

Congdon-McKune House, 1860

By Paul Hoffman, November 28, 1973

Few houses, if any, have dominated a neighborhood or scene such as the Congdon-McKune house. The character of the dwelling rises above all else in the town of Chelsea, which, comparable to surrounding towns, has never been a showcase of architectural excellence.

This large home was built by Elisha Congdon, the last of three houses to be built by him on the same site. After the burning of his second home, a daughter of Mr. Congdon relates in her memoirs that her father was determined that the new structure should be like a fortress, virtually indestructible and immune to devastation. On frequent business trips to Ann Arbor he passed always the beautiful home of Mr. Gott, a legal adviser to John Allen, the founder of Ann Arbor. This home was built in 1840 and at the time stood on a five acre lot at 709 West Huron Street. Today it is still standing and is commonly known as the Martha Washington House. His admiration for the Gott house compelled him to build an exact duplicate, which he did in the year 1860. This new red brick house, resplendent in its commanding position, was destined from its beginning to serve as a neverending reminder of the many contributions Mr. Congdon made to this community. Through its portals, without question, passed the most eminent people of the area to socialize, ponder, and shape the future of Chelsea and Sylvan Township.

Elisha Congdon came to Michigan from Connecticut in the 1830s and immediately he emerged as a leader in a group of early settlers earning him an appointment as the first Sylvan Township clerk. Later on he was elected the first mayor of the village of Chelsea, as well as serving a few terms in the state legislature in the 1860s. Mr. Congdon passed away in the year 1867 and is buried in Oak Grove cemetery. His descendants in this area are the family of Mr. and Mrs. Merle Barr and their offspring.

The property eventually passed into the hands of Timothy McKune, who as a young lad came from Ireland and settled in Lyndon Township, serving that community as Supervisor and distinguishing himself during the Civil War by honoring a government contract supplying the Union forces with wood for fuel along the Mississippi River.

He used this house as a hotel until his death in the year 1909, at which time his son Edward McKune became the owner and continued in the same capacity. Edward McKune was married to Catherine Staffan, a daughter of an early pioneer family. Prior to her passing, she willed the home to the Chelsea Public Library, a very generous and noble gesture by a grand lady.

Enduring the ravages of time, this handsome house, elegant in its design, has gained stature through the years with many improvements. Today, after 113 years, it stands, as does the Martha Washington House, strong and durable, dominating the scene as did its builder, a fitting monument to those who built and lived in it, fortress – like as it was meant to be.