

This Week in Saratoga County History

Every Photo has a Story

Submitted by Rachel Clothier June 19 2024

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George Laing Corliss

Histories mysteries are so fascinating and solving them is rewarding. A group of photos were found in an antique shop recently and thankfully some were identified with a name on the reverse. A cabinet style card with a photographer's imprint of Epler & Arnold Saratoga, N.Y. shows a distinguished man wearing pince-nez glasses. On the reverse someone had written the name – George L. Corliss. An unfamiliar name to me, I began searching for him on Ancestry.com. From census and death records I found he was born in Providence, Rhode Island on January 1, 1863 to Charles and Anna Laing Corliss. Unfortunately, he never knew his father who died barely two months before George L. was born. And George L. died at the young age of 39 and is buried in Greenridge Cemetery in Saratoga Springs. His life had been cut short due to medical problems.

The Corlis name is renowned throughout the region. Captain John Corlis, great grandfather of George L., of Haverhill, Massachusetts had served in the Revolutionary War and later moved to Easton, Washington County. John's son, Hiram, was a physician and surgeon in Greenwich. Hiram had at least two sons. One was George L.'s father, Charles, and the other was George H. Corliss. George H. Corliss designed, built, and patented a sewing machine in 1843, three years before Elias Howe, who is credited with the invention and perfection of the sewing machine.

George moved from Washington County to Providence, Rhode Island, to work more closely with metal foundries. Here he studied draftsmanship and created the steam engine that revolutionized the efficient production of industrial power. His company is also credited with building parts for the iron-clad Monitor during the Civil War. The Centennial Celebration held

in Philadelphia in 1876 was powered by an enormous Corliss steam engine. When George H. died in 1888, he had 48 patents issued to him with 12 more pending.

George L.'s father, Charles also moved from Washington County to Providence, R. I. where he was employed at Corliss & Nightingale, his elder brother's company. Charles died in November 1862 less than two months before the birth of his son. The widow, Anna Laing Corliss was left with three young children to care for. Within three years they moved back to her hometown of Schuylerville. By 1875 they were living in Saratoga Springs with her sister and brother-in-law, Johnathan Howland.

George L. attended the public schools until the age of sixteen. He then moved to Chicago where he was employed as a bookkeeper for the Commercial National Bank of Chicago for the next eight years. While he was in Chicago his mother died in 1880. He was just seventeen. He became active in the Democratic Party in Chicago and served as secretary and treasurer of the 9th Ward Democratic Party.

Returning to Saratoga Springs in 1887 he entered the employment of the First National Bank, a position he held for a dozen years. He also served as a member of the Board of Water Commissions. Subsequently he was elected supervisor of Saratoga Springs in 1899, a position he held until 1902. His sister, Mary Emma Corliss, married Edgar T. Brackett, a prominent attorney and business leader in Saratoga Springs. Brackett had been a lawyer for Richard Canfield (the Prince of Gamblers), but later staunchly opposed gambling in Saratoga. He served in the New York State Senate from 1896 until 1906 and then returned in 1909-1912. George L.'s older brother, Charles was involved in Troy politics where he was deputy commissioner of public safety.

George L. and his wife, Florence K. Hubbard, were married in 1895. They were the parents of two daughters, Florence (1896-1917) and Elizabeth (1899-1985). They lived at 203 Caroline Street. George L.'s life was tragically cut short at the age of 39. He had fractured his left leg five years earlier as a result of a fall. It never healed properly and troubled him ever since. In early February 1902 he became ill with chronic nephritis, kidney inflammation that causes swelling of the hands and feet because the kidneys do not function properly to carry off excess fluid. With treatment he seemed to be improving when an artery in his right leg ruptured causing gangrene to set in (antibiotics would not be available for another forty years).

The doctors decided amputation above the right knee was necessary. The operation was performed at his Caroline Street residence by Dr. D. C. Moriata, and Drs. Fish, Lester and Thompson. The anesthesiologist was Dr. Thomas Bennett of New York City. According to newspaper reports the operation lasted twenty minutes. George L. seemed to improve for a day until edema (fluid) in the lungs caused his death on March 7, 1902. His obituary was published in numerous newspapers throughout the northeast. The funeral was conducted from his Caroline Street home with the burial at the Greenridge Cemetery. He was survived by his wife, two daughters, his sister, and brother.

Sources: Ancestry.com for census and death records, articles from the Saratogian and other newspapers found on Fultonhistory.com., National Inventors Hall of Fame, Wikipedia.