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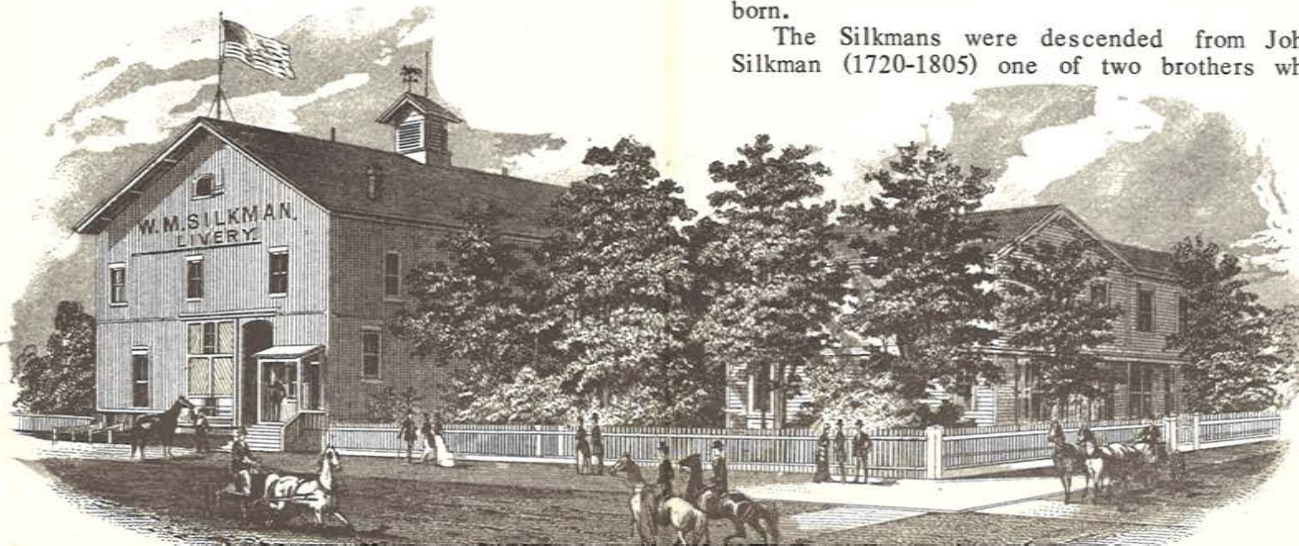
May - June 1971

THE SILKMAN HOUSES AND THE SILKMANS

Attention was recently drawn to the North Scranton Branch of the Scranton Library because the library board threatened to close it when denied what the board considered sufficient funds by Scranton City Council. The threat was not well received by the citizens of Providence, who saved the library for the present by raising a sum of money which appeased the library board. Much of the money was raised by chancing off a case of whiskey, which was donated for the purpose by Miss Julia Henwood, a nonagenarian who has made her home next door to the library for all of her life.

Of course, it wasn't always a library, being the former home of the Silkman family, members of which dwelled in it for 96 years, from its building in 1840 by Aaron Burr Silkman until the death of Miss Augusta Silkman in 1936.

On the death of Miss Silkman, who by the way, spent the latter years of her life as a recluse, allowing the fine old building to fall into disrepair, her heir and niece, Mrs. Helen Labar, secured the agreement of other family members and donated the home to the city of Scranton, which, in turn made it available to the Scranton Library board for use as a branch. Miss Silkman, according to newspapers at the time of her death left an estate of about \$200,000, although living for many years in an apparent state of destitution.



Although there are now no Silkman listed in the Scranton telephone directory, various members of the family were prominent in the early history of Scranton and are mentioned by the early historians of the city. I have only been partially successful in determining what relationship they bore to one another and in the case of Charles Silkman, who came here about 1840 and was a pioneer attorney, I can find no relationship. He doubtless was related but I have no means of finding out in what manner.

Although the subject of this article is the well-known Silkman house on North Main Avenue, in order to trace its history it becomes important to attempt to know relationship because local historians state different members of the family lived on the property at one time or another. Daniel Silkman was said to have lived on the site before the Silkman House was built. Daniel Silkman was a brother of Aaron Burr Silkman, who later owned the property and built the present house in 1840. In 1847, after his wife died, Aaron B. Silkman exchanged the property for a farm in what is now Petersburg with William Silkman, a cousin.

It is all a little confusing, particularly as a deed in the possession of the branch library states that Aaron B. Silkman bought the property from Ira Tripp and his wife Joanna. In 1855, William Silkman bought some adjoining land from the Tripps.

Be that as it may, William Silkman and/or his family lived in the house until his daughter, Augusta, died there.

Aaron B. and Daniel Silkman were the sons of Jacob Silkman. William Silkman was the son of John Silkman. John and Jacob were brothers, sons of another Daniel who lived in Westchester County, New York, where John and Jacob were born.

The Silkman were descended from John Silkman (1720-1805) one of two brothers who



The Silkman House in 1916

emigrated from the Rhine Valley in Germany sometime in the XVIII Century. They landed in Philadelphia and separated, John settling in Westchester County, New York. In his last will, the name is spelled "Silkeman."

John Silkman served in Col. Budd's regiment during the American Revolution.

John's son Daniel (1757-1804), grandfather of Aaron Burr and William Silkman, was married to Joanna Brundage, who was a direct descendant of John Winthrop, governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Of the three Silkman known to have come to Scranton, William Silkman, who had been a furrier in New York City settled on what is now North Main Ave. just north of Hyde Park. He later bought a farm near Dunmore. He married Mary Bailey in Westchester County, New York, who died in Scranton in 1891. The William Silkman moved into the "Silkman House" after the purchase from Aaron Burr Silkman and had the following children, some of whom must have been born there: John B., Henry O., William M., Francis B., Mary, who died at age 12, Carrie and Augusta. Carrie and Augusta died in the old homestead.

Daniel Silkman, who was said to have lived on the site of the house and who undoubtedly lived on the "Notch" at one time as shown by an early map, came to the area in 1842. At one time he and his father, Jacob Silkman, and brother, Aaron B. Silkman, were engaged in lumbering and construction. Daniel later went into the wholesale grocery business in Scranton. He was married to Catherine Tripp and had the following children:

Scranton; Helen M., who married Edward L. Fuller, of Scranton; Hattie Grace, who married Charles M. Clinton, of Washington, D.C. and Blanche, who married John Ryon, of Pottsville.

Aaron Burr Silkman, after selling the house he had built, later to become a recognized classic of neo-Greek early American architecture, moved to a large tract of land in what is now Petersburg, which he had acquired from his cousin, William. He laid this land out in lots and built a home nearby, later moving into Central Scranton. He died in Vineland, N.J., in 1895. His children were Mary C. who married John Gage; Luella, Elizabeth and Katherine, who did not marry; and Edward J., who married Mary H. French.

Going back to the house, it is necessary to introduce another Silkman, William B. Silkman, who was the son of William. William B., whose photograph with a flowing beard stands on a bookcase at the Catlin House, was very successful in business and it was his only child, a daughter, Helen, widow of L. G. LaBar, who inherited a five-sixth interest in the Silkman House when Miss Gussie Silkman died. Mrs. LaBar secured the agreement of the relatives who held the remaining interest in the house and as soon as the necessary steps could be taken, the property was donated to the City of Scranton and accepted by the City Council, which authorized its use as Providence Branch of the Public Library system.

Another interesting Silkman home was the residence and livery stable of William M. Silkman, which is reproduced in this Bulletin from a letterhead used in business by Mr. Silkman. These buildings stood at the corner of Wyoming Ave. and Spruce Street and are now occupied by a commercial building, originally erected to house the former Dime Bank.

William M. Silkman was born in Westchester County, N. Y., in October, 1834. He was brought to Scranton by his parents as a baby and was raised in the "Silkman House." In 1854 he graduated from Wyoming Seminary, after which he helped his father for two years and then went to work for the Pennsylvania Coal Co., in charge of their weighing department and later as paymaster at Hawley. In 1863 he returned to Scranton and entered the hardware business as a member of the firm of Connell and Silkman on Penn Ave., near Lackawanna. He sold out his interest in 1875 and bought the property and livery business of Daniel Roberts at the corner of Wyoming and Spruce. He sold out in 1884 and devoted his time to his business interests, which included ownership of a building at the corner of Spruce and Wyoming and vice-presidency of the then Scranton Savings Bank and Trust Co.

The building at Spruce and Penn, across from the Scranton Times, was built under his supervision in 120 days on the site of his former

residence at the corner of Spruce and Wyoming Post Office for ten years.

Mr. Silkman married Frances E. Eltinge, of New Paltz, N. Y. on the Hudson River. Her father and mother, the former Eliza Hasbrouck, were of Holland-Dutch descent. Mrs. LaBar was their only child.

From the William M. Silkman dwellings we will turn back to the house in Providence, which was made a library branch in 1937 after restoration. At that time its design was selected by the Historic Buildings Survey of the Department of the Interior as "possessing exceptional architectural interest and worthy of the most careful preservation for the benefit of future generations and to that end, a record of its present appearance and condition has been made and deposited for permanent reference in the Library of Congress."

It is hardly necessary to describe this lovely old building because it stands today as sturdy as when it was built and is available to anyone who wants to go there and admire its charm. Mrs. Short, the librarian is a mine of information about the old house and really enjoys showing it to visitors.

Miss Julia Henwood, who lives next door in a house of similar age, recalls that a fence of cast iron, featuring grape leaves, originally faced North Main Ave. in front of the house and that at one time a summer house stood beside it on the lawn. She also recalls that a parrot was kept by the Silkman for many years.

The plan for securing the house and preserving it came from a committee of Providence men, including Dr. J. W. Houck, chairman; John R. Atherton, treasurer; and Rev. Gordon G. Kibler. \$2000 was raised at the time to pay off certain debts in accordance with the agreement made with Mrs. LaBar when the house was donated. In May 1938 the Orphans Court made available \$1735.36, which had been held in trust for the erection of a memorial fountain to the memory of Walter W. Winton, Jr. This sum was used to erect a drinking fountain in the building with the balance going toward general repairs.

I'M SORRY

In the Bulletin about Moses Taylor and the Moses Taylor Hospital, I incorrectly stated that Charles F. Mattes was the father of Attorney Philip V. Mattes. Correction, he was the grandfather of Atty. Philip Mattes, also grandfather of Miss Dorothea Mattes and Robert Mattes, who ably manage the Catlin House and the Lackawanna Historical Society.

My authority for the statement was my own memory, which played me false.

H.H.N.

LACKAWANNA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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