

The Monongahela House, Pittsburgh, PA

by Duane Ready

The Monongahela House was, in its day, one of the finest hotels west of New York and the Allegheny Mountains. Located at the intersection of Smithfield and Water Streets (now Fort Pitt Boulevard), the original Monongahela House was built in 1840. It burned down in the great Pittsburgh fire of 1845, and a larger, grander structure was built in its place two years later. The greatest luminaries of the day stayed here- Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, P. T. Barnum, Buffalo Bill, as well as, many presidents including Andrew Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant, Grover Cleveland, Teddy Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln, who stayed here February 14, 1861 on his way to his first presidential inauguration.

The five-story structure was a prominent feature of Downtown Pittsburgh's Mon Wharf. The original hotel had 210 rooms, but, when rebuilt, it reopened with nearly 300 rooms. The main entrance on Smithfield Street led to a handsome rotunda sixty feet square, having an octagon shaped dome, which flooded the interior with light. It had white marbled floors, leather upholstered furniture, an elegant bar, 1500 person ballroom, massive black walnut stairways, and paneled fresco walls.

Abraham Lincoln came by train into Fort Wayne Station in Allegheny City at 8 PM on February 14, 1861, two hours behind schedule due to a freight train derailment in Rochester, PA (note for non-Pittsburghers that Allegheny City, was just across the Allegheny River from Downtown Pittsburgh and has subsequently become part of the city). He was greeted by a heavy downpour and a large waiting throng estimated at 10,000. The rain soaked crowd followed Lincoln to the Monongahela House at the end of Smithfield Street. At 8:30 AM the next morning he delivered a speech from the balcony of his room to an eager, also wet audience. His hotel room became a prestigious spot in the city for the next 70 years until the hotel was razed in 1935 to make way for a bus depot (which is also now gone).

- In the days of Lincoln's visit, the hotel was also a safe house for escaped slaves traveling the Underground Railroad. The hotel's owner James McDonald Crosson, sympathetic to the abolitionist movement, employed many free African-Americans who would take in fugitive escaped slaves.

- The bed that Lincoln slept in at the hotel has been kept at Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall (erected in 1910 to honor veterans of the Civil War, it now honors all military veterans) in the Oakland section of the city for many years, as well as, Heinz History Center in more recent times.

- There is a towering stained glass window in the Smithfield United Church of Christ on Smithfield Street in Downtown Pittsburgh (the oldest house of worship in Pittsburgh - serving since 1782) showing President-elect Lincoln on the Monongahela House balcony making the aforementioned speech (among eleven other such windows depicting biblical scenes and Pittsburgh History).

