

The Cobbles
by: Scott W. Deming

Ever since I was a young boy growing up in West Elmira I have been intrigued by the cobblestone house located in the middle of the block between Cobbles East and Cobbles West behind the Congregation Shomray Hadath at 1008 West Water Street. Over the years the large home sat vacant for periods of time which was very mysterious to me. In thinking about the next article to write for Town Talk, being inspired by Keith Vaughn (a co-worker of mine at Corning Inc.) and seeing some recent restoration activity there I started the research on The Cobbles.

The Cobbles, as it has come to be known, was built by Judge Hiram Gray in 1849 with convict labor which could be rented out back in those days. According to the book about Chemung County, *Our County and It's People*, the cobble stones were gathered from surrounding fields and gauged to be the correct size by passing through a ring. The house was an extremely well built structure and doesn't look anywhere near its 160 years of age. Judge Gray had a large tract of property, said to be 100+ acres, which ran from the Chemung River bounded by Wall Street and Fairmont Avenue with the property running north into the hills. The Cobbles, at the time it was built, was the fourth house west from Hoffman Street with the other three being the Foster house at 722 W. Water St, the Dininny mansion was between Foster Ave. and Dininny Ave. and the Guinnip home which was located where the Congregation B'nai Israel is now located. Judge Gray also built other homes in the town of Elmira. The Victorian home at 1061 West Water Street, was built in the 1860's by Judge Gray and was most likely built for one of his children.

Judge Gray was one of Elmira's foremost citizens for over sixty years and very well known across New York State. He was frequently honored by the citizens of Elmira and his wisdom and advice were sought by many. Gray Street in Elmira is named after Judge Gray. The western end of Gray Street used to end at his eastern most property line at what is now known as Wall Street. His driveway being an extension from Gray Street running through the still standing cobblestone pillars leading to the house. Judge Gray drove his horse drawn carriage from his home to the court house in Elmira and back. It is believed that that Wall Street is named after a cobblestone wall that was built along the street by Civil War prisoners. Remnants of a cobblestone curb still exist on the corner of Wall and Water Street but it is unclear if this curb is related to the wall that once existed there.

Hiram was the ninth child of ten born to John and Margaret Sloan Gray and with the Gray family being of Scotch decent. He was born on July 10, 1801 in Salem, New York. He went to high school at the Salem Academy and upon graduation entered Union College in 1818 graduating in 1821. Upon graduation he entered the law office of Chief Justice Savage of Salem and was admitted into the bar in 1823.

He first came to Elmira, a village of 600 inhabitants, in 1825 and formed a law partnership with Theodore North. In 1828 the village of Newtown changed its name to Elmira and Hiram Gray was one of the first officers of the newly named Elmira. In 1830 he married Aurelia Covell the daughter of Robert Covell of Elmira. He and his wife had four children Margaret Gray, Mary Gray (Hotchkin), John Gray and Stephen Gray. In 1836 Hiram was elected Congressman of the Twenty Fifth Congress and was appointed by Governor Silas Wright to the office of Circuit Judge and vice chancellor of the Sixth

Judicial District. In 1847 he was elected to the office of State Supreme Court Justice and served in this capacity for twelve years. His written opinions as an appellate judge, many of which were reported in books, were models of their kind. He also had a very high respect for written law. In 1867 Union College conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. In 1879 Judge Gray was elected President of the Newtown Monument Association which was formed to honor the one hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Newtown. In his honor, his portrait still hangs in the New York Court of Appeals hall in Albany, New York.

Judge Gray died on May 6, 1890 at the age of 88 years and is buried in Woodlawn National Cemetery. His son Stephen C. Gray died in 1897, his wife Aurelia C. Gray died in 1901, his daughter Margaret Gray died in 1902 and daughter Mary G. Hotchkin died in 1907. It is believed there are no direct descendents of the Gray family left in the area since Hiram and Aurelia Gray's only grandchild Aurelia C. Hotchkin died in 1941.

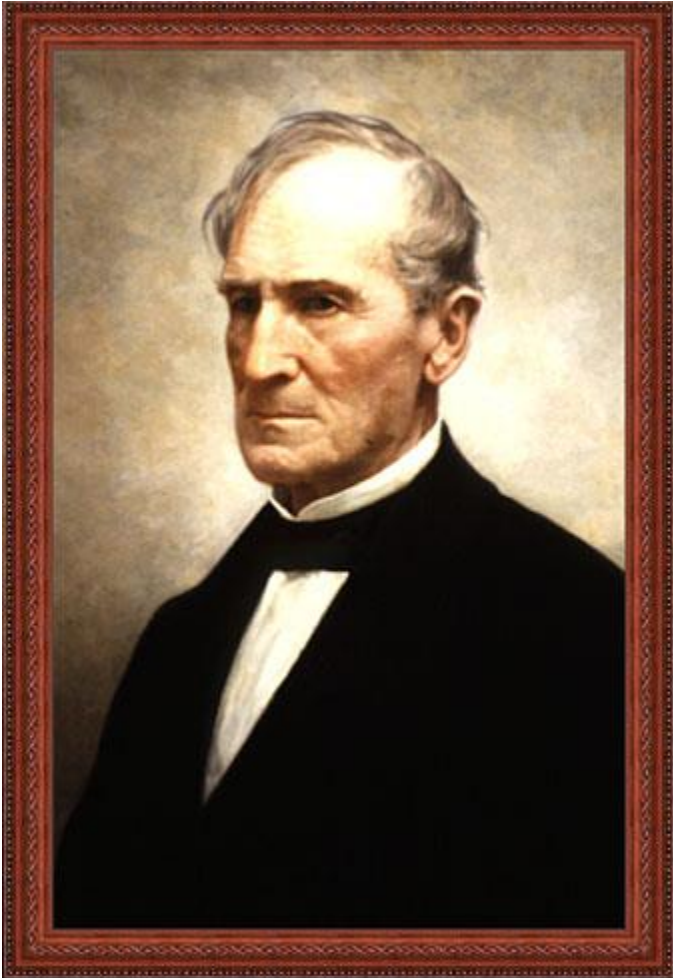
On December 17th, 1898 the Gray family sold a strip of land across their property to the Town of Elmira for the proposed extension of West Church Street beyond Wall Street to the Point. In 1906 Aurelia C. Hotchkin sold the entire property to the Cobblestone Land Company who then subdivided the land into building lots. At the same time The Cobbles was sold to Charles Phillip Myers and his wife Elizabeth who raised their two sons, Phillip Myers and Lewis "Crary" Myers, there. Charles ran the Merchants Oil Company, an oil distributor, in Elmira for many years. The Myers family modernized the home by installing plumbing and electricity. Mrs. Myers sold the frontage on West Water Street to the Congregation Shomray Hadath which built their Synagogue on the site in 1956. Mrs. Myers continued to live in the home until her death in 1963. Mrs. Myers grandson, Lewis "Crary" Myers Jr., still resides in Elmira. Crary has a photo album filled with many family photographs (see below) of The Cobbles over the years his father, uncle and grandparents lived there. Crary remembers going to the home on numerous occasions, as a child, to visit his grandmother.

In 1968 the property was sold to Dr. and Mrs. William H. Burke who completed a beautiful restoration of the property and the grounds. They lived in the home until 1976 at which time they sold the home to Congregation Shomray Hadath who went on to own the property for the next 28 years.

In 2004 The Cobbles was purchased by Mike and Mia Devlin who became the fifth owners of the home. Mike and Mia have done a wonderful job of restoring the historic home. While restoring the home they have found 13 of the supposedly 20 original fireplaces and have found an old pair of shoes in one of the walls that was gutted as part of the restoration. An unusual feature of the house is a trap door in the center of the large dining room and currently located under their dining room table. This trap door leads to a bricked in room in the basement of the home and is thought to be a hiding place for runaway slaves seeking freedom as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

It is great to see historic homes in the area restored to their original glory rather than being torn down. Many of these homes represent the history of our town and preserving them helps preserve a piece of our history.

Information for this article was taken from the Steele Memorial Library, Our County and It's People; A History of the Valley and County of Chemung, The Chemung Historical Journal, various newspaper articles, discussions with Crary Myers Jr. and Mike Devlin and various internet websites.



Judge Hiram Gray Portrait from the NYS Court of Appeals Hall in Albany, New York