

The Bartlit - Cowan - Stradley Legacy

One of the oldest houses in Canal Winchester, located in a National Register Historic District, has been home to several generations of one of Canal Winchester's eminent and influential families. Samuel Bartlit, with his brother John, came to Canal Winchester in 1839. For over a hundred years, members of his extended family were involved in business, politics, education, and community life in the village and beyond.

Samuel Bartlit was born November 16, 1811, in Jay, Essex County, New York. His father Elihu Bartlit, was born in Connecticut of old Puritan stock. His father and grandfather graduated from Yale and were Congregational ministers. Sam's father went to New York as a young man, took up a large tract of land, and laid out several villages and many farms that proved to be prosperous. In the spring of 1839 Samuel Bartlit came to the Village of Canal Winchester and "with very little capital except his natural pluck and energy, began business on quite a modest scale, opening a miscellaneous stock of goods in a small frame building." Sam Bartlit was one of Canal Winchester's early entrepreneurs and one of its most substantial businessmen.

Samuel and John Bartlit were in the grain and dry goods business together until John retired from the firm about 1849. Sam then went into partnership with William Fry until Mr. Fry died in 1855, at which time the business was carried on with Samuel Pond. In 1857 the dry goods department was sold to Mr. Pond and Samuel Bartlit took entire control of the grain department. In the fall of 1857 he sold the business to another firm, agreeing to stay out of the grain business for four years. In 1861 he went into business again with John Gehm and L. C. Bartlit. In 1864 the firm was dissolved and L. C. Bartlit took the dry goods part of the business. In 1865 C. W. Speaks joined with Sam and the grain business was conducted by Bartlit and Speaks until 1879 when Mr. Speaks retired and Sam carried on the business himself.

In an 1880 article profiling Sam Bartlit and other prominent citizens of Canal Winchester, the Times recorded that "the success of Mr. Bartlit is owing entirely to his own exertions. He began his career with but a small capital, and now in the decline of life enjoys a handsome competency." To Mr. Bartlit, his career, to a great extent, was "due to the fact that Winchester has for years past ranked as the second best grain market on the Ohio Canal."

In 1853 Samuel Bartlit was elected to represent Franklin and Pickaway counties in the Ohio Senate, "a position that he filled with credit to himself and his constituents." He was also a School Director --

similar to a Board of Education member. Samuel Bartlit's name is among those who were subscribers in the building of local roads and railroads. He was a member of the town's Literary Society. He died August 31, 1880, at his residence in Canal Winchester.

Sam had remained a bachelor, but his younger sister, Amanda, was widowed with two small boys in 1850. He told her that if she would come to Canal Winchester from Cleveland, he would provide them a home and raise her sons as if they were his own.

Amanda Bartlit had married David Mathews Cowan in 1846. They had two sons: Charles Bartlit Cowan, born March 18, 1847; and David Henry Cowan, born April 7, 1850. In June 1850 David Mathews Cowan died when he was kicked in the head by a horse at the harness-making establishment and livery stable that he owned in Cleveland, Ohio. Amanda and her two sons boarded a canal boat and came to Canal Winchester -- the trip took more than a week.

The boys attended Canal Winchester schools for a while and then, in 1862, were sent to a private school in Springfield, Ohio, for two years. Charles then entered Kenyon College and graduated in the Class of 1868. After graduation he returned to Canal Winchester, where he assisted his uncle in the management of his large grain business and other extensive interests. David attended Central High School in Columbus, Ohio, and then graduated from high school in Cleveland, Ohio. He had returned to Cleveland to live with his mother when she married Ansel Roberts of Cleveland. David stayed in Cleveland and worked in the office of the Lake Shore Railroad from 1871 to 1875. He traveled to Nebraska -- he found the western frontier interesting -- and would have stayed there had his uncle not asked him to return to Canal Winchester in 1876 to join him in the grain business.

One of the grain businesses owned by Samuel Bartlit and operated by his nephews was the Empire Mills. The Empire Mills was built on the Ohio - Erie Canal, midway between Canal Winchester and Groveport, by John Chaney and Son; construction began in the fall of 1852 and was completed in the spring of 1853. (One source gave the completion date as 1851.) The structure was 35' by 70' with three stories, basement, attic and cupola, with a nearby covered bridge over the canal. After passing through several subsequent owners, it was bought by Samuel Bartlit at an assignee's sale in 1874. At his death, Charles and David Cowan became the owners and remodeled the interior. They had successfully operated the mill for their uncle for several years before his death, and continued to do so for many years after his death.

The Empire Mills was one of the best mills in central Ohio and did a thriving business for many years. The mill was capable of switching to steam power when the water level was low and attracted grain growers from distant parts. "Records show that it was not unusual for wagons to be lined up as far as eight miles during the milling season. A complimentary line-up of canal boats, to remove Empire's finished product, made it all work." In 1884, C. B. and D. H. Cowan put in a "Gradual Reduction Roller System" consisting of an entirely new outfit of machinery, engine, etc. The Cowan brothers produced Cowan's White Dove Flour which was packaged in white cloth bags* and distributed in a number of markets, including some as far away as New Orleans. The Cowans successfully operated the mill for many years. In August 1894 it was sold, and on Friday night, August 21, 1895, the mill burned to the ground. The fire also consumed the nearby covered bridge across the canal.

The two Cowan brothers, like their uncle, were part of the political and social life of Canal Winchester. Charles Cowan was the Village Clerk from 1871 to 1873 and was the fourth Mayor of Canal Winchester from 1874 to 1875. Charles was active in the village literary and drama clubs and attended the United Brethren Sunday School. He was on the Finance Committee for Canal Winchester's celebration of the United States Centennial in 1876. David Cowan was on the Village's Board of Health from 1893 to 1896. David was an active Mason and was a charter member of Canal Winchester's Potter Lodge. He was an expert figure skater who used the canal for skating -- one of the canal's many bonus uses. One village resident reported being impressed when he was a child with "the older gentleman's ability."

David and Charles Cowan became involved in the hotel business in Columbus, Ohio. In 1890 they purchased the Exchange Hotel and soon thereafter rebuilt and operated the Chittenden Hotel. "It can be said that the building of the Chittenden Hotel was largely due to the efforts of Charles B. Cowan, and in building up this magnificent monument he devoted not only his energy and his business ability, but contributed his entire fortune as well."

Charles spent much of his time in Columbus after their involvement in the hotel business. He never married and after the loss of the Chittenden Hotel, he retired to the Cowan Farm on Darby Creek in western Franklin County. He died April 4, 1903, in a Columbus hospital. His obituary stated that "he was a man of brilliant mind, strong in his attachments to friends and always considerate of their interests and generous to them." David lived in Canal Winchester, with his family, in the home his uncle, Samuel Bartlit, had originally established. David Cowan died June 16, 1930, at his home in Canal Winchester.

David Cowan had married Grace McCarty August 4, 1892, at her home near Groveport, Ohio. They had one daughter, Elizabeth, who attended Ohio Wesleyan University after graduating from Canal Winchester High School in 1911. There she met a young man named Bland Lloyd Stradley.

Bland Lloyd Stradley was born October 29, 1889, in Frazeytsburg, Muskingum County, Ohio, the son of Howard David and Flora Fawcett Stradley. He grew up in nearby Dresden, Ohio, and graduated from Dresden High School. He was encouraged to attend college by his high school principal and his minister, so he made his way to Delaware, Ohio, and worked his way through Ohio Wesleyan University as a waiter. He graduated in 1913 and came to Canal Winchester to take a position as high school principal and also taught English and Science. He coached the Canal Winchester football team in a championship season that year -- a major highlight in his life. After one year at Canal Winchester, he enrolled in Harvard University for graduate work for the year 1914 - 1915.

After attending Harvard for a year, he was a school principal in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. While at Ohio Wesleyan, he had met Elizabeth Cowan, and they married October 27, 1917, in Canal Winchester and then made their home in Providence, Rhode Island, for a time. In 1919 Bland Stradley returned to Ohio to become University Examiner (a position that would now be Dean of Admissions) at Ohio State University. In 1937 he was named Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and in 1944 he was appointed Vice President -- in charge of all student relationships outside the classroom. He received the Distinguished Service Award of Ohio State University in 1952. During World War I, he served as assistant educational director at Camp Sherman.

"During his long service as university examiner, Dr. Stradley admitted to Ohio State many thousands of young people and started them on their college careers. In this capacity he also assumed the leadership in the selection of students for the professional colleges on the Ohio State campus, such as medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine. Final decisions on major disciplinary actions involving students also fell on his shoulders. He was considered a firm disciplinarian with a kindly consideration for the age and future welfare of those who came before him on such occasions." From a Columbus Dispatch editorial at his death: "Dr. Stradley always had time to listen and advise. It was a rare day on campus when his office was not filled with young people waiting to discuss their problems with him. Not until the last one had been talked with and advised, did Dr. Stradley end his day. The influence of this noted educator is reflected throughout the world as men and women, former students of OSU, pursue careers that had their beginnings with a word of sound advice from Dr. Stradley. They represent Bland Stradley's lasting memorial."

"Despite demands on his time for participation in student events on a campus with an enrollment of some 20,000, Dr. Stradley still was a leader in church, community and other civic activities." He served as President of the North Central Association, an accrediting organization for high schools and colleges, and was a member of the Central Ohio Boy Scout Executive Board for 20 years. He was a 33rd Degree Mason, a trustee of White Cross (now Riverside) Hospital, and a member of Ohio State University's

Athletic Board. Stradley Hall, on OSU's campus, was named in his honor. He was an active member of Canal Winchester's Faith Methodist Church. He served on the Canal Winchester School Board for 26 years -- upon his death, his wife, Elizabeth Cowan Stradley, finished his term. Bland and Elizabeth Stradley had two children, a son and a daughter. They made their home in Canal Winchester -- in the same house that was home to Sam Bartlit and David Cowan.

Bland Stradley served 38 years at Ohio State University, with additional years in education preceding his time at OSU. He was awarded honorary degrees from such universities as Ohio Wesleyan, Ohio Northern and Wilberforce. He died August 4, 1957, in a Columbus hospital.

The Bartlit - Cowan - Stradley legacy has truly been one of importance for Canal Winchester. Family members and their spouses have been prominent among the entrepreneurs and civic and community leaders that have shaped the growth, prosperity, and advancement of the village.

* It should be noted that the mills of Canal Winchester were pioneers in the use of cloth bags instead of barrels for flour. O. P. Chaney, son of Judge John Chaney who was the subject of a previous tidbit, had observed canvas bags being used to transport flour up the mountains in California during his time at the Gold Rush. When he returned to Winchester and became involved in the grain business again, he had muslin sacks made to package flour for the purchaser of small amounts.

Note: Sources for this tidbit include, but are not limited to: the 1902 History of Madison Township by George Bareis; the Times, Canal Winchester's weekly paper since 1871; information from the C. W. Historical Society's files; Canal Winchester's sesquicentennial booklet, In Celebration of 150 Years; and family history and genealogical information from descendants.