

LOUISVILLE IN THE EIGHTEEN FIFTIES

By A. J. WEBSTER*

With some misgivings I write, by request of The Filson Club, these recollections of Louisville in the middle of last century. Eighty years is a long time, and memory is sometimes treacherous. Modern cynics aver that half we believe to be true is not true, and that many of the events written into history never occurred. Maybe they are right. However, I will try to stick to facts as nearly as it is humanly possible.

Louisville in the Eighteen Fifties! From babyhood to early manhood it was my home. In after years, until my people were all laid away in Cave Hill Cemetery, I visited it frequently but I have not seen the town for nearly forty years. Still, from memory, I can see it as it was in my early days, and build a picture of the old town, its people and many incidents of which I was cognizant.

In the Eighteen Fifties it was a busy thriving city of some forty to fifty thousand people. Its wharves were lined with steamboats from every river point; its streets echoed with the rumble of six-mule team "Conestoga" wagons loaded with the farm products of the up-country "hinterland," and the bugle blasts of the daily mail stage coaches. Dominated by the trenchant editorial pens of the late George D. Prentice of the *Journal* (Whig) and Walter N. Haldeman of the *Courier* (Democrat) it was the center of political thought and activity for the Border States.

Louisville was an outstanding American city, the metropolis of the Southwest. It is now 150 years old; it was then about

*A. J. Webster was born in Boston, Massachusetts, March 26, 1841, and a few months thereafter came to Louisville where he continued to live until the winter of 1858-59. He is a son of Frederick W. Webster who died in 1847, and who, in partnership with Wm. C. Peters of Cincinnati, established a music publishing house and piano factory in Louisville. From this sprang the Peters, Webb and Co., piano manufacturers and importers, 4th Street, between Market and Jefferson; also David Faulds, dealer in music and pianos, Main Street between 2nd and 3rd. A. J. Webster after leaving Louisville lived in Chicago, Detroit and Columbus, Ohio, and since 1899 has lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, also Clearwater, Florida. Ed.

seventy-five. Its theatre patrons were responsive to such artists as Booth, Barret, and Salvani, and the never-to-be-forgotten voices of Jenny Lind, Patti, Brignoli, and Parepa Rosa. Its homes were occupied by cultured, educated, hospitable home-loving citizens; many of them prominent in business and in the politics of the State and the Nation.

And now, for some of the details:

From somewhere about opposite the foot of Towhead Island to the old bridge over the canal (approximately Fifteenth Street) the River Front line was built up. Scattering at either end, but solid from about Brook Street to Twelfth Street, and north and south from the river to Broadway, was the town's area. Broadway had only a few houses. Main Street and streets leading down from Main to the river constituted the wholesale business district. Market and Fourth were the retail streets.

The Louisville Theatre was at the southeast corner of Fourth and Green streets, with an alley at the back; next to the alley was the Jewish Synagogue, and next Professor Beach's School. Mozart Hall was at the northeast corner Fourth and Jefferson; it was the Odd Fellows Hall, and was then the only music hall used for concert purposes.

The prominent church buildings were Christ Episcopal on Second Street, St. Pauls on Sixth Street, and the Catholic Cathedral on Fifth Street, all north of Walnut. In the middle of Market Street, between Fourth and Fifth, was one of the City Market Houses, the whole length of the block, where daily market was held. It occupied all of the space except sufficient room on each side for a vehicle to drive.

The Volunteer Fire Department Company houses, beginning up-town, were: "The Kentucky" on Jefferson above Preston; "Hook and Ladder" on Preston, south of Jefferson; "Mechanics" on First, below Main; "Hope" at First and Green; "Washington" on Jefferson, between Fourth and Fifth; "Union" on Market, between Fifth and Sixth; "Relief" on Market, between Seventh and Eighth, and "Rescue" on Jefferson, below Twelfth.

The Volunteer Fire Department was a problem to the city authorities but a joy to the rising generation who longed to "run with the machine." I belonged to the Falls City Hose Company, attached to the No. 3 Relief Company. It has the only six-brake engine in town and held the record for "stream throwing," both

horizontal and vertical. Necessarily, this caused jealousy in the other companies and made it a mark for attacks. Fights occurred at practically every fire of consequence, when spanners, trumpets and fists were freely used, but never any gun play. The Uptown Companies were banded together, and the Downtowners the same. Any advantage either could gain at a fire was promptly grabbed. I recall one incident that caused quite a sensation at the time.

The Hook and Ladder Company was composed entirely of Germans—in fact an outgrowth of the Turn Verin. At the *Journal Office* fire (then at the northeast corner of Fifth and Main streets) they pulled a ladder from under one of the Relief's pipe men, injuring him quite seriously. That called for a reckoning, and this is what happened:

The hose boys were directed to start a false alarm on a certain Saturday night—an easy matter—the fire being supposed to be in the extreme downtown section. All the companies used Main Street in either direction on account of its comparative smoothness. We knew the "H and L" would come down that street. The Relief Company and its pal, the Rescue, quietly parked their machines up an alley near Eighth and Main streets and waited the arrival of the "H and L." All the other Uptown Companies passed on down town, looking for the fire. When the "H and L" reached that corner, the street lights suddenly went out and fists, trumpets, and spanners came into play. Taken by surprise, the "H and L" were soon routed. Their truck was quickly manned and started down the incline leading to the river. At a signal the ropes were dropped and the truck plunged into the river, badly damaged; and the ladders became detached and floated away. The next day (Sunday) the Mayor having got a tip as to the perpetrators of the "outrage" did his best to get the names of the company members, but the roll could not be found. He nailed up the doors of the engine houses and said he would disband the companies, but when a large fire broke out on Main Street a few days later he was glad to open the doors, and beg the firemen to get busy again.

With the steam fire engines, high pressure systems, fire alarms, telegraph, and stand pipes of today, we wonder how fires were put out by hand-engines (playing a $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch stream) and the ever insufficient water supplied only by street intersection cisterns

or wells (often only part full). There was no waterworks system in Louisville then, and only a few sewers. Rich and poor journeyed to the corner pump for their drinking water, or drank rain water taken from their private back yard cisterns. Faddists wonder how we lived through it, but Temple Bodley is a fair "exhibit," and I another, of the inability of such water to harm the old stock.

I think the first steam fire engine ever in service was built in Louisville. It was, as I remember it, a cumbersome heavy machine that had the faculty of breaking down at every fire it went to. It was heartily despised and berated by the Volunteer Firemen, but the handwriting was on the wall: soon came modern methods and the paid Fire Department.

The Dutch Ditch was a slough that had its head in the Southeastern part of the city and ran somewhere near what later became Kentucky Street, and thence diagonally across to the Ohio.

Jacob's Woods was out First Street, south of Broadway. It was of considerable extent and was used for picnics and Fourth-of-July celebrations. Frequently, during the winter season, the carrier pigeons would make this woods a roosting place over night, furnishing fine shooting the next morning.

Corn Island still lived up to its name. There was a considerable farm on it; possibly twenty acres under cultivation. Its lure, other than the snipe shooting on the rocks, was the abundance of black haws and persimmons one could gather in their season. Fishing was good almost anywhere around the Falls; the best was in the Indiana Channel.

At the upper end of the town were a number of saw mills that cut into lumber the logs that floated from up-river points; and then rafted as lumber down to Mississippi River towns. These rafts moored out from the shore made fine bathing beaches for the boys—boys who knew nothing of bathing suits and who there felt safe from any unwelcome visit of the "Cops."

The residential district of the well-to-do was from First to Twelfth Streets, on north and south lines, and from Jefferson to Broadway on east and west lines. But no matter what the financial status of the citizen was, he wanted a house to live in. Apartment houses and tenement slums were unknown.

Life was far different from the present. Housewives, with or without maids, went daily to the various excellent markets for

their daily needs. Corner groceries were few, and delicatessens were unknown. People of all conditions wanted home-cooked food. Dinner hour was in the middle of the day and ample time was taken to eat it. Quick lunches had not yet arrived.

The street lights were oil lamps, and were used even after gas was introduced. Only a few houses were piped for gas when it was first made available, because of the inadequate street mains. Candles and "burning fluid lamps" were the common method of lighting houses. Grate fires and coal-burning stoves furnished the houses with heat.

The leading hotels were the Galt House, then located at Second and Main Streets, and the Louisville Hotel, on the south side of Main, between Sixth and Seventh. Main Street was paved with boulders taken from the Ohio River and was comparatively smooth, but the rest of the city had cobblestone pavement that would "jolt your teeth loose" in riding over them.

Remember I am visualizing a town with no street cars nor railroads, with no means of getting around but your legs or your carriage—if you were fortunate enough to own one. Transportation to outside places was confined to the steamboat and the stage coach. Of course, transportation and other conditions changed rapidly as the years went by.

The first notable occasion in which I took part was the funeral of young Henry Clay, during or at the close of the Mexican War. Lieutenant Colonel Henry Clay was killed in the Battle of Buena Vista, February 22, 1847.] Practically the whole town turned out to see the parade. I have no doubt I was impressed with the solemnity as much as any small boy could be.

My next remembrance has to do with St. Paul's Episcopal Church, where I was confirmed. The choir and organ loft was directly over the chancel. The quartette choir was composed of my mother as soprano, Mrs. George D. Prentice as contralto, and Mr. Griffith as one of the male singers; the other male member I can't recall. Professor E. W. Gunter was organist. He was a very small man and highly tempermental and I took great pleasure in seeing him grip the stops and dance around on the foot pedals. I was also deeply interested in the "co'ored gentleman" that blew the bellows.

Poor Professor Gunter was thrown from his carriage and killed when his horses ran away on upper Broadway—frightened

by the sudden crash of the Barracks Band. A queer coincidence occurred when my younger brother, George E. Webster, who succeeded Gunter as organist, was on his riding horse and it bolted from the same cause, and threw and killed him within a few yards of the same spot.

My first school masters were Professors Beach and Goodrich. Their school was on Fourth Street, next to the Jewish Synagogue, and they were my last teachers; later their school was at Sixth and Jefferson streets.

Dr. William H. G. Butler's school was on Chestnut near Second Street. I was not an eyewitness of the killing of Butler by Matt Ward [November 2, 1853]. I happened to be at home sick that day, but my information came by first hand. Robert J. Ward, Sr., was one of the wealthiest and most respected citizens of Louisville. His family consisted of Mrs. Ward, Sallie (noted for her great beauty), Matt F., Robert J., Jr., Will, Victor, and a younger daughter whose name I cannot recall. The events leading up to the tragedy were these: Dr. Butler (or his assistant), had given Will and Victor a well deserved thrashing—a common way to enforce discipline in those days, as I know from experience. Mrs. Ward was highly incensed that a Yankee school master should presume to thrash her boys, and threatened to go herself and horsewhip him if some male member of the family did not avenge the insult. Matt volunteered. Taking young Robert along they went to a gun shop on Third Street and Matt bought a pair of Deringer pistols and Robert an eight-inch Bowie knife. Thus armed they went to Dr. Butler's school. In the altercation that ensued, Dr. Butler put out his hand to emphasize something he was saying and Ward shot him. He died the next day. This motion of Butler's hand was the groundwork of Ward's claim of self defense. Ward was arrested and put in jail. There he fitted up two rooms sumptuously and lived with his wife who was the former Belle Key, a raving beauty and daughter of Captain Peyton Key, the steamboat owner and former commander. He was granted a change of venue to Elizabethtown, Hardin County. After a long and hard fought trial he was acquitted.

There was great indignation all over the State: Ward, the judge, the jury, and the prosecuting attorney were burnt in effigy in a number of places. When he returned to Louisville a mob formed to hang him and burn the Ward residence on the north-

east corner of Second and Walnut. Matt fled and hid in the residence of George D. Prentice across Walnut Street near Floyd, and the Fire Department put out the fire with little damage to the house.

Matt Ward got out of town and sailed for Europe where he lived for some years. A newspaper published at that time said he never wrote his name on a hotel register in Europe but there mysteriously appeared after it the word "Murderer." This story is probably a reporter's "fake." Ward returned to this country during the Civil War and retired to a plantation near Helena, Arkansas. Wandering one night outside the picket lines of a Confederate force in that vicinity, in attempting to return he was shot and killed by the guard.

His father, Robert J. Ward, Sr., was ruined physically and financially by Matt's act and lived only a few years. As far as I know, the family with the exception of Sallie Ward disappeared from public view. In the 90's I saw her in the dining room of the New Galt House (First and Main streets), and she was still a strikingly beautiful woman, although she must have been well along in her sixties.

Another sensation in the fashionable circles was the killing of Tom Slevin, a member of the firm of Slevin Brothers, wholesale dry goods merchants, located on Main between Fifth and Sixth streets. He had the bad habit of going off on periodical sprees about once a year. He would disappear dressed in the height of fashion, with jewelry and money in plenty, and in a week's time would turn up in a River Front dive or a hospital dressed in a pair of overalls, a dirty shirt and brogans. The pitcher went to the well once too often. His body came to the surface of the Ohio River, after the rope rotted that was attached to the weight holding it down. His skull had been crushed. I believe the mystery of his murder was never solved.

One of the greatest thrills the younger generation had was the advent of the Frankfort Railroad's first train into Louisville. It was the first railroad to enter and none of us had even seen a locomotive. I think it was on Sunday and in the presence of a vast crowd. A little wood burning engine with two or three nondescript cars came puffing up to the platform of its terminal at Jefferson and Brook streets with as much "esprit d corps" as a present day Pennsylvania Limited. Of course, we were enthralled

and many boys determined then and there that they would be engine drivers—but none of us became a fireman or an engineer.

Where the Louisville and Nashville Railroad built their terminal at Tenth and Broadway, was Maloney's Brickyard. Originally there was a considerable hill there that the boys utilized in winter for a coasting ground, and the "darned old railroad" spoiled it, much to their disgust.

The first street-car tracks were laid from Twelfth and Main streets to Portland and the cars made trips every hour. In a short time the streets in the principal part of the city began to be grid-ironed with tracks of the various companies who began to sense the profitable potentialities in getting in on the ground floor. The cars were mostly one-man, one-horse contraptions with fare-boxes at the front end, into which the passenger dropped his fare—a plan supposed to prevent "knocking down" by the driver, but it didn't. Electricity was not thought of, and the motive power was then largely a mule.

One of the things that the boys appreciated about as much as a circus was the Kentucky Giant—Jim Porter. Almost any day he could be seen driving on Main Street in his one-seat buggy, a big mule pulling it, and his knees higher than the dashboard. He always dressed in a long-tail frock coat, an old-fashioned standing collar and a high hat. I have forgotten his height, but I recall he had a measuring competition with the much advertised "P. T. Barnum's giant," and he overtopped him by several inches.

"Bloody Monday" occurred on August 6, 1855, on a Congressional election day, and I believe Colonel William Preston was one of the candidates. "Know Nothingism" had spread all over the country and was very strong in Louisville. Excitement ran high and it took but a spark to cause an explosion. The first outbreak occurred in the First Ward when the ballot box was carried away from the polls by the Democratic (or anti-Know Nothing) Party. This started a riot and a rather formidable battle was fought in the eastern part of the city, culminating in an attempt by the Know Nothings to burn a large brewery. This, however, was frustrated by George D. Prentice, who, it was said, made on that occasion the only speech of his life. The mob finally compromised by drinking all the free beer they could, and then disbanded.

The Twelfth and Main riot was far more serious. At 6 o'clock, at about closing time of the polls, I was at the Washington Engine house, a polling place, when a man came galloping up Jefferson Street, whipping his horse with his hat and shouting at the top of his voice. Halting a few minutes he told his story, and then rode on to the next polling place.

This was the news he carried: "The First Engineer of the Henderson Packet, who had just completed his run, was on his way to his home walking quietly along Main Street opposite the "Quinn's Row" of buildings, when he was fired upon and mortally wounded." (It was afterward said this man was mistaken for another person.)

The report was soon spread over the city and a large mob quickly formed. The excitement was intense, nearly every man had a gun or some other weapon. The firebells rang and the Fire Department from all over the city sped to the scene. In the meantime the forces in the "Quinn's Row" had command of the situation. They completely covered the neighborhood of Main and Twelfth streets, and shot at any one who came within range. After a time a sharpshooter, armed with a long barrel rifle, improvised some protection for himself, and from the corner of Twelfth and Main streets, shot and killed two of the alleged leaders of the forces in the "Quinn Buildings"—who, so it developed, there had a secret society's club room and well-stocked arsenal. Meanwhile, some adventurous lads had crawled along close to the front of the buildings, broke open the doors, and set fire to the lower floors. After the fire started the department began to put it out, but the firemen were quickly told that "if you attempt to throw a drop of water on these buildings, we will cut your hose into ribbons; but you may protect the surrounding buildings." This it did. With the setting of fire to all of the lower floors, the upper ones became untenable, and a panic and break for the outlets ensued. This was resisted by the mob and a battle royal took place in which a number of men were killed, among them Father John Quinn.

Another thing that intrigued the boys was "Garrison's Nigger Pen" on Second Street, between Main and Market. When a Kentucky nigger became unruly his master would threaten to sell him "South." If he continued unruly he sent him to Matthew Garrison's place to be taken to New Orleans. When a sufficient

number accumulated they were hand-cuffed in twos and driven to Portland and shipped by boat to New Orleans to be sold.

Another sensation that occurred was the Newcomb tragedy. Mrs. H. D. Newcomb being ill, in the absence of her nurse and members of her family, became violently insane and threw five of her small children from an upper window, I think killing them all. Victor, one of her children, escaped by not being present. (I saw an account of Victor's death in New York not very long ago.) Mr. Newcomb, after years of endeavor to better his wife's condition, applied for a divorce, but under the law of Kentucky then in force it could not be granted. Later it was alleged he got the Legislature to pass a special law granting him relief.

In the latter part of 1858 I left Louisville, and never thereafter became a resident. Once during the Civil War, passing through, while on duty I reported at General Buell's headquarters, located in the old Ward Mansion at Second and Walnut streets.

In closing this paper of reminiscences I cannot resist adding a personal note which I feel confident some of your readers also share. With ninety years in the offing, what are my reactions to the present age and the future? Well, it would take a huge volume to record them. Outstanding is the fact that my "Lucky Star" permitted me to live in this age of marvels. During my time I have seen the development of the ox-cart and horse-drawn wagon to the ten-ton truck; the horse-drawn plow to the farm tractor; the four-passenger horse-drawn carriage to the seven-passenger automobile; the lumbering horse-drawn street car to the electric trolley; the diminutive wood-burning steam locomotive to the ponderous electric motor engine; the wind-blown balloon to controlled dirigible and aeroplane; the "house" printed telegram to the wireless, and to the long-distance and local telephone; the tallow candle to the electric light; and I have witnessed the evolution of the skyscraper, subway, radio, and the many other aids to the comforts and refinements of life that were once luxuries and have now become necessities.