

KENTUCKY BIOGRAPHICAL NOTEBOOK

WILLIAM BURKE BELKNAP

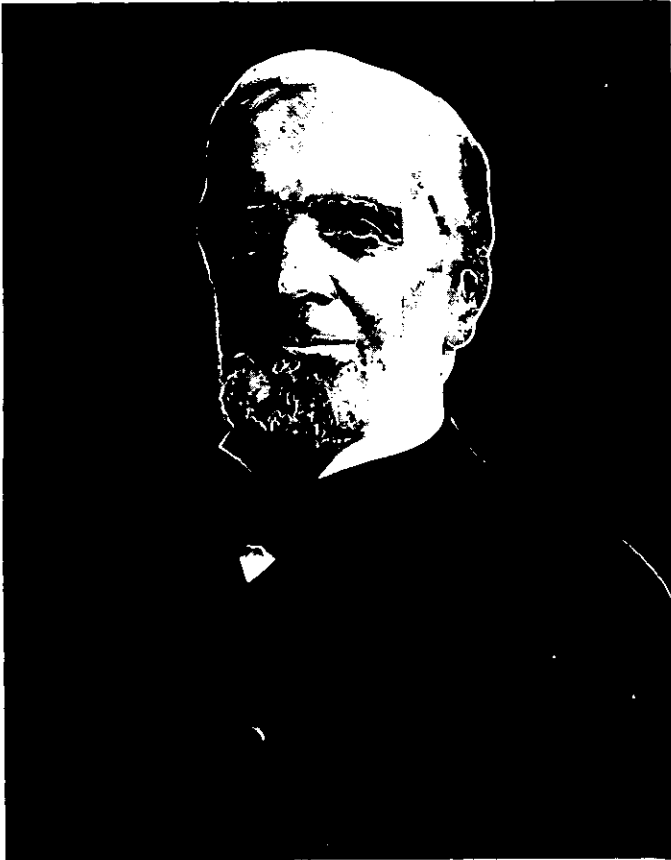
1811-1889

LUCY BRENT SLATER

The recent restoration and revitalization of the Presbyterian Headquarters near the Ohio River and the Humana Building on Main Street bring to mind the historical significance of these landmarks as well as the tremendous contribution of their nineteenth-century creators to the growth of our city. Outstanding among these pioneers was William Burke Belknap who by mid century had become Louisville's largest employer and biggest wholesaler, attracting settlers to the state and spreading his merchandise over the entire south. His German ancestors came to Massachusetts before the American Revolution. One relative, Dr. Jeremy Belknap, was famous as a New Hampshire historian and another, Robert Morris, was well known as a signer of the Declaration of Independence. William Burke's father Morris earned two degrees from Harvard before marrying Phoebe Locke Thompson and occupying a home in Pittsburgh in 1816.

He had already started the construction of furnaces and rolling mills for the manufacture of iron — a brand-new enterprise at that time. Before long his business was tremendously successful, and Morris had become a prominent civic leader in Pittsburgh as well as a family man with six growing children. Nevertheless, his adventurous spirit prevailed, and Morris was persuaded by bankers to search for mineral deposits on horseback along the Kentucky, Cumberland, and Tennessee rivers. He found an abundance of both coal and iron. This important discovery encouraged bankers to finance furnaces and rolling mills in Tennessee and Kentucky.

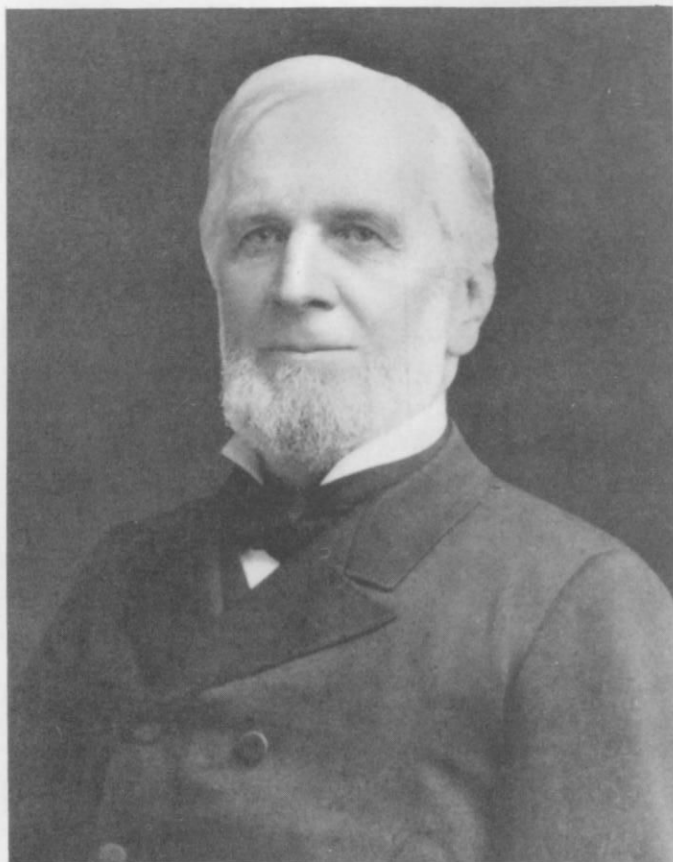
During this period Mrs. Belknap and the six children had been living outside Pittsburgh. They received word from Papa that the oldest child, sixteen-year-old William Burke, should buy

*William Burke Belknap*

The Filson Club

machinery for an iron furnace and bring it down the Ohio River along with all the family and their household goods to the mouth of the Cumberland where his father would be waiting. William had attended Stockton's Academy in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, and was pursuing his studies at Cannonsburg College, but he left school to follow his father's orders. Some years later, William himself described the journey this way:

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family and household goods to our landing on the Cumberland River. Not seventeen years of age, I was thought too young to undertake this, but I made the contracts for the machinery and was successful in getting what was wanted and taking it and our family with me.

William had secured passage on the steamship *Essex* in Pittsburgh. Reaching the Falls of the Ohio at Louisville, he shepherded his family through the city and supervised the transfer of their household goods around the Falls and down to the mouth of the Cumberland River where Papa awaited him. Father and son worked together for the next two years building and operating several charcoal furnaces which gained a reputation for high-quality iron. Indeed, Morris Belknap is described by historian J. Stoddard Johnston as the "father of the iron industry west of the Allegheny Mountains" in his *Memorial History of Louisville*.

But William wanted more excitement, so with his father's permission he took off on horseback, accompanied by two close friends, to seek his fortune. Like father, like son. Before long, the young men were selling various items to stores in small southern towns and doing well. One project initiated by William and his associates was shipping Indian corn, shelled and in sacks, on flatboats down the river. The group continued to do well until the financial panic of 1837 swept the country, leaving them bankrupt but much wiser. With their obligations paid in full, they were still looking hopefully to the future.

After experimenting in Cincinnati and St. Louis, they decided to settle in Louisville. The year was 1840, and William Burke Belknap was twenty-nine years of age. He opened an iron store on Main Street where he carried a stock of iron for bars, castings, and horseshoes as well as nails and other heavy hardware. Mature judgement was used in selection of this site. It was only one block from docks for steamboats making transportation costs very low and, furthermore, Louisville was a distribution point for iron smelted twenty-five miles south of the city where ore deposits had been found in pockets and thin veins.

Louisville's population grew rapidly in the 1840s because of

the opening of the Louisville and Portland Canal and the arrival of more steamboats. In 1840, 460 steamboats docked here. Warehousing became a major industry, and two hotels opened. The Galt House opened in the later 1840s at the northeast corner of Third and Main streets and was said to be the finest hostelry this side of Paris by no less an authority than Charles Dickens after he visited it in 1842.

In 1843 William married Mary Richardson of Lexington, daughter of William Richardson, president of the Northern Bank of Kentucky, who had also come to Kentucky from Massachusetts. Mary was one of thirteen children, five of whom died in infancy. William Burke and Mary had five children in the next thirteen years, and only one died young. The other four were Caroline, William Richardson, Lucy, and Morris Burke. Many prominent Kentuckians can trace their ancestry to these four Belknaps.

Meanwhile the Belknap firm had become the largest wholesale hardware business in the south. Its selection of products had been expanded to include agricultural supplies, tools for manufacturing, gardening, mining, and transportation as well as household tools. Travelers were quoted as saying every garbage can in the south was an advertisement for the company.

The Belknap salesmen, always well dressed and fully prepared, were known as drummers who visited customers and prospects with great regularity making lasting friendships. The success of their techniques became a model for many other companies. Their printed ads were also effective. One in 1865 read:

W. B. Belknap & Co. Iron Merchants, 83 West Main St., Louisville, Ky.
Agents for Fairbanks Scales, Blacksmith's Tools, Springs and Axles
Wagon-Makers Materials, Farm and Garden Tools, etc.

William Burke Belknap, president of this growing enterprise for forty years, was also a civic and social leader. Tall, handsome, and unassuming in manner, he was a person to whom others naturally turned for guidance. During the Civil War, as a Northern sympathizer, he hosted many important visitors including

Union officers Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, and George H. Thomas. Evidently a majority of Louisvillians shared his view at the time since statistics on local enlistments showed three out of four soldiers choosing the Union forces. No doubt the Northern generals were among the many visitors entertained in the elegant Belknap home on the south side of Walnut Street between Third and Fourth across from the old Macauley's Theatre. This home was sold to the Pendennis Club in 1883 and later was razed to make room for an extension of the Stewart Dry Goods Company.

After the Civil War, the development of railroads and turnpikes helped the expansion of businesses like Belknap's. The first turnpikes, which were toll roads, went to Frankfort via Shelbyville and to Bardstown via Elizabethtown. From New Albany, a toll road led to the interior of Indiana. Toll collections helped to pay for maintenance of the roads.

In spite of increased business responsibilities, Belknap spent more time on civic affairs. He had no taste for politics but was vitally interested in civic improvements; some of the boards on which he served were the Sanitary Commission, the Refugee Commission, the Louisville Library Board, the Board of Trade, and the Old Southern Bank where he was a director and then president when the name changed to the Citizens National Bank.

There is no doubt that experience as a Belknap executive prepared many people for civic responsibilities. Some common practices within the company were:

- 1) A democratic atmosphere with no closed private offices. Top executives had glass partitions around them, and everyone else was out in the open.
- 2) Office supplies were carefully supervised. No waste was allowed. To get a pencil, one produced an old stub.
- 3) Belknap did not believe a man ceased to be useful when he reached middle age. Company employees worked as long as they were able.



The Belknap Home on Walnut Street

The Filson Club

- 4) High ethical standards were required at all times as well as a neat personal appearance.

William Burke Belknap served as president of the company he founded for forty years; he was succeeded by his son William Richardson Belknap who held the post for the next twenty years. The elder Belknap died on 25 February 1889 at the home of his son at 917 South Fourth Street after an illness of several weeks. This house is no longer standing, but the next home of William R. Belknap at 1320 South Fourth Street has been preserved by the Woman's Club and used as their committee house. It was recently named the Amelia Brown Frazier Home.

The Louisville *Courier-Journal* for 26 February 1889 reported the death of a leading figure in Louisville's business life as well as an interested sharer of many wide-ranging philanthropies who will long be remembered for his many contributions to the growth of our community. Similar comments could be made today about the occupants of the remodeled National Presby-



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terian Headquarters overlooking the river and the refurbished Humana Building on Main Street.

There are other reminders of Belknap's leadership and generosity. One of them is the Belknap Campus at the University of Louisville. The widow and children of William B. Belknap subscribed a sum of money in 1917 to be used for a municipal campus as a memorial. The present site, acquired in 1926, was made possible in part by a \$150,000 Belknap bequest.

Another happy memorial is the splendid 1863 painting by Alexander Winant entitled *Falls of the Ohio* which Mrs. Lewis C. Humphrey gave to the J. B. Speed Art Museum in memory of her grandfather, William Burke Belknap. Winant painted from the Indiana side when the Ohio River was still blue and the city was expanding along its shores above and below the Falls. *Falls of the Ohio* is said to have been commissioned by Belknap when the artist visited Louisville in the late 1850s.

Reflecting on the life of this nineteenth-century pioneer makes one realize how very much his leadership meant to the economic, environmental, and cultural improvement of our city. Today the former twelve-story Belknap building on Main Street is occupied by Humana, specialists in health care. Humana's David A. Jones was responsible for remodeling and updating the Belknap buildings. The smaller building facing the Ohio River, a former Belknap warehouse, is now the headquarters of The Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. It is a comfortable and architecturally handsome facility which accommodates staffs of The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. and The United Presbyterians.

There is no doubt that if William Burke Belknap could see the revitalization of his buildings and the services being performed in them by twentieth-century pioneers, he would be highly pleased.