A HISTORY OF
923 CHEROKEE ROAD
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY
FROM 1823-2025

By

N. David Williams

The house and property at 923 Cherokee Road, Louisville, Kentucky. Photo from Louisville Property Valuation Administration web site, November 2025.

A HISTORY OF
923 CHEROKEE ROAD
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY
FROM 1823-2025

ORIGINS

James D. Breckinridge (Prior to 1823)

Deeds on the property at 923 Cherokee Road can be verifiably traced to 1823, when James Douglas Breckinridge sold 216 acres on Beargrass Creek to John Floyd "of the state of Virginia" in absentia. It's not known for certain how long James had owned the property. James and John were half-brothers. Beargrass Creek lies just to the north of Bardstown Road.

In all its history, James and John are by far the most distinguished owners. Their families were noted early pioneers and large landowners. Both have extensive Wikipedia listings as well as entries in *The Encyclopedia of Louisville.*[1]

James, born most likely in 1781, was one of the city's first attorneys. He was admitted to the bar in 1806 when he was 25. From 1821-23 he served as Louisville's congressman. His first wife, Mary Eliza, died in 1830. In 1845 he married Lucy Fry Speed, daughter of John Speed, friend of Abraham Lincoln, who built Farmington. He died in 1849 and is buried in St. Louis Catholic Cemetery.

His father Alexander and uncle Robert were veterans of the American Revolution. Alexander's unit stayed with George Washington at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777-78. Alexander and Robert were captured by the British after the fall of Charleston, South Carolina in May 1780 and spent a year on prisoner-of-war ships. It's thought that Alexander later became an alcoholic.

Robert, who never married, was once described as "shy, compassionate, and quiet."[2] He attained many important posts during his lifetime. In 1787 the Virginia General Assembly named him one of the trustees of the struggling town of Louisville. In 1788 he became one of the original members of the Society of the Cincinnati. George Washington was its first president.

In the late 1780s and early 1790s Robert attended a couple of conventions to create the state of Kentucky. After it entered the Union in 1792, he served in its first House of Representatives. Through the years he speculated in land and assisted many settlers when they sought to buy property in Jefferson County, amassing a fortune. A great many homes and businesses in St. Matthews can trace their deeds back to him.

---

[1]John E. Kleber, Editor in Chief, *The Encyclopedia of Louisville*, Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001. James Breckinridge's entry is on p. 115. John Floyd's is on p. 300.
[2]*Ibid*., p. 115.

In his final years he became a recluse. He died in 1833 and is buried in the Floyd-Breckinridge Cemetery, a forgotten family cemetery off Breckinridge Lane and Prince William Street on land he once owned. It's in the duPont area.

John Floyd (1823-1826)

John Floyd "the Second"

There are three John Floyds in the early records. John the First—not the owner of the property--was one of the original surveyors of Jefferson County in 1774. He later claimed a large tract of land in the area now known as St. Matthews. In 1783 he was killed in a Native American ambush on the future Preston Highway while on his way to Bullitt County. He's buried in the same cemetery as James Breckinridge.

John the Second was born two weeks after his father was killed. The next year his mother Jenny married Alexander Breckinridge, father of James. At a time when Louisville's population was under 200, everyone probably knew everybody else. If a woman's husband died, news would have spread quickly. Eligible widowers or bachelors wouldn't be hard to find. James Breckinridge and John Floyd, future owners of the property, grew up together in a blended family.

As a young adult, John moved to Virginia, where he spent the rest of his life and rose steadily in political circles. In 1814, after serving briefly in the War of 1812, he was elected to Virginia's House of Delegates. In 1817, at age 34, he was elected to the US Congress and served until 1829. During that time he bought, then sold, the property at 923 Cherokee. From 1830-1834 he was the 25th governor of Virginia. In 1832 he became involved in the contentious presidential election of that year. He received eleven electoral votes, all from South Carolina, which considered him an ally against native son President Andrew Jackson, whom they despised.

John the Second was an early advocate for settling the new territory of Oregon. He was also something of a Southern maverick. He was an early opponent of the institution of slavery, calling the system inefficient. Late in life he converted to Roman Catholicism, another rarity in the South. He died in 1837 and is buried in the Lewis Family Cemetery in Sweet Springs, West Virginia. Floyd County, Virginia, is named for him.

His son, John the Third, served as the 31st governor of Virginia from 1849-1852. From 1857-1860, in the runup to the Civil War, he was US Secretary of War under President James Buchanan.

Gilbert C. Russell (1826-1827)

The next owner was Gilbert C. Russell, about whom next to nothing is known. He didn't hold on to the property for long. Finding himself in financial straits, he decided to sell the property. On September 24, 1827 James Southard took out a mortgage (or so he thought) and paid him $4,929.81 so he could farm on it. James died around 1841 and the farm passed to Richard Southard, probably his son, who sold it to Daniel R. Southard, probably another son, who sold it to James D. Southard, probably a third son.

Through all that time, apparently the Southards hadn't kept up with the alleged mortgage. In 1847 Russell sued. Southard argued that the $4,929.81 was not a mortgage but a conditional sale, which would have affected his ownership. He won at the circuit court level, but Russell took the case to the US Supreme Court, which sided with him in 1851. In order to reach a final settlement, the 216-acre farm had to put up for sale, but Russell decided not to sell it all in one piece. As the city was beginning to encroach on the Highlands, he must have sensed the future. On December 6, 1852, Henry Craycroft purchased a small piece. After further subdivisions over the years, it became the lot now known as 923 Cherokee Road.

Before 1852 there had been a house on the property. Its location is unknown. It must have been an elaborate structure. On March 1, 1847 it went up in flames. Fortunately, James D. Southard had it insured for $7,000: quite a hefty sum. Sometime over the next five years the house now occupying the lot was built, perhaps with some of the insurance money.

EARLY HISTORY OF THE PROPERTY

Henry J. Craycroft

Henry J. Craycroft first appears in the Jefferson County deed books in 1847.[3] A prosperous farmer from Bullitt County, he bought several lots in the center of the growing city as well as 175 acres on the "north side of Bardstown Turnpike Road," which was further down the road.[4] The lot at 923 Cherokee was just another acquisition.

A history of the Cherokee Triangle, the neighborhood where the house is located, notes that Craycroft bought thirty acres from Gilbert Russell in 1852 and built a house on it.[5] Perhaps, but the house could just as easily have been constructed by Southard before he lost his court case. Craycroft didn't purchase the property until the end of the year. A 1982 article in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* states, without verification, that the house was 130 years old, taking it back to 1852.[6] In 1985 another reporter wrote it was 130 years old in that year, meaning it was built in 1855.[7] The first reporter was probably relying on oral history. The second was just repeating what the first one said.

---

[3]Henry's middle initial was sometimes written as "I." Some records spell his last name Cracroft or Cracraft.
[4]Deed Book 67, p. 464, Feb. 8, 1847. It had once been owned by the Hite family, early pioneers.
[5]Samuel W. Thomas, *Cherokee Triangle: A History of the Heart of the Highlands*. Louisville: The Cherokee Triangle Association, 2003, p. 50., and Deed Book 88, p. 507.
[6]*Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 10, 1982, p. 8.
[7]*Louisville Courier-Journal*, July 6, 1985, p. 10.

Section of an 1865 showing the property. The house and outbuildings can be seen above the letter "G."

In early 1853 J.B. Speed, receiver for the property during its legal problems, placed a rental ad in *The Louisville Daily Courier*. "I will rent the FARM known as the 'SOUTHARD FARM,' about two miles from the city, on Bardstown turnpike, for the ensuing year."[8] It seems improbable he would try to rent land that didn't have a farmhouse on it. Few farmers would have commuted each morning to their property. It's a strong hint there was a house on the property by the beginning of 1853.

.

Finally, the architecture is in the Italianate style, popular in America from the 1850s to the 1880s. It has exceptionally high ceilings on the first floor, another clue. Later houses had lower ceilings.

Although a precise year of construction is impossible to determine, the house almost certainly dates between 1847, after the fire, to 1852, right before the sale and the rental notice. The year 1852 is as good a guess as any. It was built by James D. Southard and not Henry Craycroft. Craycroft didn't own the property until the end of 1852.

It's the oldest extant house in the Original Highlands.

+

From 1851 to 1852 Craycroft and a partner, Stephen Kulp, operated a saddlery shop, specializing in harnesses, saddles, bridles, and other items for use in a horse and buggy. Around the same time he served briefly as tax collector for the Eastern District of Jefferson County.

---

[8]*The Louisville Daily Courier*, Jan. 8, 1853, p. 2.

The saddlery was located on the west side of Second between Main and Market. In the same block were the offices of a notorious slave trader, Matthew Garrison.[9] Garrison's holding pen, essentially a jail, was just across the street. A state highway marker describing that history sits on the spot today.

Like many other antebellum Southern farmers, Craycroft owned slaves. In 1850 he had four. By 1860 he'd accumulated 15.[10] Undoubtedly slaves helped tend the property at future 923 Cherokee Road, though because of its small size there probably weren't that many. He most likely used it as a truck farm. In 1840 Louisville's population was 21,210. Twenty years later it tripled to 68,033. He would have found a lucrative business growing vegetables and flowers for city markets.

But Craycroft went one step further. He was also an occasional slave trader. From 1853 to 1855 he advertised several black men and women for sale out of his real estate office, Craycroft & Field, on Fifth Street near the county courthouse. He probably didn't have his own slave pen, preferring to utilize Garrison's on Second.

He doesn't seem to have been a ruthless kind of trader like Garrison. Slave trading was almost a side hustle for him. There's even a hint he may have felt some compassion. In 1855, at a time when slave traders routinely separated husbands, wives, and children from each other, he took an entire family on consignment. The ad stipulated that "all [are] to be sold together."[11] Undoubtedly that was the wish of their owners, but Craycroft didn't have to take them on.

Around 1856, he seems to have moved onto a farm in southwest Jefferson County, but he kept a presence in Louisville for many years. In 1866 he was on a committee that welcomed President Andrew Johnson to the city. By then he was approaching sixty and appears to have lost interest in the Cherokee Road land. He kept growing vegetables and flowers, but occasionally he leased the property to private groups, including, ironically, former slaves.

From 1866 to 1871 he called it Hanauer Garden. For two years at the end of the decade private entrepreneurs operated a beer garden for the swelling German population. It was one of about twenty in the city. In 1871 Alfred Froman, a local black civil rights leader, leased the garden for a black-led Emancipation Day celebration. Speaking from the front porch, he noted how proud he was to speak at a house that had once been inhabited by a slave trader.[12]

Crowds renting the land for picnics could get rowdy. The Fenian Brotherhood, an Irish social group, held a picnic there on July 4, 1867. Before it was over they'd trampled flower pots, destroyed shrubbery and the vegetable crop, and broken glass in some of the conservatories. The group denied that anything had been destroyed, but it didn't come back. At another July 4

---

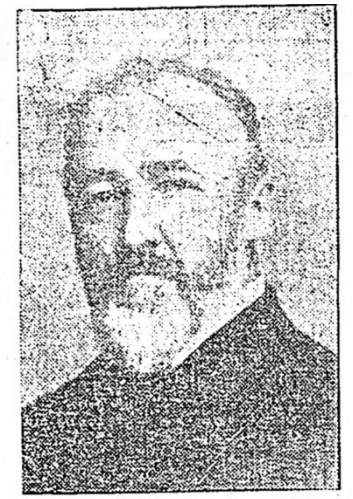
[9]A Marriott hotel occupies the site today.
[10]US Census Slave Schedules for 1850 and 1860. In 1853 he placed on ad in the newspaper for a runaway slave named Sam. *The Louisville Daily Courier*, Oct. 14, 1853, p. 2.
[11]*The Louisville Daily Courier*, March 22, 1855, p. 5.
[12]*Louisville Courier-Journal*, Apr. 25, 1871, p. 4.

Fenian Brotherhood picnic the next year at Cedar Hill Park in present day Old Louisville, one man was killed and three other people injured.
In 1877 Craycroft finally sold his property to a prosperous German immigrant, Jacob T. Burghard. The next year he sold the rest of his land across the alley on the north side of Cherokee Road. The entire area came to be known as H.I. Craycroft's Subdivision, a name by which it may still legally be known.[13]

Henry Craycroft died of pneumonia at the age of 78 (or perhaps 81) on December 16, 1888 and is buried in Cave Hill Cemetery.

German Baptists' Orphans Home

Jacob T. Burghard emigrated from Wittenburg, Germany to Louisville around 1856 when he was just sixteen. In a city filled with German Catholics, he stood out as a fervent Baptist.



JACOB T. BURGHARD.

Burghard started out as a peddler before opening a hat store. By 1866 he was operating a millinery shop. He later went into dry goods before settling on a carpet store on the southwest corner of Brook and Market.[14] It specialized in carpets, lace curtains, linoleum, rugs, and oil cloths. Before his death at the age of 61 in 1901, the frugal merchant had accumulated a small fortune, but he was very generous. He donated $20,000 to the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary so it could begin constructing buildings. He was especially generous to fellow Germans. It's said that no hungry German was ever turned away from his door.

In August 1871, Burghard founded the German Baptists' Orphans and Little Wanderers Home in a house at 232-234 Clay Street between Jefferson and Green (now Liberty). It was one of about seven orphanages in the city. Six years later he purchased the property on Cherokee Road and moved the children into the old Craycroft mansion. In 1880 he sold the property to what by then was called the German Baptists' Orphans Home.

Over the years the home expanded at least twice. By 1892 there was enough room to accommodate sixty children. In 1909 it was estimated the home had served 264 children through the years. Many went on to become notable citizens.

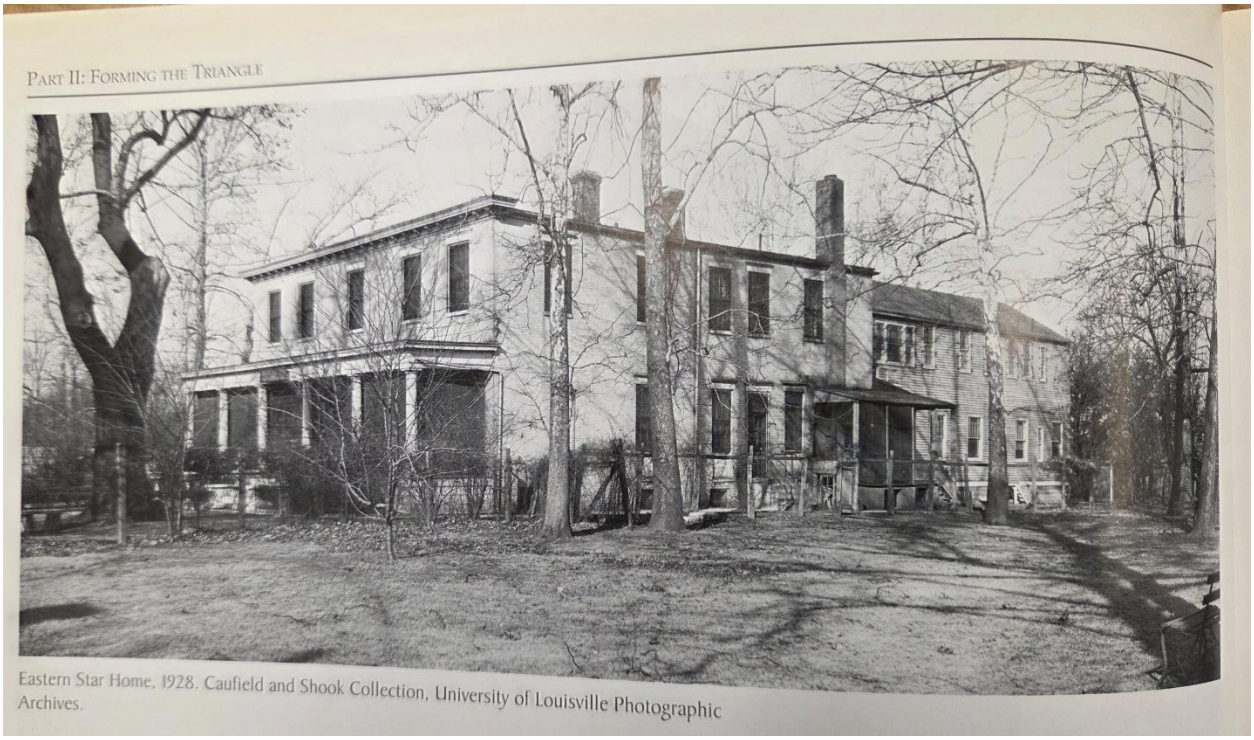
The orphanage wasn't a school and it wasn't strictly Protestant. Boys and girls of all faiths attended nearby public schools.

Burghard died of heart disease after an extended illness on August 31, 1901 and is buried in Cave Hill Cemetery with his wife and only daughter.

---

[13]The original plat is recorded in Deed Book 214, p. 641.
[14]The building may still be there.

Financially the orphanage experienced ups and downs through the years but managed to hold on until 1916. By then the German Baptist denomination, never very large, had diminished considerably in Louisville. Even though it stood to lose an endowment of $10,000, the owners



1889 photo showing the original house and an extension built onto the back. Samuel W. Thomas, *Cherokee Triangle: A History of the Heart of the Highlands.* Louisville: The Cherokee Triangle Association, 2003, p. 50.

vacated the property on July 10, 1916 and moved the orphanage to St. Joseph, Michigan, in the southwestern part of the state on Lake Michigan. A week later they sold the house and property to the next owner for $7,000. The home in St. Joseph lasted until 1956.

Stokes Sanatorium (later, Stokes Hospital)

The next owner was Dr. Edgar William Stokes, Sr. Dr. Stokes, a native of Alabama, was a graduate of the University of Louisville School of Medicine.

In the early part of the twentieth century Dr. Stokes operated a sanatorium in east downtown. In 1916 he and his family transferred it to the house on Cherokee Road and moved in. Initially it catered to patients suffering from mental or nervous diseases or alcoholism but later took in the infirm and elderly. Mixing mentally disturbed individuals with seniors was not an uncommon practice at the time. By 1930 it had thirty beds. An average of twenty people stayed there at any one time. It was one of 22 hospitals in Louisville, and one of about eight privately-operated ones, certified by the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

When Prohibition arrived in 1919, Dr. Stokes was ready to treat alcoholics who suddenly found the flow of liquor cut off. "The alcoholic who fails to heed the warning of the approaching crisis

on July 1, and rid himself of the alcoholic habit, will be caught in the drag net of the law when the country goes 'bone dry,'" he predicted presciently in 1919.[15]

After Prohibition was instituted, he obtained a special permit, allowed by law, to dispense whiskey to patients as a kind of sedative. He lost his license in 1922 over allegations he was dispensing too much liquor to some, but it was restored the next month. In 1927 a thief stole a barrel of whiskey from the facility.

From 1923 to 1942 at least four residents hung themselves. There have since been reports of a ghost or ghosts haunting the house.

In the early years the property still had a garden. Classified ads in the *Courier-Journal* in the late Teens offered a room to a sober, middle-aged man in exchange for his services milking two cows and tending a small garden.[16] The vegetables were probably used at the sanatorium and not sold at market. It appears Dr. Stokes had a hard time finding a suitable worker. Between 1918 and 1920 he placed ads for the position eighteen times.

Dr. Stokes may have been professionally successful, but he didn't fare so well in his personal life. Marriage doesn't seem to have been his strong suit. In 1896, when he was just 22, he married Belle Hartwell. Two years later they had a son, Edgar, Jr. But the marriage quickly soured. Belle filed for divorce, charging Edgar with failure to provide adequately for her or their child. The marriage was finally dissolved in 1902. Belle gained custody of their four-year-old son. Shortly thereafter he married a woman named Minnie Carol. Three years later they had a daughter, Adell. But around the time of her birth Dr. Stokes' eye seems to have started wandering.

After Minnie's death in 1920, out of the blue a woman named Sara Leon filed a lawsuit against Dr. Stokes, claiming he'd broken a promise to her. She said she'd been seeing him intimately for seventeen years. That timeline places the beginning of their relationship around the time his daughter was born. Dr. Stokes, she said, told her he was single, but she soon found out he was married and was devastated. She softened after he told her his wife was an invalid. Eventually she fell in love. A year after Minnie's death, she says he proposed to her and she accepted, but four months later he called it off. By then she said he'd started seeing another woman. Thanks to Dr. Stokes, she felt her marital prospects had been ruined.

Dr. Stokes denied everything. "My association with her was strictly professional at all times," he said. The suit was quickly dropped after Leon moved to California. Why did she move when she seemed so aggrieved? Did Dr. Stokes pay her off? It's easy to speculate why she left, but speculation makes for poor history. Her allegations do seem credible because they were so detailed, but because the case never made it to court, they can never be proven.[17] Despite her fears about marriageability, she eventually found a husband in San Francisco and got married in 1927. Her husband, Murray Isham, died in 1950. She died in 1964.

---

[15]*Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 22, 1919, p. 1.
[16]The first one appeared in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* on Mar. 10, 1918, p. 35.
[17]For a full rendering of the scandal, see *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 11, 1922, p. 1, and July 19, 1922, p. 8.

Dr. Stokes died of myocarditis at the age of fifty in 1924. He's buried with his daughter and second wife in Cave Hill Cemetery. Even after his death, his personal life continued to grab headlines. In his will he stipulated that Edgar, Jr., was to receive one-third of his $60,000 estate and his daughter Adell two-thirds. Apparently he favored Adell, who had lived with him from birth into adulthood, over Edgar, Jr. who had been raised by his ex-wife Belle from the age of four. Edgar, Jr., objected and sued. In 1928 the court invalidated the will and gave each sibling half.

After his father's death, Edgar, Jr., assumed control of the sanatorium. In the 1930s he renamed it Stokes Hospital and continued running it until 1951 when he apparently went into private practice. Adell died in 1991. Edgar, Jr. followed her at the advanced age of 98 in Reno, Nevada in 1996 and is buried in Mountain View Cemetery in Reno.

RECENT HISTORY

Eastern Star Home

The Encyclopedia of Louisville says the sanatorium closed in 1949, but the *Courier-Journal* continued printing employment ads through early 1951. On January 26, 1951 trustees of a special committee of the Eastern Star of Kentucky, a Masonic organization, purchased the house and property. After making a few renovations to the house that summer, it opened a nursing home facility in October. In 1975 the house and property were passed to the Eastern Star Home in Kentucky, which still owns it.

By 1976 the 124-year-old house was looking its age. It had been used as a nursing home for 25 years but wasn't up to code. Stricter fire and safety codes would have required a massive renovation effort. Eastern Star proposed demolishing it for a newer building, but Louisville's Landmarks Commission wouldn't allow it because by then it had been placed on the National Register of Historic Places.[18] Instead, Eastern Star built a one-story facility to the east which it dedicated in October 1977. The old house lay vacant for nearly a decade.

Highlands Community Ministries

In 1985, Highlands Community Ministries approached Eastern Star about opening a children's day care center in the house. On July 15 the Louisville and Jefferson County Board of Zoning Adjustment granted a permit to the organization. It was estimated that renovations would cost $300,000. The community came through amazingly quickly and the center opened in April 1986. Today the assessed value of the property is almost $2 million.

[18]A search for its registration on the National Register turned up no such listing. It couldn't be ascertained how it's described exactly.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF DEEDS AND HOMEOWNERS