

Rectory of the House of Prayer
Corner State and Broad Streets
Newark, Essex County, New Jersey

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of New Jersey

Historic American Buildings Survey
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ISAAC PLUME HOUSE (RECTORY OF THE)
HOUSE OF PRAYER

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Source of information - Booklet commemorating the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the House of Prayer, Nov. 26, 1925, by Rev. William F. Venables.

As the oldest dwelling in Newark, as a treasure house of Revolutionary memories, as the place where the motion picture film was invented, the Rectory of the House of Prayer is a landmark which not only the Sons of the American Revolution, but every other citizen worthy of the name will naturally desire to preserve and cherish. Under the succeeding administrations of the various Rectors of the parish, reverent hands have refrained from desecrating it.

With the few changes that have been made to adapt it to its more modern uses, it remains in structure and appearance the same as when it was a cozy farm house on the outskirts of a little town on the riverside, looking out on waste land that extended as far as the eye could reach and visited now and then by a somewhat distant neighbor or perhaps by members of the native tribe of Indians from whom the settlers took peaceful possession of the soil.

We do not know just when it came into being, but we do know that it was in existence only forty-four years after the little, devoted band of men and women who were the pioneer settlers of Newark went out from civilization to the wilderness spread along the Passaic shore. It was and is a well-compacted structure of native stone, with broad and thick panelings from the great trees of the virgin forest and with hand-hewn beams and flooring and deep window seats so characteristic of the domestic architecture of the period.

Family records name Nancy Visher Plume as the builder. Beginning with her time the place has been known as the Plume homestead. The farm extended west beyond where High Street is now and its orchard ~~reached~~ reached south to about the present line of the Morris Canal. A stream south of the house flowed into Millbrook, near where the old stone bridge was, just above Clay Street.

Among the Revolutionary traditions which cluster about the old homestead is the one which tells of the original way in which Mistress Ann VanWagenen Plume ^{was} made a prisoner of a member of a band of predatory Hessians.

When, in the winter of 1777, General Washington made his retreat from the Palisades across New Jersey,

The Continental Army, hard pressed, stopped five days in Newark. Footsore and weary, they waited until they heard the Hessians were coming and then made a hurried get-away.

One of the first dwellings reached by the pursuing troops was the Plume house, on the northern outskirts of the town. Loot-hungry Hessians stopped there at once. Officers set men to chopping wood in the parlor for the open fireplace there. Mistress Plume protested. A Hessian officer, as the story goes, told her that if she said "another crooked word" he would order her shot. Her temper was up. Stamping her foot, she cried out the crookedest word she could think of.

"Ranshorn", she said, "if I die for it!"

The officers laughed and the woodchopping was finished outside.

After the Hessians had been around for a few days, a rumor reached them that Washington was coming. Hasty preparations were made to move out. Mistress Plume saw a big Hessian in her dairy house, which stood where the church now stands. It was a structure with sound-proof walls about two feet thick. She slipped to the door and closed and bolted it. The rest of the Hessians left soon after, burning the school house which stood in Washington Park and plundering homes in the upper end of the town.

As to how long Mistress Plume kept her prisoner, accounts differ. One version of the story says that a company of Jersey Blues came along the next day and that she turned him over to them, keeping his helmet as a souvenir. Another version has it that he made his escape from the dairy house leaving his helmet, accidentally knocked off on the inside as he struggled through the window.

At any rate, the mistress of the household kept the helmet. With a piece of steel taken from it a knocker was made for the old Dutch front door of the homestead. This knocker was still in evidence up to a few years ago, when a new door was substituted and the Hessian relic went into the possession of a member of the Plume family.

Tradition has it that General Washington stayed in the Plume house for a time on his historic retreat in that stormy year of the Revolution. If he did he surely was a welcome guest and certainly he

found in Ann Plume a true type of the women who kept the home fires of patriotism burning while husband or son or brother or father was taking his share of the hardships of the camp, the march or the field.

But there is another message, of a later day, different in character but quite as romantic.

The Rev. Hannibal Goodwin, rector of the House of Prayer from 1867 to 1887, was a lover of children. One of his favorite methods of getting the children around him and developing surprises by leading their thoughts into new channels was by showing them stereopticon views. Every now and then he would find his glass slides cracked or shattered. The children had a way of getting into the place where the slides were kept, and after their analytical study the slides would often be unfit for use. Things got to such a pass that the good Rector scratched his head. He didn't want to interrupt the activities of the investigational instinct which turned his stereopticon department into a physical research laboratory. Goaded to the point where a stroke of genius was inevitable to a man of his creative ability, he determined that there must be another way out of it. It was the easier for him because he had already been making some investigations right along that line. He went at it in earnest, devoting all his spare time to study and experiment. Frequently one of his intimate friends would confidentially admonish him that it wasn't consistent with the dignity of a man of the cloth to appear in public with discolored hands and acid stains on his clothes. Like Bernard Palissy, who stoked the furnace with the household furniture to get the proper gloss on the pottery, he determined to burn up, if necessary, what remained of his reputation for immaculateness in appearance in order to perfect a product that would revolutionize photography and the projection of pictures through the instrumentality of artificial light.

The result was the malleable, rollable, flexible film, an invention which is the basis of the motion picture in its various forms.

It was in 1887, the last year of his long term of service as Rector of the House of Prayer, that he applied for a patent. For more than eleven years he waited, facing the opposition of one of the biggest concerns in the photographic supply business, before the patent was allowed. During the long process of experimentation before he brought his invention to a workable reality and

during the longer fight to maintain the validity of his patent claims he was seriously handicapped by a shortage of financial resources. A retired parish priest, he was pitted against a rival with millions to spend, if need be, to win the patent rights to an invention which meant untold millions in profits.

Hannibal Goodwin did not live to reap the rewards of his great invention. He died in 1900, and it was not until March 26, 1914 when an infringement suit brought up in behalf of his widow and other claimants that it was finally settled in favor of the Goodwin heirs. Mrs. Goodwin was then a bed-ridden invalid, eighty-six years of age. She lived only a few months to enjoy her long-delayed prosperity, yet long enough to see her husband's claim to his great invention vindicated in every way.

Up in the third story of the old Rectory, still showing on its walls the splashes of acids and other marks of the experiments there conducted, is the garret room where the motion picture was born. There may have been lowlier births than this; there may have been greater achievements, but as a dramatic story the story of Hannibal Goodwin and his invention is one that will never lose its interest and inspiration for minds and hearts that ring true.

NOTE

The above history was collected by Mrs. Dorothy W. Lockwood, secretary to the N. J. District of the Historic American Buildings Survey.

Revised 1936, H.C.F.