



Weigley Mansion - Full Front North View. (Photograph taken September 2021 by Randy Jaye.)

Weigley Mansion: Lebanon County's most magnificent historic house

by Randy Jaye

The Weigley Mansion, also known as "Heidelberg Hall," is located at 1373 Heidelberg Ave., Schaefferstown, in Lebanon County.

Construction of this one-of-a-kind magnificent structure started in 1876 and was completed around 1882. It was designed in the Second Empire architectural style for William M. Weigley by the noted Philadelphia architectural firm of Isaac H. Hobbs & Son. The firm prospered during the late nine-

teenth century as Hobbs was a society architect noted for creating elaborate and large homes in the eastern seaboard area of the United States.

Hobbs described his work and vision as, "Do not imagine that I desire a humdrum style. No, I desire variety, -- variety of form, in quantity, in appliances of every kind to produce it. Let the lightning flash, the thunder roll, the waves heave. Let them all co-operate, and for a while be as one, until the strongest

force becomes master, and leads the whole; aiding, by the murmurs of others, the positive voice of the leading spirit." Obviously, a man of poetic nature who incorporated many styles of art into his architectural creations.

A description, front elevation engraving and first and second floor plans of the Weigley Mansion was published in the Hobbs's Architecture book, 2nd edition, in 1876. Hobbs & Son named the structure Design LXXXVII - Sub-

urban Mansion. An engraving of the front northeast view and floor plans appeared in 1875 editions of Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine and Scientific American, which helped attain national recognition of the Weigley Mansion.

William M. Weigley was born in 1818 in Millbach Township, Lebanon County, to Catharine Miller and Jacob Weigley. His education included training at the Tulpehocken Academy near Stouchsburg. After leaving school he was employed at Lyon Lemberger's store in Myerstown. In 1837, he began working as a clerk at a store in Schaefferstown owned by Abraham Rex. The two sons of Abraham Rex assumed ownership of the store and sold their interests to Weigley in 1839. Weigley was able to expand his business holdings by opening additional stores in the communities of Millbach and Myerstown. In 1841, he married Anna Rex, the affluent daughter of Abraham Rex and the great-granddaughter of Alexander Schaeffer, the founder of Schaefferstown. They had three children: Rex, William Wallace and Anna Isadore. Weigley soon became one of the wealthiest and most prominent citizens in the Schaefferstown area. He contributed funds and participated in many community projects including the building of the town's first Sunday school, founding of the Schaefferstown Academy, promotion of the local fire company and the construction of a new St. Paul Reformed Church.

Weigley's business prowess guided him through many financial hardships caused by the Panic of 1857, the first worldwide economic crisis. Over the following three



Weigley Mansion - Schaefferstown, PA.
(Public Domain Photograph by Harpel's of Lebanon, PA - circa 1921).

decades, he reestablished himself as a successful businessman who owned a large general store, several smaller stores, several large farms, a grist mill and a brownstone quarry. He was an associate of James Buchanan, the fifteenth president of the United States, and served as a political adjunct during Buchanan's presidential administration. When Weigley died in 1887, he was one of the wealthiest men in Lebanon County.

In the early 1700s, the area now known as Schaefferstown was settled by German Jews and was called Lebanon Trading Post. By the 1730s, Protestant families moved into the area and the German Jews relocated leaving behind a graveyard surrounded by a stone wall as the only physical reminder of their presence in the area. In June 1738, Alexander Schaeffer purchased 208 acres and began laying out lots to establish a town that became known as Heidelberg. Between 1744 and 1750, the first gravitational water system by underground pipes in the British Colonies was built in Heidelberg. In

1830, Heidelberg became known as Schaefferstown.

Currently, Schaefferstown is home to three museums: The Alexander Schaeffer House and Farm, Gemberling-Rex House and the Thomas R. Brendle Museum. Schaefferstown also has four properties on the National Register of Historic Places: Brendle Farms, Philip Erpff House, Rex House and the Schaeffer House.

Many publications often refer to the Weigley Mansion as Victorian style architecture, however, it was actually designed in what is known as the Second Empire architectural style. This style originated in France during the reign of Napoleon III (1852-1870), France's Second Empire. The Second Empire architectural style is also called the French Second Empire, Napoleon III and Mansard styles. Exhibitions in Paris in 1855 and 1867 led to popularizing the style in England and spreading it to the United States. It was popular in the United States for only a short period of time from approximately 1860 to 1890.

The most prominent feature of

Second Empire architecture is its use of the mansard roof, a type of roof with two slopes on every side, the lower slope considerably steeper than the upper, and including dormer windows. The mansard roof allows for an additional full story of space without raising the height of the structure. This roof type was introduced in the mid-1500s on a part of the Louvre in Paris, popularized by the French stonemason, sculptor and architect Francois Mansart in the 1600s, and made fashionable during the Second French Empire during the mid-1800s.

The Weigley Mansion's footprint extends to 75 by 100 feet and includes more than 12,000 square feet when considering the full-height basement and third-story mansard roof sections, yet it was built on a relatively small, long and narrow lot of just 0.32 acres. William Weigley was not concerned with the acreage of the property as his goal was to display his prominent position in society and considerable wealth with a magnificent mansion near the town's square where everyone passing by would take notice.

The Weigley Mansion is a masterpiece of Second Empire architectural styling as no expense was spared during its construction. The entire effect is both complicated and yet asymmetrically balanced. The structure is raised above grade by 30 inches. The first floor is 14 feet high, the second is 13 feet high, the third is 14 feet high, the fourth floor of the tower is 15 feet high and the attic of the tower is 12 feet high. The structure has 110

windows, two back doors, nine fireplaces, ten bedrooms, twelve staircases, seventeen closets and four and a half bathrooms. There are two pantries and a main and back staircase. The main entrance is below the central tower on the north side and includes a double-door and a 10-foot by 12-foot vestibule. A most unusual feature is its east double-door entrance with vestibule and a west double-door entrance.

Elaborate details and materials are present throughout the exterior and interior of the structure. One of the most striking features of the structure's exterior is the reddish-brown colored sandstone, which includes elaborate dressings of quoins and arches with 53 keystones. These stones were locally quarried from Weigley's own stone quarry. This is a fairly unique feature as many Second Empire architecture style mansions were built with brick or wood framing. Other elaborate features of the structure include two-tone painted wood paneled frieze boards and wide carved wood cornice brackets with rounded bottom finials. The fenestration of the windows on the first and second-stories include a mixture of one-over-one and two-over-two narrow and wider wood framed arched-topped and flat-topped window types.

This Second Empire architectural style mansard roof is unusual as its shape is an ogee (S-curve) form which includes twelve arched 14 foot dormers, two projecting brownstone chimneys and is covered with slate roofing shingles.

The current owner, Wayne Da-

vid Hand, has been furnishing all three floors with an impressive array of authentic Gilded Age furniture, sculpture, clocks, paintings, carpets, porcelain, dinnerware, vases and miscellaneous art work that originate from 1865 to 1885 (the heart of the Gilded Age). Hand believes that only authentic Gilded Age furnishings are appropriate for the Weigley Mansion. The main focus of Hand's authentic Gilded Age collections are those produced by the top artists and craftsman with a provenance connected to the wealthiest families of the time, which include the Vanderbilts, Astors and Colemans.

The Weigley Mansion is much more than an eye-catching magnificent house that has survived from the nineteenth century. The structure is one of the best preserved and a near picture-perfect example of the highly eclectic Second Empire style architecture in the United States. It is a living museum that showcases master workmanship from a bygone era.

Future plans for the Weigley Mansion include a nomination for a Pennsylvania Historical Marker, listing on the National Register of Historic Places, and tours which will share the house and its authentic Gilded Age collections with the public.

For more than 140 years, the Weigley Mansion has stood as proof that William Weigley's goal of getting noticed by displaying his wealth has been achieved as it is still one of the most architecturally impressive and notable structures in the region.