



Oak Leaves

*Newsletter of the Warren County Historical & Genealogical Society
Founded 1931 to preserve the history of Warren County, New Jersey*

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Brian Duke

Time Flies

 by Brian Duke



News

Donations Needed

WCHGS needs your help obtaining a new air conditioner to preserve our Museum's unique collection and provide a comfortable environment for our visitors.

Please send your donations to Warren County Historical Society, Inc. PO Box 313, Belvidere, NJ 07823.

Museum Hours

The Museum will be open on Sundays from 2 – 4 p.m. for the spring season.

FOR as long as I can remember, the Shippen Manor has displayed a peculiar mirror on the red walls of its parlor. This mirror, encased in a masterfully carved wooden relief, invites all to stop before it and contemplate a grave message: Time flies.

Time Flies is the title of this relic. Befitting the luxuriant Victorian Parlor, the relief is intricately carved in a dark chestnut. The main feature, to which the work owes its name, is perched atop the mirror: a lifelike skull, capped by a winged hourglass, patiently awaits the Manor's guests. The viewer who seeks their reflection beholds their own face with Death, sets vanity against mortality, despairs fleeting time. Morbid as this sounds, one might think the Shippens were eclectics and acquired the piece from pirates. But the origin of this unique work of art is here, in Warren County.

Time Flies as well as the other two reliefs displayed in the parlor were carved by David Bibinger. Born November 23rd, 1855, Bibinger grew up in the provincial town of Weisenheim, Germany. He served in the German Army as a drummer boy and apprenticed as a woodcarver. It was by chance Bibinger brought his craft to the then-organ capital of the world, Washington, New Jersey.

In search of a new life, Bibinger arrived to the New York Harbor in 1876. He lived in the city for three years, always on the lookout for work, until he read an ad in the paper: Pennsylvania factory in need of master German carvers. 23-year-old Bibinger was aboard the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western train, Pennsylvania-bound, when it stopped at the Washington Station. There a young woman caught his eye and changed everything.

Sarah Frances Davis was born on April 24th, 1861, in Washington, New Jersey. Her great-grandfather, Conrad Davis Sr., was an iron master at the Oxford Furnace in its Shippen era. Her father, Job Davis, was a cabinetmaker involved in Washington's organ industry.



David and Sarah Bibinger with three-year-old Carrie and baby Althea. Portrait by S.S. Teel, Washington, N.J., 1890.

Bibinger abandoned all plans for the woman outside his window. He stepped off the railroad car and asked Davis for change. And in that moment their story began. The couple lived together on Vannatta Street in Washington, where Bibinger fared well. Job Davis became his mentor, and he found plenty of work carving for the organ giants Beatty, Cornish, and Edward Plotts. On January 1st, 1887, Bibinger and Davis married. They had six children: five girls and one boy.

To support their growing family, Bibinger produced freelance carvings out of his backyard woodshop. *Time Flies* was commissioned by Dr. Charles B. Smith, five-time mayor of Washington and friend of Bibinger. The mirror welcomed patients in his home office at 120 Belvidere Ave. The date of the carving is not known. As to what inspired the carving – Dr. Smith was a Freemason, a member of the Mansfield Lodge No. 36. The torch of life, winged hourglass, and skull and crossbones are all Masonic symbols. A lone initiate may sit among the hourglass and skull inside the Chamber of Reflection.

Bibinger's skill in portraiture is showcased in the other parlor carvings. In a relief of his beloved wife Sarah, her watchful face gazes from the plaque, and above the wreathed plaque sits an eagle spreading its wings. In a similar design, Bibinger carved a portrait for Christopher F. Staats, proprietor of the St. Cloud Hotel and a New Jersey state senator from 1894-96. Both *Time Flies* and the relief of C.F. Staats were donated to the Manor in 1998 by a Bibinger descendant. The relief of Sarah Bibinger was donated in 2013 by another Bibinger descendant.



Dr. Charles B. Smith with the Washington Common Council, January 1st, 1915.

David Bibinger died on September 9th, 1918, at the age of 62. He is buried in the Washington Cemetery beside his wife Sarah Bibinger, who died August 14th, 1952, at the age of 91. Dr. Smith died December 19th, 1933, at the age of 66. His Victorian-style home office was demolished and replaced by the Washington EMS building. C.F. Staats died February 20th, 1939, at the age of 94. He was one of the oldest living veterans of the Civil War. The St. Cloud Hotel, on 33 West Washington Ave, was destroyed by a fire ruled arson on September 27th, 2007.



References: "Home of a Master Woodcarver" by Gladys Harry Egler, *The Furnace*, October 1997. *History of Warren County, New Jersey* by George Wyckoff Cummins (1911). Warren County Cultural and Heritage Commission. Find a Grave. Family Search.