

THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE

VOLUME 50

OCTOBER 1967

NUMBER 4

MAGNUS MURRAY

A Gesture in Appreciation After 131 Years

JAMES WALDO FAWCETT

IN the somber background of the early nineteenth century in Pittsburgh the figure of Magnus Miller Murray continues to be interesting after nearly 140 years. The explanation of why this should be so is that he was a man for all honorable occasions and purposes. He wove himself into the life of his time in numerous engaging ways. No contemporary excelled him in his relations to his world. He was, indeed, a Western Pennsylvania equivalent of Leonardo da Vinci. That can be said truly of no other person of whom we know.

Murray was a lawyer, a surveyor, a businessman operating a factory for iron articles, a chemist, a botanist, a mathematician, a humanitarian, a friend of dumb animals in distress. He also was a home guard officer, a leader in the Masonic movement, an alderman and a borough council member, a churchman active in two denominations, a community organizer, a civic spokesman, an actor and a theater manager, a practical friend to the poor, the very young and the deserving old, a founder of the University of Pittsburgh and of the area public library system.

Many readers of Ohio Valley history must have noticed how prominently the name of Murray appears. He is mentioned with emphasis again and again by discriminating chroniclers. Yet no adequate biography of him has appeared and it is doubtful that any ever will. The

Mr. Fawcett began to collect Magnus Murray data at least twenty years ago. These materials are preserved in the documentary archives of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and additional papers are solicited.—Editor

clock of time has ticked beyond the era to which he belonged and it is obvious that it cannot be turned back effectively even by a scholar skilled in research and prompted by a fully justified hero worship sustained by documented facts.

This present author has appreciated Murray for at least twenty years and has endeavored to bring together such trustworthy data about him as have been available during that period. So perhaps it now may be feasible to appraise accurately the importance of the contributions he made to the culture and social progress of his time and indirectly to ours. It is not an exaggeration to say of him as Terence is supposed to have said of himself: "I am a man, and nothing human is foreign to me."

Certainly, Murray was comparable with da Vinci in the scope and span of his curiosity about the arts, the sciences and human character and destiny. The nearest approach to an historical account of his official part in the affairs of Western Pennsylvania probably is the following quotation from "The Mayors of Pittsburgh," an unpublished manuscript in the archives of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. It was written by Allen Humphreys Kerr¹ in 1952 and reviews Murray's career as Mayor of the Borough of Pittsburgh in these words:

Magnus M. Murray, who had received four votes at the first election of John M. Snowden, succeeded him as the fourth mayor of Pittsburgh. He was the first of three mayors and a mayoralty candidate all of the same family — the father-in-law of John B. Guthrie, mayor in 1851-1852, whose son, George W. Guthrie was mayor in 1906-1909, whose nephew, Francis S. Guthrie, was a candidate for nomination for mayor on the Democratic ticket in 1913.

Mr. Murray was born on February 22, 1787, in Philadelphia, the son of Commander [Alexander] Murray, a distinguished officer in the United States Navy. He attended the college of the University of Pennsylvania during the years 1799 to 1805, receiving his B. A. degree in 1802 and his M. A. in 1805.² In 1807 he completed his law studies under William Wilkins of Pittsburgh, the distinguished lawyer, judge and diplomat. . . .

1 Allen Humphreys Kerr was a Pittsburgh attorney with an instinct for political history who wrote "The Mayors and Records of Pittsburgh, 1816-1951" in 1952 but never published it. The manuscript came into the possession of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania by gift of the author. It runs to 375 pages and is preserved in the archives at 4338 Bigelow Boulevard, Pittsburgh 13, where it has been consulted by numerous grateful scholars.

2 *The General Alumni Catalogue of the University of Pennsylvania*, 1922, on page 12, lists Magnus Miller Murray as a recipient of the degree of A.B. in 1802, that of A.M. in 1805. *The Biographical Catalogue of the Matriculates of the College of the University of Pennsylvania*, published in 1894, contains data on Murray on page 41 as follows: Magnus Miller Murray, A.M. b. Phila., Feb. 22, 1787; d. Pittsburgh, Penna., Mch. 3, 1838. s. Como. Alexander Murray, U.S.N., and Mary Miller. Entered 1799. Lawyer, subsequently iron mfr. Mayor Pittsburgh, Penna. m. Mary, dau. Gen. John Wilkins.

He was admitted to the Bar of Allegheny County on November 13, 1808, on motion of William Wilkins. He was captain of a troop of light dragoons which escorted Lafayette on his arrival in Pittsburgh in 1825 and which went with him as far as Butler on his way to Erie.

On January 8, 1828, he was elected mayor of Pittsburgh and re-elected on January 13, 1829. He was submerged by the wave of Jacksonian democracy which swept the country in 1830 and lost a third term election to Mathew B. Lowrie who ran on a party ticket. However, he was again elected mayor on January 11, 1831.

There was little of importance in the municipal affairs of the city accomplished during Mr. Murray's terms of office except perhaps the completion of a water works (Grant's Hill) in 1828.³ The supply of water limited, but it did not relieve the congestion around the town pumps. The wharf was improved, and it is interesting to note that the cost of excavation was 14½ cents per cubic yard. Pittsburgh and Philadelphia exchanged maps of their respective cities, and the latter formally acknowledged the gift by letter which was duly spread upon the minutes of Council:

"The maps which were presented to the City of Philadelphia were received with two-fold satisfaction: as evidence of the increasing prosperity of your distinguished city and of her kindly feelings toward her sister in the East. In that prosperity we beg leave to assure you none more sincerely rejoice and for the preservation and extension of these feelings of mutual kindness none more ardently wish than the Councils of this city."

An ordinance provided for the gratuitous vaccination of indigent persons against smallpox. On January 12, 1829, Neville B. Craig, Esq., sent a written proposal to Councils to light the city with gas, but it was not until 1837 that the new illuminant was used for this purpose and even until the advent of electricity in 1880 many of the street lamps used kerosene. It was a familiar sight at sundown to see the lamplighter with his ladder and torch going his rounds from lamp to lamp. Later, when gas came in use, a pole was used with which the lighter turned on the valve and struck a match, which he had previously inserted in a hole at the end of the pole.

Mr. Kerr then explains that: "Pittsburgh was still nothing but a big village" and "partisanism" was rare in the choice of public officers and suggests that it was a strictly personal victory when, on January 11, 1831, Magnus M. Murray was "chosen by the joint action of Councils . . . the sixth Mayor of the city." He succeeded Matthew B. Lowrie and the first important event of his new (third) administration was the floating of a loan of \$20,000 by the Councils, "the faith, credit, funds, revenues and corporate property of the city" being "solemnly pledged for the payment of the same."

Besides financing, another problem with which Mayor Murray had to deal was described by Mr. Kerr in these words:

The city had open sewers at the time which were great breeders of disease, yet Council solemnly resolved that it was highly injurious to the city to construct sewers under the street on account of their tendency to become obstructed and become useless by frost, and recommended that sewage be carried off by gutters above ground.

3 In the early years of the nineteenth century little of importance about municipal affairs of the city was reported in the newspapers of Pittsburgh even when the publishers and editors were informed of what was happening. Local news systematically was neglected until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861.

[Pittsburgh] also was infested with roving packs of half-starved dogs which made the night hideous with their howling and attacked late pedestrians. It was proposed to authorize the citizens to organize shooting parties to rid the city of the menace. An ordinance was passed creating an open season on all dogs running loose and not wearing collars. Mayor Murray thought that this method of abating the nuisance was barbarous and wrote a long letter to Council expressing his disapproval of it. He said in part: "If the object of Councils in passing that ordinance was to protect the city from hydrophobia, why should a dog wearing a collar be protected and one without a collar be slaughtered? . . . That the ordinance is sanguinary, witness the almost universal shuddering which pervades the city whenever its butchering provisions are attempted to be enforced . . . And let me respectfully appeal to you as parents as well as legislators ought you to accustom the rising generation to scenes of brutality and carnage, ought you to teach your children to view with apathy the shedding of blood? . . . As proof that these ordinances are unpopular I would ask you to notice the abhorrence and detestation with which the actors in the tragedy are received by all.

Mr. Kerr, at the close of his brief chapter on Mayor Murray, says: "In September [1831] plans for a new market house were approved and the novelty of dividing the market into stalls and renting them to the farmers was first introduced." Leaving office, he returned to being an alderman.

Some confusion still exists as to the exact date of the ending of his life.⁴ *The Pittsburgh Gazette* announced that he died March 4, 1838, but his monument in Allegheny Cemetery says March 3. In any case, his career was short — not fifty-two years.

As a supplement and confirmation of Mr. Kerr's commentary it is convenient to cite Erasmus Wilson's *History of Pittsburgh* as including this reference:

John B. Guthrie was born at Kittanning, Armstrong County, July 26, 1807, but came to Pittsburgh while yet a child.⁵ Possessing superior intelligence, he became one of its foremost citizens. Being strictly upright in his relations with his fellow man, it is natural that he was often called upon to fill positions of honor and trust, and for two terms was elected and served as mayor of the city. He was also a member of the Constitutional Convention of 1872-73. He chose a wife in the person of Miss Catharine S. Murray, who bore him a family of eight children, six living to years of maturity, and four (Alexander M., Robert W., George W. and Annie S.) of whom are yet (1898) alive. He died honored and respected by all who knew him, in August, 1885. Catharine S. Guthrie was the daughter of Magnus M. Murray, whose ancestors left Scotland during the troublous times of 1715. Commodore Alexander Murray, father of Magnus M., had an exceptionally fine record in the Revolutionary War. His father-in-law, General John Wilkins, was also a Revolutionary officer. Magnus M. studied law in Philadelphia, and was there admitted to practice; but in about the year 1807 he came to Pittsburgh, where for a time he pursued the practice of his profession. Having the charge of quite a large estate belonging to his father, much of his time was taken up in managing this property, and he was also one of the pro-

⁴ The cause of Magnus Murray's death is obscure, but it seems clear that he died suddenly.

⁵ John Brandon Guthrie came to Pittsburgh with his parents, James V. Guthrie and Martha Brandon, while he was yet a child, but the date is uncertain.

motors of one of the first rolling-mills to be established in Pittsburgh. He was elected mayor of the city, and is yet well remembered by the older citizens of Pittsburgh.

A contemporary and confirmatory witness from outside Pittsburgh was the famous Mrs. Anne Royall⁶ from Washington who, in her *Pennsylvania or Travels Continued in the United States*, published in 1829, referred to Magnus Murray in these words:

The mayor is deservedly reckoned one of the best men in Pittsburgh or even in the State. His name is M. M. Murry [Murray], a descendant of the royal family of that name in Scotland. He is stoutly made, of middle age, round face, fair, handsome features, and soft full blue eye; but his countenance is beyond the power of pen or pencil; and the same of his manners — so mild, so winning and suasive.

"Nature, too, has nobly done her part,
Infused into his soul a noble grace,
And blushed a modest blood into his face."

This gentleman, the soul of hospitality and kindness, like all other good men, seems to have lived for the good of mankind.

As to religion, Magnus Murray may not have been an orthodox member of either the Presbyterian or the Unitarian branches of the universal Christian fellowship, but it is evident that he worked with both. The Wilkins family into which he had married were leading personalities in the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh and the mayor and his wife undoubtedly attended service there together, at least on occasion. On the other hand, it is a matter of record, as related in *Pittsburgh's First Unitarian Church 1820-1960*, that Joseph Armorer, Jonathan Walker, Benjamin Bakewell and Magnus Murray were the trustees of the Unitarian Church listed April 8, 1823, in the deed for the property leased for the site of its original home at Smithfield Street and Virgin Alley.⁷

Proof of Magnus Murray's association with Trinity Cathedral may be found in these lines from Lois Mulkearn and Edwin V. Pugh's *A Traveler's Guide to Historic Western Pennsylvania*:

When the old church was torn down in 1869 to make way for the present church, a brass plate commemorating the dedication of the 1824 structure was found in the cornerstone. From it one learns that the cornerstone was laid by "Magnus M. Murray, Grand master of the Masons for the western district

6 Readers curious about Mrs. Royall (1769-1854) and her ten volumes of travels and other writings are referred to numerous citations listed in the *Index* to Volumes 1-43, 1918-1960, THE WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL MAGAZINE, and supplements, 1961-1965; also to Jessica Hill Bridenbaugh's contribution on pages 204-205, Volume XVI, *Dictionary of American Biography*, 1935.

7 See *Pittsburgh's First Unitarian Church*, by George Swetnam, John Lofton, William M. Schutte and Donald M. Goodfellow, 125 pp. (Pittsburgh: The Boxwood Press, 1961).

of Pennsylvania at Masonic ceremonies, May 1, 1824." This plate was replaced in the cornerstone of the new church.

Additional evidence of the accuracy of this Trinity tradition is preserved in a photostatic copy of *The Pittsburgh Gazette* in the library of The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. Under date of April 30, 1824, it shows an "advertising card" reading:

Masonic: The ceremony of Laying the Corner Stone of the New Episcopal Church has been postponed until Saturday, the 1st of May at 2 o'clock P. M. at which time the Lodges in Pittsburgh and its vicinity will assemble at the Masonic Hall in Pittsburgh. Sojourning Brethren are requested to attend.

The second and third decades of the nineteenth century were a period in which Magnus Murray was a central figure in a number of important civic spectacles. For example, on May 30 and June 1, 1825, he was captain of a company of seventy light dragoons who served as a mounted guard of honor to General Lafayette during his state visit to Pittsburgh.⁸ He officially escorted the famous French freedom-fighter from Braddock's Fields on the Turtle Creek branch of the Monongahela into the city on Monday and out of the city on Wednesday to Butler on the Conoquenessing branch of the Allegheny.

Murray also was the leading personality for the foundation stone laying at Washington Lock Number One, the western terminus of the Pennsylvania Canal, May 3, 1828 — an occasion which attracted a grand concourse of citizens including the members of four Masonic lodges.

Speaking of these memorable instances of pageantry, it happens that the arts of the theater were among the principal enthusiasms of Magnus Murray's life. Judge John E. Parke,⁹ in his *Recollections of Seventy Years*, tells how a Thespian Society was organized in 1823 and then explains:

From personal regard for the members of the company, Magnus M. Murray, who was then chief magistrate of the city, cheerfully assumed the censorship and direction; and to his counsel they were eminently indebted. He was beloved for his cheerful and friendly disposition; prompt in reproofing wrong, he was equally so in awarding praise where it was due; in short, he proved himself efficient, and was acknowledged by his *protéges in loco parentis*. Financially the venture proved a failure. The debt incurred by the purchase of the scenery was for a long period an incubus on the members, until finally liquidated . . . The net proceeds were intended for charitable purposes. (But) the only case in

8 Search for the real name of the light dragoons led by Captain Murray to meet Lafayette has been unavailing. They were not State Militia. It is possible that they were a special company organized for the occasion. General John Wilkins may have been the sponsor and patron.

9 See *Recollections of Seventy Years and Historical Gleanings of Allegheny, Pennsylvania*, by Judge John E. Parke, 375 pp. (Boston: Rand, Avery & Company, 1886).



MAGNUS MURRAY

which the receipts exceeded the expenditures was on the occasion of the play of *Tom and Jerry or High Life in London* for the benefit of the Greeks after the fall of Missolonghi, on which occasion the amount realized was transmitted to the treasurer of that fund by our preceptor, Magnus Murray. With this company closed forever the old Third-street Theatre, the premises having been purchased by the late Henry Holdship, who immediately demolished the building and confiscated the property of the society.

Ironically perhaps, the site of the Thespian Society's unlucky experiment is now occupied by the Pittsburg Dollar Savings Institution, commonly known as the Dollar Bank.¹⁰

Besides Magnus Murray and William Wilkins, the most active Thespians of 1823-1824 were: Richard Biddle, George Beale, Matthew Magee, Morgan Neville, Charles Shaler, James B. Butler, Duncan Walker, Alexander Breckenridge, Sidney Mountain, Alexander Johnston, Jr., Benjamin Evans, R. B. Barker, T. B. Dallas, J. S. Craft.

As for prosperity, those were days when relatively few individuals had all the income they could use. Magnus Murray, admitted to the Allegheny County Bar, November 13, 1808, supplemented his earnings as a lawyer by doing other available work. He was a surveyor in 1815. Also during that same year he helped James M. Riddle to publish the first city directory of Pittsburgh. By 1819 the directory admitted the association of the two young men in its production. Meanwhile, Murray was engaged as clerk to the commissioners charged with building the first Allegheny (State) penitentiary.¹¹ It was his duty to sign advertisements for sub-contractors. An idealistic aspect of his nature is manifest, at least at intervals, when he lectured, perhaps without compensation, on botany before the Pittsburgh Chemical and Physiological Society in 1815 and the Pittsburgh Philosophical and Philological Society in 1827. The date of his becoming an alderman is uncertain, but it may have been as early as 1821. He definitely was an alderman at the time of his death. Certainly, he is mentioned in that capacity in *Harris' Pittsburgh Directory* for 1837. The notice of his demise appeared in the *Gazette* simply as a statement of the fact of his passing and of the plans for his funeral, as follows: "Died — This morning, Magnus M. Murray, Esq. His friends, and those of his family, are invited to attend his funeral, from his late residence, in

¹⁰ The Dollar Savings Bank was founded by Charles Colton, George Albee and others in 1855.

¹¹ Western Penitentiary, authorized by the State Legislature, March 3, 1818, was the first such institution west of the Allegheny Mountains. It was a three-story castellated stone structure and was completed by November 22, 1827. The walls were 25 feet high, the twin towers 35 feet. In 1886 the buildings were abandoned and the prison moved to its modern location on the Ohio River. The property was returned to the City of Allegheny as an addition to the park. Phipps Conservatory, at Sherman and West Ohio streets, occupies the site of the old Penitentiary.

Fifth street, tomorrow morning, at 11 o'clock. Monday morning, 5th March, 1838." The widow, née Mary Wilkins, continued to occupy the family home on Fifth street between Wood and Smithfield, according to the Harris directory for 1839. In 1856, however, she was domiciled "between Wilkins and Baldwin." Death did not come to her until February 16, 1872, when she was eighty-four and making her home with her daughter, Mary M., wife of Samuel Fahnestock,¹² attorney, 19 First avenue, between Grant street and Cherry alley.

The children of Magnus Murray and Mary Wilkins were: Alexander Murray, James B. Murray, Henry Murray, Robert Murray, Mary Murray Fahnestock, Julia Murray LeMoyne and Catherine Murray Guthrie. It was James B. who developed Murray Hill and for whom it was named.

Dying at fifty-one Magnus Murray was in his prime when his career and its record of achievement were terminated arbitrarily. But the influence of his example continues even now, after 131 years, to be a benefaction to the community he served as "a scholar in civic harness."

This present tribute to his memory raises many questions, among them being: Where are his papers — letters, diaries, journals, writings on all manner of themes? Do they still exist? If so, where? Are they available for accredited public examination and for institutional preservation?

¹² Samuel Fahnestock, his son-in-law, was executor of Magnus Murray's estate. There was no will, but the property, of course, required administration.