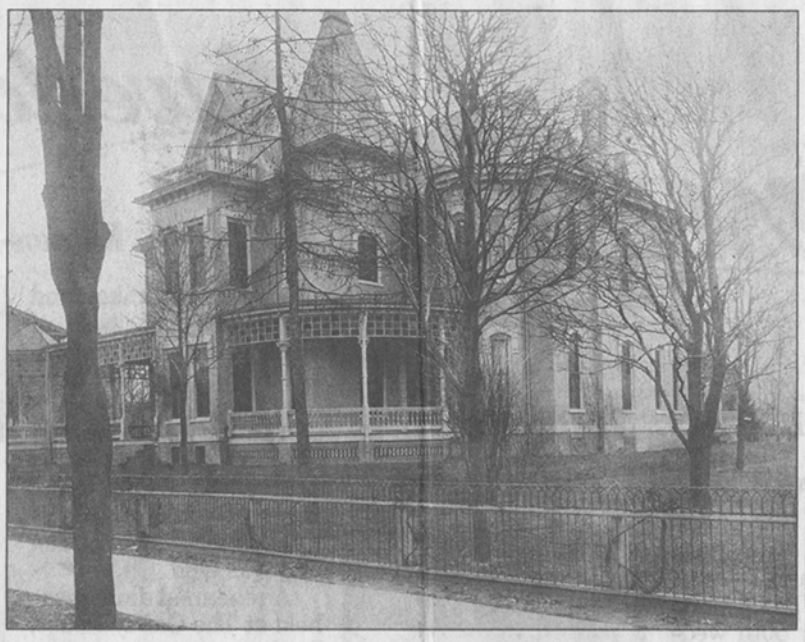

PHOTOS PROVIDED

Above left is Anne Weightman Walker Penfield. This photograph from the collection of the Library of Congress was taken about the time of her marriage to Frederick Courtland Penfield. Above middle is a photo from the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Socety showing 1005 W. Fourth St., the residence of Anne Weightman and Robert Walker. The above right photo, also from the historical society, shows the Weightman Block West Fourth Street office, apartment and theater complex, originally called the Herdic Block. William Weightman bought it after Peter Herdic's bankruptcy.

Anne Weightman: One of the wealthiest women in the world

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

I sometimes wonder what Encie Maynard, Peter Herdic's wife, thought when Anne Weightman Walker moved into the Walkers' new home at 1005 W. Fourth St., the large white, multi-gabled house at the southwest corner of Park Street, several blocks west of Maynard and Herdic's grand Italianate pink mansion.

After all, Anne Weightman was married to Robert J. C. Walker and the Walkers owned most of the bankrupt Peter Herdic's Williamsport properties. Walker was a business partner of Anne's father, William Weightman, of Philadelphia, and Peter Herdic's biggest creditor when he declared bankruptcy in 1878.

When Walker died in 1903, Anne inherited his $10 million and then when her father died a year later, she inherited his entire estate of $60 million. As if that were not enough, she married the wealthy Frederic Courtland Penfield in 1908 and in time was worth $120 million. She was "The Woman Midas"; the New York Times called her "one of the wealthiest women in the world."

Anne's father was a chemist who had the monopoly on quinine, used widely during the Civil War. He was said to be the richest man in Philadelphia.

According to Susan Stranahan in "Susquehanna River of Dreams" (1993), "Many of Herdic's friends believe it was Weightman who had masterminded Herdic's financial collapse." Weightman bought much of Herdic's real estate.

Stranahan continues, "The luxurious Herdic House hotel (now Park Place) he built on West Fourth Street in 1864 at a cost of $225,0000 went to Weightman for $1,200; the uncompleted Herdic Block-a sprawling brick office-apartment-theatre complex overlooking the hotel and its adjacent park-was purchased for $50 by Weightman, who renamed the block for himself."

Anne Maria Weightman, born on Dec. 15, 1842, was the oldest child of William Weightman and Louisa Stelwagon.

Anne had two brothers, William Jr. and John Farr. She was raised in lavish surroundings on Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia and in Cape May, New Jersey. On April 8, 1862, when she was 19, Anne married Robert Jarvis Cochran Walker, a 23-year-old Harvard-trained lawyer and emerging politician.

Their son, William Weightman Walker, was born in Philadelphia in 1865.

Williamsport years

The Walker family's residency in Williamsport lasted less than 20 years, but the Weightman-Walkers left their mark. R. J. C. Walker is first listed in the city directory in 1877-78, a lawyer practicing in the Opera House. A few years later, he is listed as the president of the Lumberman's National Bank, a position that Peter Herdic had held before him. Walker managed the former Herdic properties and was active politically. He was elected to the United States Congress from the district encompassing Williamsport in 1880. By 1898, the Walkers' address was 2014 Walnut St. in Philadelphia, and J. Henry and Avis Cochran were living in the West Fourth Street house.

In a 1926 story, "Noted Women Directed Williamsport Society," Col. Thomas Lloyd describes their home and the Park Hotel as "scene(s) of a lavish hospitality the fame of which spread far and wide. "Anne reportedly hired train cars to bring guests to Williamsport and then to Niagara Falls. Anne went with her husband to Washington when he was in Congress; Lloyd wrote, "she soon became a leader in the smart set."

Their son, William, graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, in chemistry and then earned a medical degree from Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia.

He was said to be a favorite of his grandfather William Weightman, and it is rumored that his grandfather gave him $4 million for his 21st birthday and told him to see the world.

He did travel the world, but then sadly, at the age of 26, he died of typhoid fever in Denver, Colorado, where he had gone to set up a medical practice.

Back to Philadelphia

After they moved back to Philadelphia, the Walkers maintained a suite at the Park Hotel, which Anne continued to own until the 1920s. The widowed Encie Herdic also had a suite there for several years, until she died in 1919.

As late as 1911, Anne was the biggest property owner in Williamsport. The Gazette and Bulletin reported some charitable activity in Williamsport, but she does not seem to have been a member of any boards or charitable institutions. Her name does live on in the magnificent Weightman Building on West Fourth Street and in the Anne Weightman Trolley that today carries tourists through the streets of Williamsport.

One thing that generally is not known about Anne Weightman is that she was a very talented and shrewd businesswoman.

R. J. C. Walker died in 1903, and Anne's brothers, both partners in their father's business, had died early deaths. So in 1904, Anne, the only surviving child, was admitted as a partner in her father's drug company. In 1904, this was quite extraordinary for a woman — and a 62-year-old woman at that. By all reports she was very successful in running the large, complex company.

When 91-year-old William Weightman died, another interesting story began.

Although each of his sons had left a widow and children, none of the grandchildren were in the will. The entire estate of $60 million (what would be about $1.4 billion now) was left to Anne. Her sister-in-law, the socially prominent Sabine Josephine d'Invilliers Weightman, spent years in court trying to break the will.

Anne moved to New York City to avoid the fallout and, it was rumored, because she feared that she would be poisoned.

Contested will

Sabine, who had shared her father-in-law's East Falls Philadelphia mansion, Ravenhill, was sure that there was a codicil to the will and searched relentlessly for it, making at least one trip to Williamsport.

She alleged that William had not been of sound mind and that he might have excluded her children because she had refused his marriage proposal. When the case finally went to court in 1906, Anne's lawyers produced a long note written in the dead man's "unmistakable neat handwriting."

When the aggrieved sister-in-law was shown the contents of the note, she "fainted dead away." The contents of that note were never made public, but the tabloids had a field day speculating.

Anne did leave money to her nieces and nephew in her own time and way. When she married Frederick Courtland Penfield, the American ambassador to Austria-Hungary, in February 1908 at New York City's St. Patrick's Cathedral, the 65-year-old millionaire bride gave away $1 million to her nephew and nieces and their children and to various other charities.

Anne Weightman Walker Penfield, widowed again, died of pneumonia on Feb. 25, 1932 in her grand Fifth Avenue apartment.

Her obituary in the New York Times praised her as a patron of the arts and commended her philanthropy and World War I relief work.

A convert to Catholicism, she was noted for her gifts of money and property, including the Ravenhill estate, to various Catholic charities and educational institutions. Pope Pius X conferred several honors on her.

Each facet of Anne's life could be the subject of a story in itself, but in Williamsport she will always be remembered as "one of the richest women in the world."

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