

A History of the Leitch House

Recently I attended an open house for the grand opening of the Livingston Inn, a B&B operated by Dave and Peggy Furlan at 752 E. Gorham St. I had a grand time touring the building and even got up to the cupola for the view. This is the site of the Leitch House, a historic building. Following is some of the information I've obtained concerning the original owner and his family.



commissioned the building of a home here at the corner of Gorham and Livingston Streets. The house cost some \$14,000 to construct. By way of comparison at the time a large frame house could be built for \$500!

William T. Leitch was born in 1808. Educated at Edinburgh, Scotland he emigrated with his wife Jane to the U.S., arriving in the U.S. in May of 1829. William, a tailor, operated a number of shops in New York, living in Jersey City. By the late 1840's he moved to Brooklyn and entered into clothing merchandising, concentrating on the lucrative southeastern market centered on Savannah, GA.

The Leitchs had 3 children; Jeanette, born 1830, William T. Jr. 1834, and Ida 1854. William Leitch also had a brother, James who emigrated to Dane County in the early 1850's and settled in Dane

Township where he took up farming. Perhaps William's interest in the area sprang from information provided by James. He purchased land here and looked for an opportunity. On June 13, 1855 William announced in the State Journal his partnership with a man named Nelson Roth for a "jewelry and fancy goods business at the Capital House" in Madison. However, only 2 weeks later another ad appeared dissolving the partnership due to the illness of William's son.

The attraction of Madison must have been strong, because in 1857 William Leitch

Upon his arrival in June of 1858, William entered into local affairs. He was elected President of the Madison Horticultural Society in 1860, serving that group for the next 12 years. An interest in education led to service on the Board of Education from 1863-1879 as President and Clerk. He also was connected with the Madison Institute, becoming their President in 1867. A member of Grace Episcopal Church, he was Vestryman for 10 years. As a Scotsman, he led the local St. Andrew's Society.

William is best remembered as Madison's Mayor during much of the Civil War. Elected first in April of 1862, he defeated incumbent Levi Vilas by 121 votes, despite a concerted effort by the local press to dismiss him as newcomer

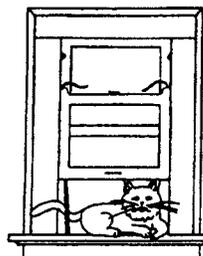
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and call into question his patriotism, having relocated his firm to Savannah in an effort to save it after the secession of Georgia.

Re-elected in 1863 with a 255 vote majority, despite being referred to as a "copperhead". He was also accused of insufficient effort in supporting enlistments and bounties to encourage them. After the election, Leitch wrote a letter to the editors of the State Journal to clear the record and thanked them for their faint praise in that he... "had in many respects made a fair Mayor."

That summer Leitch's wife Jane became ill, dying on July 6th, 1863 and was buried at Forest Hill Cemetery. Condolences were offered by many, including the local firefighters, the Sack Company. The City Council as a sign of respect attended the services and burial in a group.

With the tide turning in favor of the North, Leitch barely won re-election in 1864 by only 29 votes. The Journal editorialized that this was due to "...his redeeming social qualities..." and that "...the old veteran has heard a loud call, which we hope will prompt him to bear this honor with meekness and care."

Seeing the writing on the wall, Leitch was not a candidate for re-election in 1865. He was however elected to the position of City Assessor that same year. Two other attempts to regain his position as Mayor, in 1868 against David Atwood and J. B. Bowen in 1871 ended in defeat. He again served as City Assessor from 1872-1874.

Leitch still had business interests and friends in New York and frequently traveled there. Upon his return to Madison after one such extended trip, he gave his "...solemn opinion that Madison beer far surpasses the Gotham beverage."

By 1879 he had decided to return to his old home in Brooklyn for good, though it took him 2 years to wrap up matters in Madison and sell his home. A going away party in July of 1881 was covered by the press, and the guest list

reads like a who's who of Madison of the time. The State Journal's opinion of him had also greatly changed. He now was one of the "...most respected citizens of Madison,...a great favorite here...who's departure is felt with regret within and without the city." The party was held on the pleasure barge 'Solid Comfort' on Lake Mendota, with the guest of honor and his friends..." fishing and indulging in an old fashioned picnic. Complimentary speeches were made with recitations and oratorical and musical accompaniments. "The group reached the home dock at 2:00AM!

William T. Leitch lived comfortably on Hawes Street in Brooklyn with his daughter Jeanette as his housekeeper until his death on Feb. 2, 1897.

His son William T., Jr. had married in 1858 in New York to Ellen Dillow. The couple joined the family in Madison, and from 1861 to 1867 William was engaged in the boot and shoe business on the Capitol Square. He then moved to Dane where he farmed next to his uncle James Leitch and his large family. Eventually after his wife's death, William removed to Lodi, Columbia County, still a gentleman farmer. His only surviving child,

a daughter Jane born in 1864, was also widowed after her marriage to a man named Roach. Sometime after 1905 William moved to Brooklyn to live with his sister Jeanette. Jane Roach and her son George moved to Madison where she was a newspaper reporter and he a draftsman. Upon the death of his sister, William returned to Wisconsin and his daughter's home. By 1920 the family was living in Hamilton, Ohio, just north of Cincinnati. It was here that William T. Leitch, Jr died on Nov. 7, 1922. He was buried at Forest Hill Cemetery in Madison. In 1930 George Roach was a photographer with his own studio, living his wife Anna, and his mother Jane in Schenectady, N.Y.

As to William Leitch; though a man of great wealth, this had come to him after years of hard effort. He seems to have had the common touch. More favorable press accounts said "...Leitch is in favor of all men's rights...he is straightforward and consistent...honest and frank in the expression of his political principles...he will make a Mayor worthy of our City!"

-Richard Linster



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