

YOUHADTOASK

By Chris Potter, Managing Editor of *Pittsburgh City Paper*
and writer of the weekly “You Had to Ask” column

I ride past Stephen Foster’s home every day and I’d like to know if it’s ever open for tours?

— Julie Ransom, Lawrenceville

No, the mansion you are thinking of, at 3600 Penn Ave., is a private residence that’s not open for tours. But there’s a good reason: it’s not really Stephen Foster’s home.

I know: There’s a blue state historical marker out front stating that it’s his birthplace. And on the Fourth of July, 1826, the man who would help define American music was born on the site, the 10th child of a prosperous family. (Foster’s father established Lawrenceville, naming it after Captain James Lawrence, who in a naval battle during the War of 1812 uttered the famous last words, “Don’t give up the ship!”)

But the Foster house, referred to as the “White Cottage” (presumably due to its strong resemblance to a white cottage), was destroyed, apparently by fire, in the mid-1860s. According to architectural historian Walter Kidney’s book *Pittsburgh’s Landmark Architecture*, all that’s left of the Foster home is the foundation, which the mansion now at 3600 Penn was built on. Those remains might have been of interest if Foster’s parents had locked him in the basement, forcing him to scrawl the stanzas of “Hard Times Come Again No More” on the walls. But sadly – for history buffs, I mean – that didn’t happen. Kidney calls the current building’s connection to Foster “very tenuous.”

Actually, the words “very tenuous” describe much of Foster’s 37 years. According to the University of Pittsburgh’s Center for American Music, Foster lived most of his life in Pittsburgh; like many a native son, he even moved back in with his parents for a short time.



HSWP Library & Archives, GPCC, box 1, Lawrenceville

But he also lived in several local boarding houses, interspersed with moves to Cincinnati and New York City. Despite Foster’s fame, in fact, he could never really put down roots. Songwriting isn’t exactly a burgeoning career choice for young people today, and as the nation’s first professional songwriter, Foster had an even harder time. As the Center for American Music Web site puts it, “There was no music business as we know it.” Foster’s only income was the royalties he got from sheet music sales, but copyright law offered little protection from other publishers “rearranging” his work. Worse, “There was no way to know whether or not he was being paid for all the copies his [own] publisher sold; there were no attorneys specializing in author’s rights.” When Foster died in 1864, he had 38 cents in his pocket and a scrap of paper that read, “dear friends and gentle hearts.”

The lawn sign on this c. 1920 postcard says the “Memorial” was open to the public.

His birthplace, by contrast, had gone upscale, having been replaced by a handsome mansion. The structure does have some historic significance; architectural historian Franklin Toker writes that it was built by Andrew Kloman, an early business partner of Andrew Carnegie. But dear friends and gentle hearts don't buy many mansions, and neither does 38 cents.

Still, you shouldn't feel bad for eyeing the wrong house: Henry Ford, the famed industrialist, did the same thing.

In the 1930s, Ford wanted to purchase Foster's birthplace and move it to his Greenfield Village – a tourist attraction in Dearborn, Mich., which includes transplanted sites like Thomas Edison's lab, the Wright Brothers' cycle shop, and the home where H.J. Heinz first began pickling produce.

But Pittsburgh can be a tough place for out-of-towners who flash around a lot of money in hopes of taking away our landmarks: just ask Nordstrom, which once hoped to demolish buildings Downtown for one of its high-end department stores. Ford fared even worse, wrongly believing that Foster was born two blocks away, at 3414 Penn Ave.

The mistake was understandable. Others were confused about the whereabouts of Foster's birthplace; Sarah Kilkelly's 1906 *History of Pittsburgh*, for example, erroneously asserts that Foster was born "at the junction of Butler and Thirty-fourth streets." And the home at 3414, a rustic wood structure, by then looked more like Foster's birthplace than the actual birthplace did.

As succinctly described in the September 2001 issue of the Lawrenceville Historical Society's *Historical Happenings*, Pittsburgh Mayor William McNair tried to warn Ford of his mistake. Ford, in his arrogance, bought the property. The mayor consoled angry citizens by observing that Ford "got the wrong house anyway."

The surviving house indeed was long called the Stephen Foster Memorial, but it served primarily as a residence – and later a funeral home – before being converted in the 1980s to apartments and offices for the American Wind Symphony. Since 1937, the Stephen Foster Memorial in Oakland (Forbes Avenue at Pitt's Cathedral of Learning) has been the repository for artifacts and memorabilia from the composer's life.

So save yourself some embarrassment of your own: don't knock on the door of 3600 Penn trying to find out what admission costs. ☀

A long time ago is not that far away. . .



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