

J. G. M. Swinney

DONOR

of

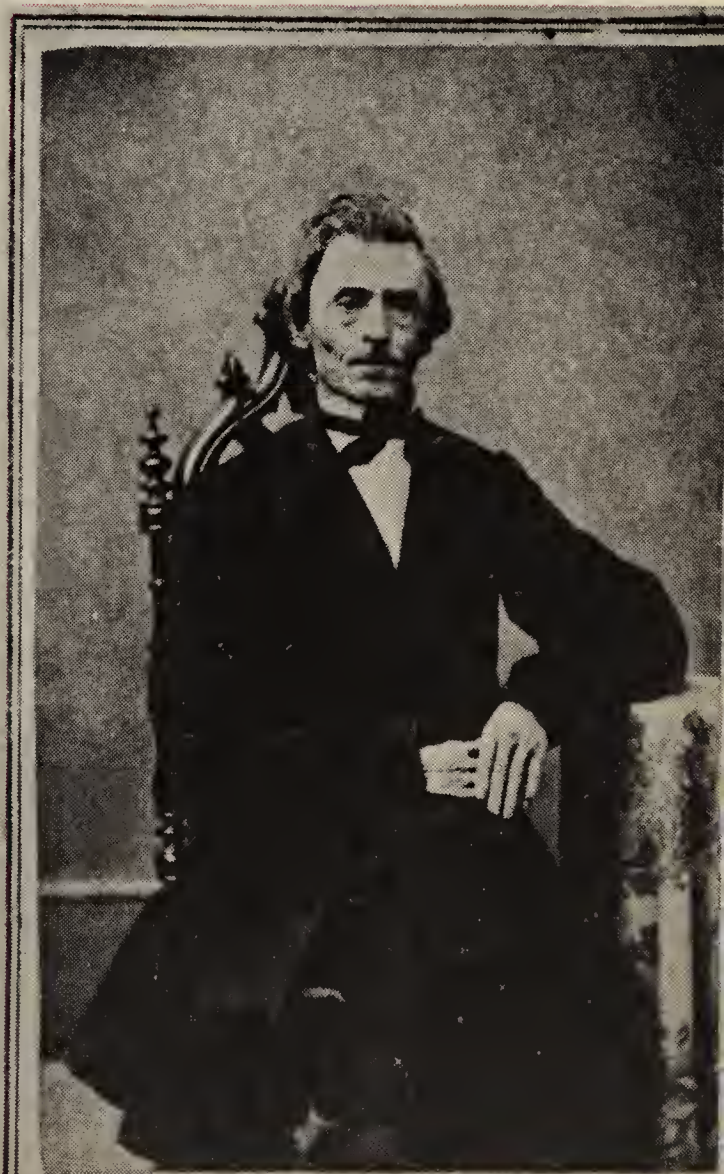
FORT WAYNE'S FIRST PARK

by

Bessie

Keeran

Roberts



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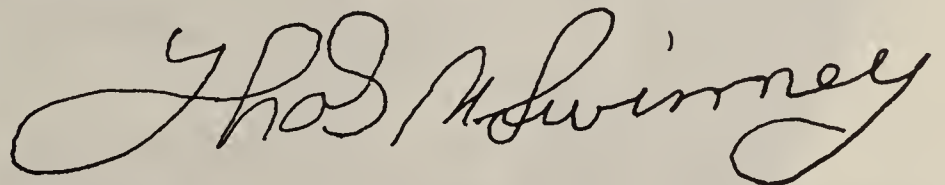
MUSEUM

1424 West Jefferson Street
Visiting Hours, 10-12 A.M., 1 to 5 P.M. Tuesday through Saturday
2 to 5 P.M. on Sunday--Closed Monday
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I, THOS. W. SWINNEY

WILL AND DEVISE . . . TO THE CITY OF FORT WAYNE, IN FEE SIMPLE IN TRUST FOR A PUBLIC PARK . . . THE SAID PARCELS OF LAND . . . (HEREIN) DEVISED . . . ON CONDITION THAT IT SHALL NOT BE DEVOTED TO ANY OTHER USE UNDER SUCH PROPER REGULATIONS THEREOF AS THE COMMON COUNCIL OF CITY MAY PRESCRIBE BUT FOREVER TO REMAIN OPEN AND FREE TO THE PUBLIC AS PLEASURE GROUNDS IMPROVED AND BEAUTIFIED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF SAID COUNCIL AND AS A PLACE OF RESORT FOR SOCIAL MEETINGS OF ALL CLASSES AND ORDERS NOT CONTRARY TO THE PUBLIC MORALITY . . .

Signed,



THE SEVENTEENTH DAY OF DECEMBER, 1874

With these thoughtful words, Thomas W. Swinney closed the books on seventy years of a long, eventful, and, as the world counts such matters, a prosperous life.

The two "parcels" of land so devised consisted of 58 4/100 acres, and about three additional acres. The Homestead and its environs were to be included after the last of the Swinney heirs living there had died.

In their agreement with the city, the heirs

specified further that no beer or other intoxicating drinks were to be sold on the grounds, no cannonading or firing of anvils, no ball playing on Sunday.

"Swinney Park," as it has been called since Thomas W. Swinney's will became effective in 1875, has lived many lives.

— The land was purchased in a sale of government land at \$1.25 an acre in 1823 for farming and stock-raising.

— A portion was leased for twenty years to the Allen County Agricultural Society for county fair grounds and race track.

— As a picnic ground around an artesian well;

— An amusement park across the river;

— A Japanese garden;

— A setting of giant trees, graceful paths and gentle slopes for the Swinney Homestead;

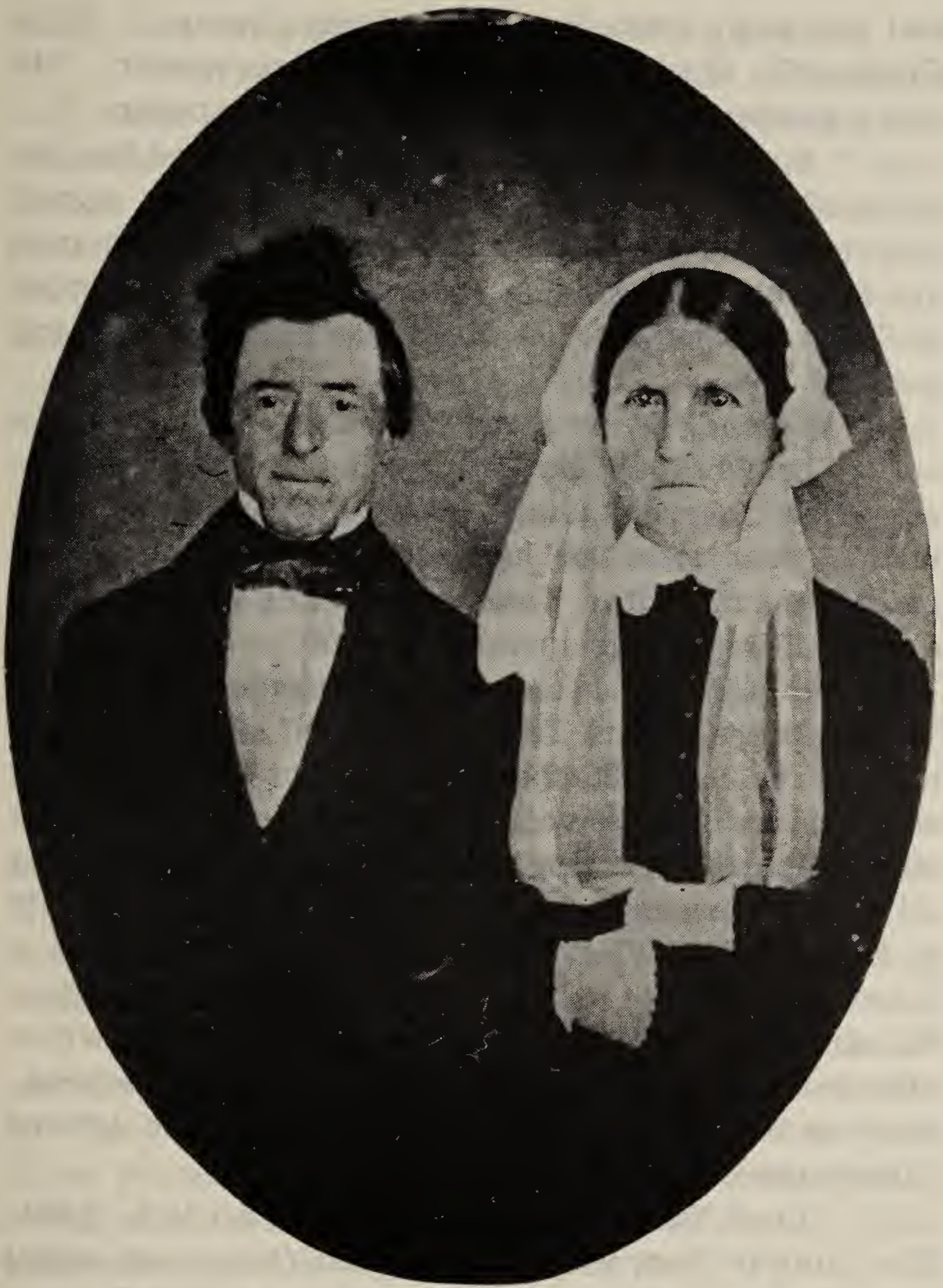
— Now the Allen County-Fort Wayne Historical Museum;

— It has remained "open and free to the public," just as Tom Swinney planned this living gift to his home town.

The present area of Swinney Park is 46.30 acres east of the St. Mary's River, and 48.24 acres west of the River.

Thomas W. Swinney was born in Piketon, Ohio, November 18, 1803. His mother's name was Rhesa Swinney. No mention of his father's given name is to be found among the family records. A sister Rhesa and brothers Samuel, Joseph--sheriff of Allen County in 1835--William and John, who were engaged in carrying cargo by boat to New Orleans, are all referred to by Mother Rhesa Swinney in her letters.

"My father came to Fort Wayne in 1822. He



Col. Thomas W. Swinney and his wife,
Lucy Taber Swinney

had run away from Scranton, Pennsylvania." Miss Frances E. (Frank) Swinney told an interviewer. "He was a painter by trade and ground his own colors."

Tom Swinney had evidently displeased his pious mother, if we can judge from her letters, signed invariably, "Your disconsolate mother." Repentance and forsaking of his many sins was her constant plea to Thomas who was her mainstay in her advancing years.

Colonel Swinney, as he was referred to formally, bore his title honestly. He had been commissioned on Governor James Brown Ray's staff in 1830. In that year also, he had purchased the northwest quarter section 10 in Township 30--containing 162.12 acres. The purchase price was \$500.

In 1828 he had bought of Samuel and Cyrus Taber, heirs of Paul Taber, tracts of land amounting to 60 acres in the northeast quarter of section 10, to add to his wife's estate. For his wife Lucy was the most important person in his life as his letters and all his references to her confirm. They were "Join'd in Holy Wedlock Dec. 20th 1827," in the words on a faded page of the Family Record torn from the Bible. He carried thoughts of her wherever he went; he wrote affectionate letters that reveal his complete dependence on her judgment and approval. These letters have survived.

Lucy Taber was born in Boston April 5, 1804. She came to Fort Wayne as a child (some say eight) from Tiverton, Rhode Island, with her father Captain Paul Jones Taber and her brother Samuel. A brother, Cyrus, had come earlier with \$400. But fever and ague attacked him, and by the time he had recovered, his money was gone. So he started all over by splitting rails at 50 cents a day for a Quaker named William Salter. Later, when he brought his father Captain Paul Jones Taber, his brother Samuel and sister

Lucy, they lived in the block house of the Fort.

When the sale of government lands at \$1.25 an acre about Fort Wayne, not immediately adjoining the stockade was held on October 22, 1823, Paul Taber was on hand to purchase 240 acres west of the town plat. He gave three tracts of eighty acres each to his son Cyrus, his daughter Lucy and his son Samuel. Cyrus and Samuel each deeded his eighty acres to his sister Lucy. This 240 acres including the Swinney Homestead and its environs was held intact until the last Swinney heir had died.

Captain Paul Taber was a sea captain during the War of 1812. Stephen Cole Taber, a son of Cyrus, recalled walking along the river bank with his grandfather at the confluence where the old Cole Homestead stood, and said that the old man was wearing his captain's uniform. Captain Taber died December 25, 1826, aged 52 years, 21 days.

Of the orchard planted by Paul Taber on his daughter's land, one tree was showing life in 1930. The year she was married--1827--Lucy is said to have planted a sycamore tree which was flourishing until recent years.

Shortly after the marriage of Thomas W. Swinney and Lucy Taber, the first home was built on Lucy's land. It was of logs and stood about 50 feet south of the present house. It must have been snug, well-constructed and warm, for the hearthstones recently excavated would have graced a mansion.

The homestead, started in 1844, was occupied by the Swinney family in 1845. However, the "mansion" as Tom Swinney sometimes called it, as it appears today was enlarged by a wing on the south and by raising the roof to two and a half stories in 1885.

By the year 1833, Tom had persuaded his mother Rhesa Swinney, to bring his sister Rhesa and all their possessions and live near him and his family.

This was her letter at the time.

Piketon Sept. 27, 1833

My dear Children,

I have concluded
to comply with your repeated
requests to come and live
among you if God will
countenance me in the attempt,
we are in a tolerable state
of health at present and if
you should conclude to come
after me I wish you to
come immediately and I will
endeavor to be ready
I think if you will bring a
good chunk of a four horse
waggon with sturdy horses that
they will take myself
Rhesa and all the plunder
that we would wish to
carry with us as I will
try to dispose of that we
can do without, Likewise
if you conclude to come
I would wish you to build
me a good little warm
cottage to winter in if
I should live to need it for
my declining years will
not admit of as much noise
and Bustle as will
inevitably be about those
that expect to make
a comfortable living for their
families in this world and
more especially in settling
new Countrys.

Just when the projected move was made is not certain. However, Rhesa Swinney's requests were carried out. On a thirty by twenty-foot lot on East Main Street opposite the Court House, a small brick house was built by Thomas W. Swinney for his mother and sister. The lot was a part of the "parcel" of three and a fraction lots that were to be the Swinney Block for business rentals in the future.

The location of the house on the public square was dictated by its nearness to the town pump on Court Street, and a doctor's office nearby in case of emergency.

Rhesa Swinney, born in 1763, died January 21, 1846, aged 77 years. An ancient marker in Lindenwood Cemetery bearing the faint inscription "A Mother's Grave" is believed to mark the grave of Rhesa Swinney, mother of Colonel Thomas W. Swinney.

During Colonel Swinney's early days in Fort Wayne, his daughter Frances recalled that he often made trips to Toledo in a canoe and stayed a week or so to visit and trade with the Miami and Potawatomi. Miss "Frank" also recalled a time when she was almost killed by a deer on their grounds.

As his family of girls increased, his plans for their future became far reaching. The children of Thomas and Lucy Swinney who reached maturity were Minerva, born November 3, 1828; Rhesa, born September 1, 1830; Margaret, born August 14, 1834; Frances E., March 7, 1839; Caroline, born December 31, 1842; adopted son William Paul, born December, 1845, died June, 1886.

Do you ask what Tom Swinney was like? He was probably without much education; but as his land holdings increased, he became prominent in the agricultural and political affairs of his town, state and nation. His daughters, moreover, attended the best schools available.

Tuition for Minerva, Rhesa and Margaret was paid in 1839 for their attendance at William W. Stevens' Academy, one of Fort Wayne's first schools. Board with fuel and lights cost \$58.62 for Miss Margaret for three months at Cooper Academy, in Fort Wayne in 1852. Miss Frances E. Swinney delivered an essay entitled "The days of originality are past" among the vocal and piano numbers at the Commencement exercises at the Fort Wayne College on April 23, 1856.

Sunday, December 25, 1851, found Tom Swinney mired in by muddy streets at the Walnut Street House, Cincinnati, while squiring Miss Margaret Swinney on her way to boarding-school in Dayton, Ohio. Although it was Christmas Day, they went to church twice that day and heard two fine sermons . . . "Doctor Rice this morning and Doctor Fisher this evening. The lecture this evening was fornenst gambling and the best one on that subject I have ever heard," Tom wrote home.

He had come to show Margaret the city but as that was impossible they had to settle for a musicale on Monday night in the "ladies" parlor and tea with Maggie's school friends at their boarding-house on Tuesday while they waited for the break-up of the ice in the river. He planned to take "Mag" to a Daguerreotype room as soon as the weather cleared and get her picture taken. But on Thursday her school friends left and Maggie with them. So there was nothing for Tom to do but write one of his longing letters to Lucy and home, ending on this note:

P.S. New Year morning. The fire bells has been ringing all night. I do not know how much of the town is burned but from the everlasting ginglin of bells a person might suppose one-half the place was burned. There has not been any large fire since we came



The Swinney Homestead, in the Nineties. On the porch, seated, Mrs. C. K. Knight (nee Cheney); On the railing, Miss Rhessa Swinney; On the lawn, seated, Miss Caroline Swinney; Standing behind her chair, Miss Bessie Knight (Mrs. Fred Peters); in the mid-

ground, Miss Frances Swinney; Facing the others, Miss Helen Knight (Mrs. Allen Hamilton); On the grass in the foreground, little Mary Knight (Mrs. Fred Hoffman).

here. The steamboats are all a getting ready to start some have allready left for down the river. They can float down with the ice without any danger. The weather is as dark and smoky as Indian summer. You cannot see one hundred yards from you. Smoke and mudd seem to be the order of the day. I can think of nothing further to say but wish you all a happy new year.

Thos. W. Swinney

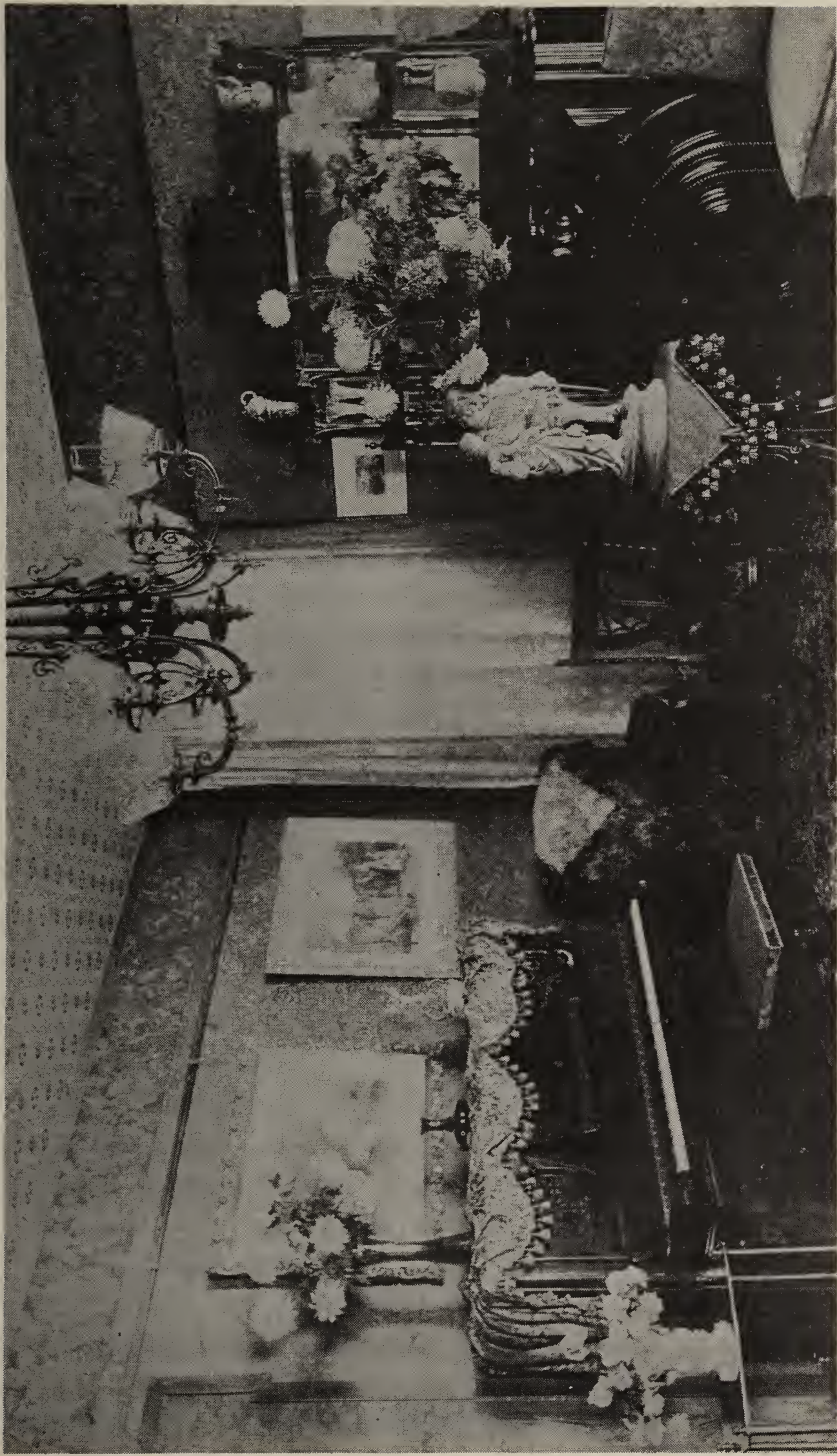
Among the personal letters cherished by Tom Swinney as long as he lived was one from Dayton, Ohio, June 20 (year not given), and signed by Margaret Cose, one of Margaret's teachers.

". . . I cannot give up my account of my dear child & return her to you without much emotion. I thank you, for the privilege: she has been a dear and precious child to me & will ever be remembered not with tender love, but with respect & honor by all her teachers & by her fellow pupils.

To me she has been so affectionate, & so tender, as well as obedient, that it would be strange if I did not love her.

In her studies she has done herself and her parents much credit. When examined in her English History, I was asked by some of the most intelligent of the Committee of Examination, who she was, as she looked strikingly handsome that day & behaved with so much dignity & self possession & showed such mastery of her subject.

Could you be persuaded to spare her to us for another year we should be most happy--Mr. Z is earnestly desirous of having her, for he says she is a noble girl & would go through the remaining studies of our most advanced course very handsomely & he says for



North parlor where guests gathered before and after refreshments at the Swinney teas.

her sake & ours he urges it earnestly."

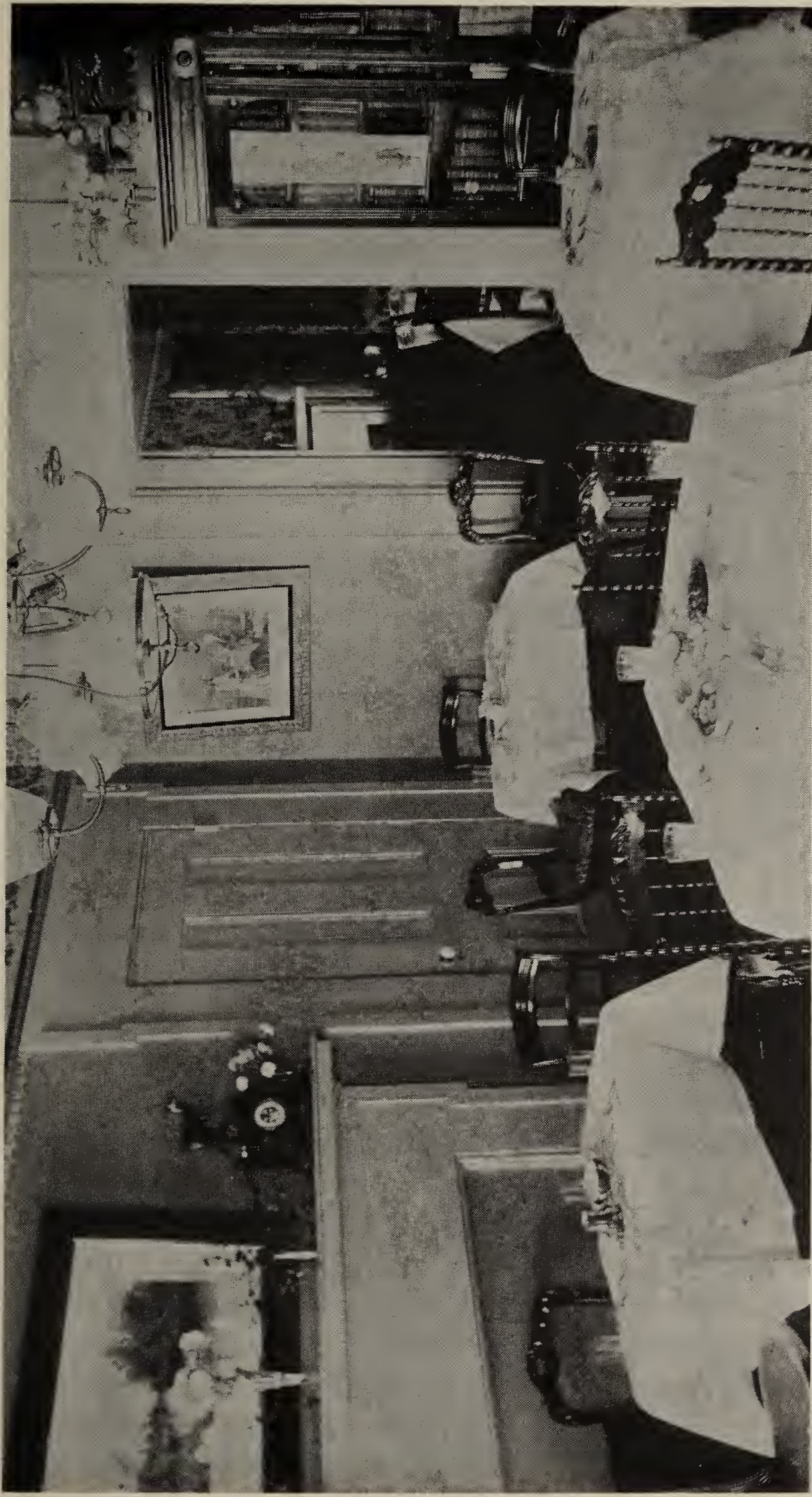
When Zenas Henderson built a two-story brick as hotel, bakery and saloon on Columbia Street, there was an ornamental front where "Tom Swinney, fancy painter of those days," spread a representation of two large eagles on the gable end of the house. Whenever that was, Tom had begun early to widen his sphere of influence in this community.

In January, 1840, he was appointed as a delegate to a State Convention of the Whigs of Indiana at Indianapolis, and urged not to allow "any private or pecuniary matters" to prevent him from attending and devoting the required time to the service of his country and his state. The business of the convention was "to nominate suitable Whig candidates to be run for Governor and Lieutenant Governor; and also for the purpose of nominating Electors for President and Vice-President of the United States.

The local Whig committee was composed of: Samuel Hanna, Francis Comporet, S. M. Black, T. J. Lewis, Smallwood Noel. Their plans must have worked out very well as they brought their candidate for President--William Henry Harrison--to Fort Wayne during his famous Log Cabin-Hard Cider campaign, and held a gigantic rally in the commons across from the site of the Old Fort.

On these jaunts into the big world, Tom would write long accounts in his letters to Lucy, at home with her young children. From the Wright House, Indianapolis, with his neighbors, Sam Shoaff and Mr. Bayless, where he was meeting with other "gentlemen" on the Board of Agriculture, and the Gibson House, Cincinnati, he continued this narration.

The perils and expense of travel were mingled with its delights in his letters on a trip to Washington City in June, 1854. ". . . while on the Ohio River the



South parlor on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the house - - 1895. This is the east end of the large room now used for meetings before the dividing wall was removed.

Collery broke out among the hands of the boat and deck passengers . . . it did not prove fatal only in one case one pasinger died with the Collery and we landed and dug a whole boxed him up and buried him," Tom wrote home. The market interested him greatly. "I have just returned from the market which is very well supplied with meats of all kinds fishes birds and all kinds of vegetables strawberries ripe cherries and new potatoes as large as my fist in short as finely supplied as I ever saw."

However, high spot of the trip was the "visit to the President's house which we found a very fine one and the President (Franklin Pierce) a kind and affable gentleman . . . She being unwell we did not get a peep at the interior of the house and the furniture is very grand . . . the grounds about the mansion is almost sublime . . . Col. G. W. Ewing has prevailed upon us to remain one day longer and go with him this evening to the President's to hear the musick --it is said the merine band that plays there is the best in the country at all events we have consented to go and hear for ourselves of which I will speak after hearing . . . Well we have heard the musick and saw the crowd . . . the musick we have heard excelled--the crowd was very fantasticle from the President's foreign ministers, heads of departments, senators, Representatives, gentlemen lady & loafers, black legs, Paupers, niggers, old and young . . . all were there . . . the grounds were as fine as ever I saw . . . the show passed off very well . . . we then took carriages and went around town and then to Georgetown and saw all the fine buildings and grounds there then out to the Potomack--it looks fine by moonlight . . ."

The letter closes with his familiar sentiment when away from home--"I am beginning to get sur-fetted with sight seeing and would willing exchange all those foreign pleasures for one day with you again



West end of south parlor. Woodwork and door help to identify the location.

I remain yours ever dearly

Thos. W. Swinney"

The letter was addressed to Lucy Swinney "the most dear mother and wife" of all his personal correspondence.

Who is to say that Tom Swinney's resolve to leave a great "parcel" of beautiful land for a public park did not take shape during his visit to the nation's capital?

Lucy died in 1860. So this journey of Tom's may have been near the end of her life.

Much of Tom Swinney's later life was spent in the courts. When Jesse R. Straughan, chief engineer of the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railroad, approached Tom Swinney about the right-of-way through his land, Tom, it is said, went after him with a shovel. The railroad continued on its way.

When in 1870, the new Fort Wayne, Muncie and Cincinnati Railroad began "her" roadbed and engaged a large force of men and teams in building "her" embankment, trees were cut down, fences demolished, crops exposed to stock running on the commons, Swinney began litigation which outlived him and was finally settled in the Supreme Court of Indiana where he won his case and received damages. The invader--the railroad--was referred to in the complaint as "her" or "she."

The complaint, signed September 7, 1870, was made against a company later absorbed by the Lake Erie and Western, that became the southern portion of the Grand Rapids and Indiana. Swinney had sold portions of his land to this Railroad, December 28, 1869, for \$3600, and to the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railroad for \$8,125. The new company, however, made no effort to acquire title to his property, the complaint stated. As a result, they paid on damages appraised "by reason of the construction of



Miss Caroline Swinney, youngest child of
Thomas and Lucy Swinney

the Rail Road" for the use of his gravel years later.

Whenever it passed his property, a defiant locomotive saluted the Swinney site with shrill whistles during the legal controversy.

When Colonel Thomas W. Swinney died in January, 1875 of a malignancy, he received the sincere expressions of his fellow citizens that they felt were due to "an enterprising and wealthy citizen of Fort Wayne whose residence dates back to the early days of our history when Fort Wayne was but an Indian village."

The Common Council on July 28, 1875, acknowledged his "munificent bequest" as--

". . . his Homestead or that part of Section 10, Township 30 North; Range 12 East which lies in the bend of the St. Mary's River and north of the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago railway to be known as Swinney Park."

Their response was a promise of "ever holding the memory of the giver in profound respect."

MISS RHESA TAKES OVER

Miss Rhesa, eldest of the three daughters still living in the Homestead, now found herself in charge of an estate of considerable importance. Included among her responsibilities were farms, city lots adjacent to Swinney property, projected completion of the Swinney Block facing the Court House square and its rental, sale or lease of grounds so specified, and sale of gravel on said land. As Executrix of her father's will, "as the trusts committed to her charge are important and she is without experience in such



Two silhouettes in a stylized garden behind an iron fence with the little Jefferson Streetcar approaching in the distance.

matters and will feel disposed to consult the opinions of those on whose judgment she can rely, I request my friends Ochmig Bird, Stephen R. Bond and James A. Fay to aid her . . ."

An agreement on the two parcels "devised" to the City of Fort Wayne for a Public Park was entered into twenty years later, May 23, 1893, by the three Swinney heirs--Rhesa, Frances and Caroline. William Paul, their adopted brother had died in 1885.

The terms of this agreement were to be carried out for thirty years until June 1, 1923, or sooner "if the life tenancy of the first parties should cease by their decease."

The Eighteen Nineties saw the Swinney "girls" in their heydey. Miss Rhesa was recognized for her excellent handling of her father's estate. They were now comfortably middle-aged. They were also comfortably wealthy. Those who remember them today recall their parties and the west-end streets filled with the carriages of their guests.

The Swinney's New Year's teas were lavish.

"They called them teas, but they were really dinners," some of the neighbors recalled.

Miss Rhesa presided at the large table, laid with its precious fine china, sterling silver and covered with fine damask. Service for more than a hundred guests was always stowed away in tall kitchen cupboards. Small tables for four were set up in the north parlor.

ALICE'S SWEET LITTLE BLUE GOWN

Presiding at the door was Miss Alice Crane, now Mrs. Frank D. Bond. Alice held her post until the day she appeared in a blue dress that matched the



Leisure on the grounds of the Swinney Homestead --
the Misses Rhesa, Frances, Carrie and a friend.

upholstery of a chair so perfectly, that she was removed from her station and assigned to sit in the aforesaid chair as a part of the decor.

The separation of smokers from non-smokers took place after the lavish tea, when the gentlemen were directed to the south parlor, with smoke billowing out of its doors when they were opened. Cigars were provided, and this courtesy was enjoyed by the gentlemen without interference. No complaints were ever heard.

Miss Carrie always toasted the almonds and served them in the bright tin pan in which she had toasted them. It was also Miss Carrie's task to iron all the lustrous damask tablecloths. There was one thing that the hostesses and their help never bothered about during these teas--washing dishes. There was enough service for as many as 135 guests without the drudgery of dish-washing.

The only gold service the Swinneys had was a cream and sugar set that had cost \$350.

Miss Rhesa who was smaller than her sisters, is remembered for her mincing walk, a sort of dancing step with her small feet, as she made her way to the old Jefferson streetcar on her way downtown.

More significant is the recollection of her charities that nobody knew about but her. Her most absorbing hobby was entertaining. Once a year she chartered the streetcar to Robison Park and took a score of people--her friends whom she seldom saw till then--to enjoy a picnic lunch and all the pleasures that Robison Park offered in those days.

The simple wholesome enjoyment of a great picnic ground may have helped her in dictating her own will in 1893 and making certain that her father's dearest wish was fulfilled.

BLIGHTED ROMANCE

The Swinney Homestead had not always been without romance. The eldest daughter, Minerva, had married Thomas Teller and gone west to Sioux Falls, Iowa, to live. By the sixties the Swinney girls were in their twenties and thirties. Among the young men who came to call there was one J. McNutt Smith, who became engaged to Miss Rhesa. This turn of events caused a permanent rift in the family and affected the lives of all its members.

For somehow, Mr. Smith at the last moment, fell in love with Miss Margaret and they eloped. From this union were born a son Reader and a daughter Margaret. Their mother's name was never spoken in that house, nor did the Homestead ever extend its hospitality to her children.

Mrs. Margaret Smith and Mrs. Minerva Teller were bequeathed the sum of \$40,000 in their father's will. The unmarried sisters and the adopted brother shared equally in the remainder of the estate. The personal estate of the household items alone amounted to \$120,936.60.

Rhesa died September 1, 1911. The first reaction of the sisters was to say "The best is none too good for her." She had suffered deep humiliation as a result of her sister's conduct, even to the extent of losing her hair. She endured good-natured ribbing about the wig she wore, especially after the wind blew it off at the corner of Main and Harrison streets and a "gentleman" had come gallantly to the rescue and presented the wayward wig to her.

"Always the best as she deserved," one said. "Whatever you do is right," replied the other.

So they bought a \$1,000 casket for her. The newspapers as well as her close friends extolled her for her many philanthropies and her capable handling



Miss Margaret J. Smith, granddaughter of Thomas and Lucy Swinney and their last survivor.

of the Swinney estate.

Miss "Frank," the home body, rather large in build and slow, and Miss Caroline, a semi-invalid, were in complete charge for the first time in their lives.

On October 4, 1923, Miss Caroline died.

Two telegrams dated December 4, 1923 tell the rest of the family history.

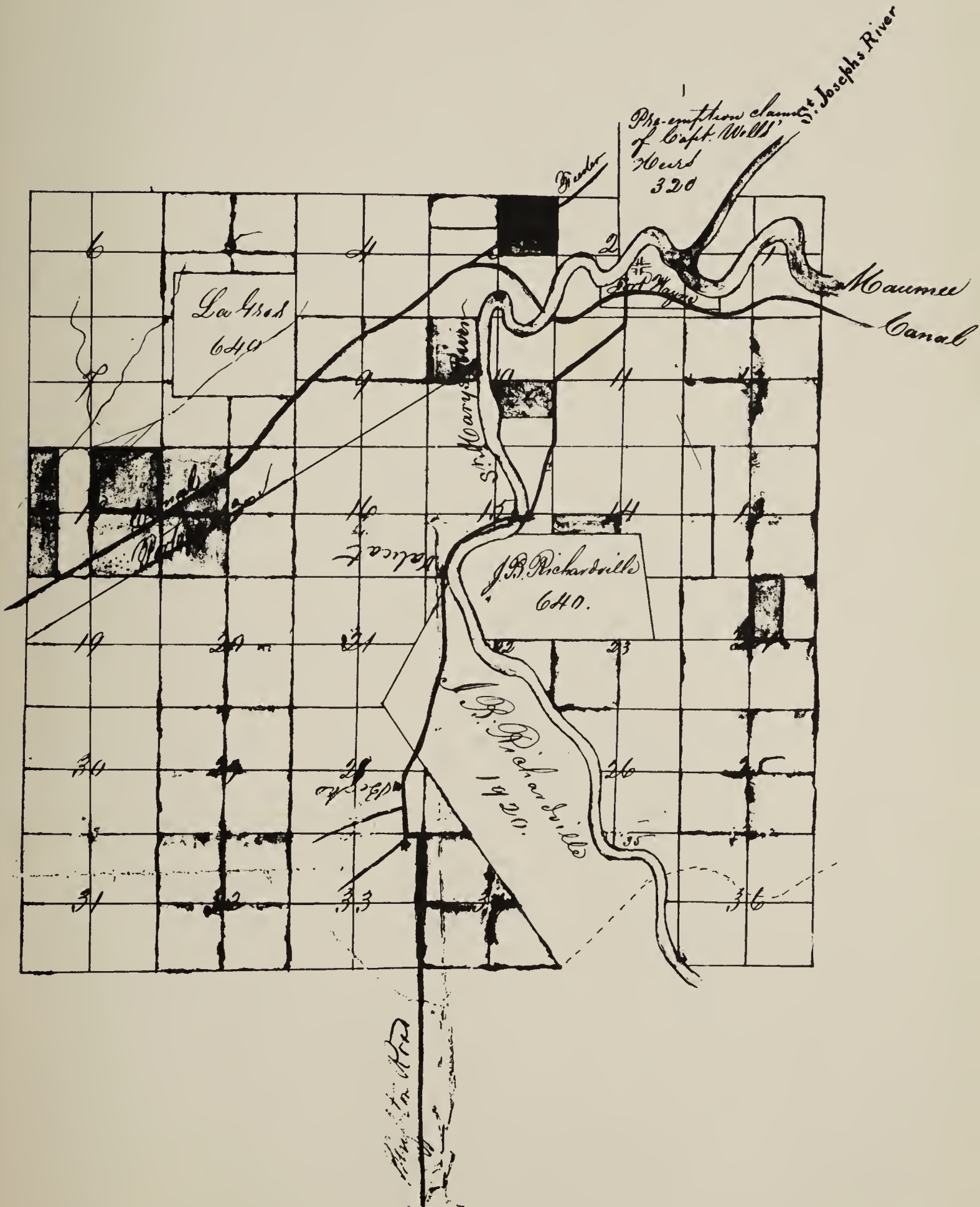
To a cousin, Mrs. L. F. Loree, West Orange, New Jersey--"Frank died at eight o'clock this evening."

To Cora Teller, Sioux Falls, South Dakota--"Aunt Frank died this evening. In bed one day."

Both were signed Margaret J. Smith.

"There are no survivors," were the closing words in the account of the death of Miss Margaret J. Smith, 82, on August 28, 1950.

Township 30. N. R. 12. East



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