

Mark Twain:

Queen City stay marred by personal tragedy

Twain's time in Buffalo, from August 1869 to January 1871, "in many ways were the best of times and the worst of times."¹

Twain (1835-1910) came to the Queen City as part owner and managing editor of the Buffalo Express, and "used his newspaper column to experiment with a variety of approaches to contemporary political and social issues and storytelling styles. His time in Buffalo was critical."² The Buffalo Express operated out of a four-story brick building at 14 E. Swan St. Twain, known by his real name of Samuel L. Clemens, apparently wasted no time getting down to business: "I think within 5 minutes the new editor has assumed the easy look of one entirely at home, pencil in hand..." said John Harrison Mills, an artist on the editorial staff.³

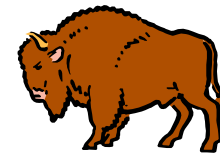


Twain married Olivia Langdon of Elmira on Feb. 2, 1870, and together they settled into a home (see photo inset) at 472 Delaware Ave. Olivia's father, who had helped Twain buy his partnership at the paper, bought the home and its furnishings, as well. It was a tony address, but saw its share of sorrow. Olivia's father died shortly after she and Twain were married; Olivia's friend fell ill and eventually died in the house, and the couple's son, Langdon, died before reaching the age of 2. Twain and Olivia left Buffalo in March 1871, "never to return."⁴ The house was burned by vandals in 1963, but the two-story carriage house was transformed into The Cloister restaurant in the early 1960s, operating until 1989.⁵

Twain's newspaper columns discussed local, national and international issues of the day, with titles such as "A Day at Niagara: Concerning the Falls," "The Tamed Hackman," "Journalism in Tennessee," and "Murder and Insanity." His oft-quoted "Salutatory" of Aug. 21, 1869 tells readers of his plans "to do my plain, unpretending duty, when I cannot get out of it. I shall always confine myself strictly to the truth, except when it is attended with inconvenience."

But it was his "Curious Tale in Search of a Moral" that hit a nerve with Buffalobians. Published in two parts in 1870 – it tells of a "dream" Twain had in which he sat on a front stoop "in no particular city, perhaps," startled as a skeleton from "the shameful old graveyard a block or two above you here, in this street" begs a seat next to him to rest. Twain referred to the North Street Cemetery at the corner of Delaware Avenue and North Street. The skeleton laments how "our descendants have forgotten us. My grandson lives in a stately house built with money made by these old hands of mine, and I sleep in a neglected grave with invading vermin that gnaw my shroud..."

Twain was active with the Young Men's Association - the predecessor to the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library - and in 1885 donated to its library the second half of his "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" manuscript. According to the BECPL Web site: Twain thought the first half had been lost by a printer. In 1991, the missing manuscript turned up in a steamer trunk in a Los Angeles home, and the complete manuscript became the centerpiece of the Mark Twain Room at the Central Library in Lafayette Square.⁶



Another Buffalo Connection

Edgar Allen Poe's gold watch was once part of the BECPL's collection. It had been presented by the widow of David Gray, a Buffalo poet, newspaper editor and friend of Twain, in 1888. The watch was stolen from the Central Library's autograph room in 1906; its whereabouts remain a mystery.⁷



**“Many a small thing
has been made large
by advertising.”**

*Mark Twain
“A Connecticut Yankee
in King Arthur’s Court”*

David Gray, left, editor of the Buffalo Courier, chats with Twain and George Townsend, war correspondent, in this circa 1870 photo by famed Civil War photographer Matthew Brady, in Brady’s Washington, D.C. studio.

Photos on the Twain pages courtesy of the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society.