

History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

October 2011

J.W. Sexton High School Tour Scheduled

Some of you will remember that in the fall of 2010 the Historical Society had the opportunity to visit Lansing's historic Eastern High School. Due to the positive response from our members regarding the event, we've arranged to visit J.W. Sexton High School for a similar tour on Tuesday evening, November 15, 2011. The doors will open at 6:30 pm. The program will begin at 7 pm in the auditorium, and will be followed by tours of the building. We hope you can attend. The evening will close with refreshments in the social room. HSGL would like to thank Sexton Principal Dr. Reginald T. Bates, Assistant Principal Mr. Steven Lonzo, and the Sexton National Honor Society for their hospitality.

Sexton High School was first conceived of in the 1930s, when the west side of Lansing was growing rapidly. At that time student populations in Lansing were quickly expanding. Designs for the new school building were begun in 1939, with the Warren S. Holmes Co., the architects of the building, taking over a year to research the educational needs the new school building would have to meet. One anecdote relates how a biology and taxidermy teacher who would be teaching at Sexton requested a conservatory large enough to maintain an entire ecosystem, so he could better teach his pupils!

Work began on the school in 1941, just before America entered World War II. After some discussion with the government about the usage of valuable construction supplies, it was decided that work would continue during the war years. The school was opened officially opened for classes in 1943, despite the fact that some portions of the building were not yet complete due to lack of funding. The auditorium exterior was finished in 1943, but the interior was not complete until 1949. In 1956 the school's natatorium was completed, bringing about the official end of the school's construction. Despite a great many cost cutting measures, including the elimination of interesting architectural elements, the final price tag for the school was over \$2 million.

Email Newsletters

Historical Society of Greater Lansing is now offering its members the option of receiving *The History Explorer* via e-mail. By e-mailing our newsletter the society will be able to save a considerable amount of money spent on postage and printing. If you would like to receive your newsletter via e-mail, please send an email to info@lansinghistory.org. Thank you!

Membership Renewals

Don't forget to check your address label for notification as to when your membership will be up for renewal. If you have any questions about memberships, please feel free to contact the society at any time at info@lansinghistory.org.

Civil War Women

The HSGL would like to thank Prof. Emerita Marilyn Culpepper for reading from her book *Trials and Triumphs: The Women of the American Civil War* at our September 15 meeting.

Arc of Justice by Detroit author Kevin Boyle

The Michigan Humanities Council has selected Detroit author Kevin Boyle's *Arc of Justice* as their 2011-2012 Great Michigan Read book. The book tells the story of a murder trial that resulted when an African American doctor, Ossian Sweet, moved his family into a white neighborhood in Detroit in 1925. The trial became a landmark civil rights case, launching the career of future Michigan Governor Frank Murphy and serving as one of the highlights to the brilliant defense career of lawyer Clarence Darrow. *Arc of Justice* is the 2004 National Book Award winner for non-fiction, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

On Tuesday, October 25, Boyle will speak on his book at Thomas Cooley Law School, located at 300 S. Capitol Ave. Refreshments will be served at 5:30, with the program following at 6:00pm. Books will be available for purchase and signing.

Cass & Washington Cross Paths in Lansing

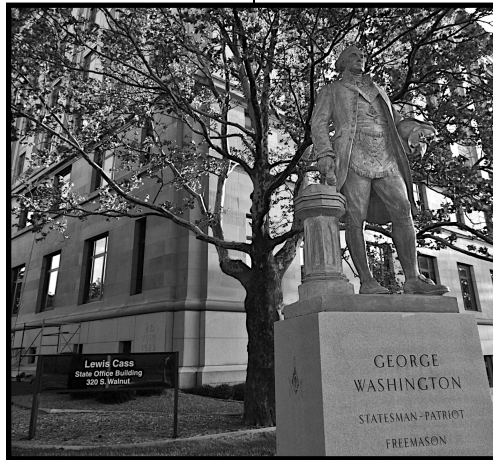
by David Marvin

Downtown Lansing, two pieces of art crafted out of different media - both copies of earlier works, one a statue and one a painting - and created 150 years apart link the lives of two great Americans that could never be duplicated: George Washington and Lewis Cass. Aside from their mutual interest in Freemasonry, the military, and American politics, a direct connection between Washington and Cass seems tenuous at best.

Born in 1782, Lewis Cass would have just turned 17 when George Washington died and no record of them ever meeting one another exists. However, upon the Cass family's migration to the Northwest Territory in 1799, young Lewis encountered a number of compatriots of the recently deceased President Washington as they traversed the distance between New Hampshire and their new home in Marietta, Ohio. During a short stay in Winchester, Virginia, Cass met Revolutionary War General and former Virginia Congressman Daniel Morgan. In his biographical work, *Life and Times of Lewis Cass*, W.L.G. Smith states, "...Lewis often conversed with General Morgan, of revolutionary memory, and listened to hour after hour of anecdotes told by him, and by a Mr. Bush, the innkeeper, of the early life and conduct of Washington, who was stationed for some time at the fort, whose dilapidated walls were then visible." As a young man growing up in the United States in its infancy, Cass would have learned of the exploits of George Washington, but he never met the first President.

Two blocks southeast of the Michigan Capitol stands the Lewis Cass state office building. This large sandstone building once served as the main state office building for the State of Michigan. Today, the Lewis

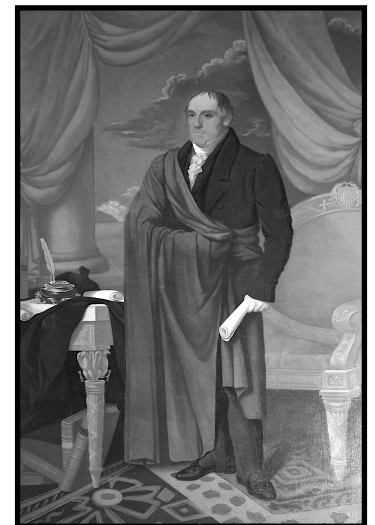
Cass building stands six stories tall, though until 1951 it had a seventh story, which fire damaged beyond repair. A young father and state highway department worker, Richard Shay, set fire to the building in an attempt to avoid service in the Korean War. The fire destroyed countless state records and spurred the state into creating legislation to protect its records more effectively. For many decades, this building, once simply called the "State Office Building", and the Capitol served as the only major state government buildings in Lansing.



"Washington As A Master Mason" in front of the Cass Building

On the northeast corner of Walnut and Washtenaw Streets, facing toward the Michigan Capitol building with its back turned to the Lewis Cass building, stands a statue of President George Washington. American sculptor, Donald De Lue, designed the original copy of *George Washington As A Master Mason* at the request of the Grand Lodge of New Orleans in 1959. Another copy of this statue was commissioned by the Grand Lodge of New York for presentation at its display for the World's Fair in 1964-65. That copy now stands in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Queens, New York. Several identical versions of this piece stand around the country, including one in Detroit, near Mariners' Church. A gift of the Free and Accepted Masons of Michigan, the Lansing version was installed in 1982 in front of the Lewis Cass Building to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Washington's birth.

The back wall of the chambers of the Michigan Senate bears a stately portrait of Lewis Cass. For years this portrait hung proudly in the Senate chambers with no one questioning its origin. During the restoration of the Michigan Capitol in the late-1980s and early-1990's, an art historian noticed the Cass portrait and recognized that something seemed too familiar in this portrait. Looking at the Cass portrait it is difficult not to notice the similarities to a portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart, painted in



Michigan Senate Cass Portrait

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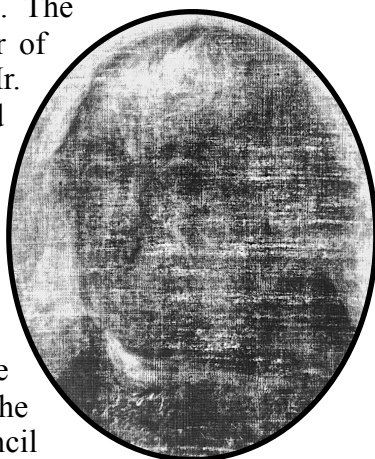
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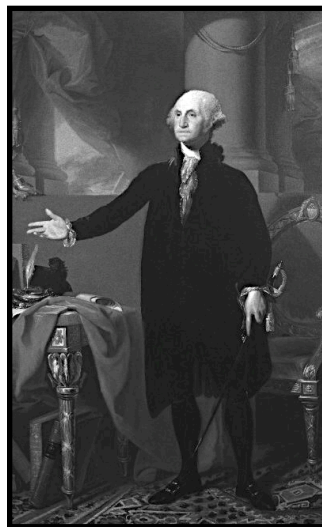
1796. The Stuart painting, called the *Lansdowne Portrait*, hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. Senator William Bingham commissioned the portrait as a gift for an American sympathizer in the British Parliament during the Revolutionary War, William Petty, the Marquess of Lansdowne. The painting symbolizes George Washington refusing a third term as President. The Stuart painting has Washington standing next to a table with his left arm outstretched, as opposed to an arm withdrawn and covered by a cloak in the Cass version. However, upon closer review, most of the other elements of the two paintings seem remarkably similar. The chair, the pen and ink, the scroll, the table leg, the carpet design, and even the number and orientation of the books on and under the table, all look the same in both paintings.

Several famous copies of the *Lansdowne Portrait*, a copy itself of an earlier Stuart piece, exist today, including a copy by an unknown artist that hangs in the Rayburn Room in the U.S. Capitol and another painting based on the Stuart portrait by John Venderlyn, hanging in the U.S. House Chambers. It was not uncommon in the early 19th-Century for painters to make mass reproductions of famous artwork and portraits of famous personages.

Suspecting something more than met the eye with the Cass portrait, an x-ray of the painting was taken at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) during a cleaning and preservation of the piece. The scan showed a second layer of paint under the face of Mr. Cass, which looked distinctly like Washington. Alfred Ackerman, an art expert from the DIA involved in the painting's restoration stated, "There has definitely been a change in the design around the head." The records of the Michigan Territorial Council indicate that on June 29, 1832, the Council approved payment to a "Thomas M'Cleland, for balance due him for a full length portrait of Lewis Cass, late Governor of Michigan, for the library room, one hundred and twenty dollars." We may never know if Mr. McCleland painted a replica copy of the *Lansdowne Portrait* and modified it



X-Rayed Portion of Cass Portrait Showing Washington's Head



The Lansdowne Portrait

later to approximate Cass or whether he simply painted over someone else's work and collected \$120 for his efforts. Copies of the more famous Stuart work would have been available and would have served as a quick way to memorialize a famous person with little work required to paint a different face over Washington's.

The portrait of Lewis Cass hangs on the northwest corner of the Senate chamber and from that location one can see the Lewis Cass building out the western windows of the Capitol. From the vantage point of the lawn of the Lewis Cass building, the statue of George Washington stares somberly at the Michigan Capitol, toward the southern wing of that great building where the Michigan Senate convenes. The painting of Lewis Cass and the statue of George Washington look toward each other, knowing that while their paths in life never crossed, their stories remain intertwined in the random history of these two works of art in downtown Lansing.

Sources

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