, site of what had been the old Second National Bank and later an insurance company office. The old building, as well as others around it, had been acquired in 1905 by William F. Woodruff and C. F. Henry. They had razed all the old structures for a half block along West State Street and erected a seven-story edifice, the highest in the city at that time, naming it the Rockford Trust Building. Although Woodruff and Henry owned one-fourth of the land involved, they had acquired the remaining three-quarters under a 99-year lease. The corporation formed by Woodruff and Henry was known as the Rockford Trust and Safety Deposit Company, and the Rockford National Bank rented part of the building from them. In 1922 four more floors were added to the Trust Building, which then remained the highest structure in town until the Talcott Building was erected in 1927. The Rockford National Bank suspended operations and went into receivership February 10, 1932, victim of uncollectable loans and nervous depositors making demands for deposits.

Seven small Rockford banks were opened which had very short histories. In November, 1854, a banking business was founded at about 328 West State Street by Charles H. Spafford, Dr. D. G. Clark, and E. F. W. Ellis. It closed before 1860. In 1853, four Belvidere men opened a bank in the Worthington Block on East State Street. They were Allen C. and E. L. Fuller and Enos and N. C. Tomkins. Allen C. Fuller later was the adjutant-general who established Camp Fuller and after whom it was named. Their bank lasted a very short time, as did one begun by E. H. Potter and another by Edward N. Kitchel. Norman C. Thompson opened a bank about 1860 on the southwest corner of East State and South First Streets. Thompson was a reaper manufacturer on Race Street. His bank closed in 1884. On June 15, 1864, Alonzo Wood and E. H. Griggs opened a bank, which they called the First National Bank, on the second floor of the

C. F. Henry block on West State Street. It went out of business in March, 1869. In 1891 John Budlong started the American Exchange Bank on Seventh Street; Budlong was president and Robert L. Griffen was cashier. It lasted until 1893, when it succumbed to the financial panic.

The People's Bank first opened for business on July 31, 1873, at 202 West State (the southwest corner of West State and Wyman Streets). It was moved to the first floor of the William Brown Building at South Main and Chestnut Streets in 1892. The first president of People's Bank, a state-chartered institution, was N. E. Lyman. His successors to the presidency were A. D. Forbes, Harry F. Forbes, Frank F. Wormwood, and George O. Forbes. George Forbes became president in 1930 when Wormwood became chairman of the board. The People's Bank closed its doors on June 15, 1931 the same day that two other Rockford banks shut down as a result of the Great Depression. The late Stuart A. Ralston, a former member and director of Rockford Historical Society was vice president at that time.

On January 2, 1889, the Manufacturers' National Bank started on the first floor of the building at 402 East State Street, directly north across the street from the present First National Bank. About 1905 the bank purchased the Crotty Building, formerly the location of N. C. Thompson's bank, at 327-329 East State Street, and the bank was located there until building the present City Hall at 427-429 East State Street in 1926. This became the new home of the Manufacturers National Bank, and it remained there until going into receivership in 1931. The first president was Charles O. Upton. He was followed by W. F. Barnes. In 1905 Norman F. Thompson, son of Norman C. Thompson, became president and continued to head the bank until it closed on June 15, 1931.

The Forest City National Bank began business on June 7, 1890. For about thirty-two years it occupied the building on the southeast corner of West State and South Church Streets, the address being 330 West State Street. In 1922 the firm erected the building at 401 West State Street at the northwest corner of that same intersection which is now occupied by Rock River Savings and Loan. John D. Waterman was president from the beginning, becoming chairman of the board in 1920, which position he held until the bank closed in April, 1932. Ralph D. Spottswood became president in 1920 and also remained until it closed.

(To be continued in next issue)

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