

# McGraft

## The Man, The Plan, & The Park

by Frances Harrington

The MAN: Rachel (Farwell) and her husband, James McGraft, were living in Lockport, Niagara, New York, in 1840 when their 1<sup>st</sup> child, Newcomb was born. Three years later, shortly after the birth of their 2<sup>nd</sup> child, James died, leaving Rachel and her two small children on their own. James wasn't a wealthy man and had very little to leave his family. Rachel tried as best she could to provide for her children but within a few years, she turned Newcomb over to a farmer where he was to work for his room and board. While still just a boy, and tired of the conditions he was living under, Newcomb ran away. He moved from place to place, working wherever he could, for a place to stay and food to eat. When he was 13, he met a man named David Cleveland. He started working for Mr. Cleveland on his farm doing chores for \$6 a month plus room and board and also, a chance to go to school – something that was very important to Newcomb. He knew that an education was his way for a better life. He read and studied whenever he could, which would become a lifelong habit for him. When Mr. Cleveland decided to move his family to Flint, Genesee County, Michigan, and start a farm there, Newcomb went with him.

During his time in Flint, Newcomb started working for one of the lumber companies moving logs down the Flint River. He was called a “log driver” or “river hogs”. The drivers rode the logs down the river to make sure the logs flowed freely to prevent log jams. Sometimes the logs were chained together to form rafts. When there was a log jam, the “jam crew” was sent in. These were usually experienced men who had to be quick, strong, agile, and have some understanding of physics to break up the jams. It could be dangerous so you had to be very aware of what was happening around you. One wrong move could land you in the river where you could get crushed by the on-coming logs. Newcomb was a quick learner and proved to be so good at this kind of work that after his first year, he was put in charge of a drive from Lapeer to Saginaw with 100 men working under him. Next, he worked in a sawmill in Flint, and then for Charles Merrill & Company in Saginaw. In 1865/66 he studied at Albion College. After college, he returned to Genesee County and worked for Brown, Nester, Little, & Hoyt for 4 years looking after their lumber interests. During this time, on July 3, 1868, he married Caroline “Carrie” Dayton. Newcomb was an intelligent young man and invested his money well. In 1870, at the age of 30, while living in Saginaw, the U.S. Census showed his occupation was a lumber dealer and had real estate valued at \$8,000 (approximately \$182,000 in 2022).

In 1871, he moved to Muskegon and started working for Charles Merrill and Thomas W. Palmer of Detroit, handling their lumber interests here. (Mr. Palmer would later become a U. S. Senator.) In 1874, he partnered with A. S. Montgomery to form “McGraft & Montgomery”. In 1875, they purchased the old saw mill built by George Ruddiman in 1849. They made improvements to the mill and with new equipment, it became one of the most successful lumber mills in Muskegon. They also owned 2 lumber yards in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Over the years, Newcomb purchased vast amounts of property not only in Michigan, but in other states too. From 1881 to 1883, Newcomb served as the President of the Muskegon Boom Company. His early days of working on the river made him perfect for the job. He was well respected by his fellow lumbermen, his own employees, and the men working for the Boom Company, after all, he had been “one of them”. Then, during the lumber strikes in 1882, two

striking workers (not from his employ) came onto his mill property trying to talk his men into joining the strike. When the men refused to leave, he had a physical altercation with them. After that incident, there was a complaint made against him by the “working man’s committee” (representatives for the striking workers). He tried to resign as President of the Boom Company, thinking that it might ease the tensions during the strike, but the other board members refused to accept his resignation. (It wasn’t until 1883 that his resignation was accepted.) In June of 1882, the partnership of McGraft & Montgomery was amicably dissolved. In the winter of 1882, Newcomb started another mill in Lakeside called “McGraft Lumber Company”. He served as President and Treasurer, Thomas W. Palmer was Vice President, George D. Smith was Secretary and W. S. Gray was Superintendent. This proved to be another very reputable and profitable business for all concerned.

As time went on, it was evident that the lumbering business wouldn’t last forever and many of the mill owners were starting to leave Muskegon for lumbering opportunities in other states – taking their Muskegon-made fortunes with them. Fortunately for Muskegon, some of the lumbermen cared about the city and didn’t want to see it become a ghost town. In 1883, the Board of Trade was formed with John Torrent, Newcomb McGraft, and Charles Hackley becoming known as the “big three” who pretty much ran the show. After all, they carried a great deal of the financial burden in “revamping” the city. Their goal was to bring new life into the city by attracting non-lumbering business to Muskegon. One way, it was thought, to make Muskegon more desirable was with better roads, better water systems, better schools, entertainment, parks, etc., so these men worked with, and became civic leaders, to get some of these things done, donating much of their own time and money. They even launched a Midwest advertising campaign to attract new industry. Some of the ways Newcomb McGraft showed his civic-mindedness was by being part of the Citizen’s Water Committee, he was on the Muskegon Harbor Improvement Committee, he was President of the Temperance Library Association and owner of the building, one of the directors of the Muskegon County Agricultural & Driving Park Association, and he was on the building committee for the Muskegon Club, all while continuing to run his business. It had long been his desire for Muskegon to have a beautiful park, so he had a large piece of land in Lakeside platted for that purpose. In 1888, he offered to sell 12 acres of that land to the city of Muskegon for \$8,000 but they were not interested. In 1890, he offered to donate not just the previous 12 acres but a total of 65 acres for a park but only with the condition that the city would improve the grounds and take care of them. The land began near the bridge on Lake St. crossing Ruddiman Creek and ran both sides of the stream. The land was rolling, dry, well shaded, and picturesque – perfect for a park. Again, the city showed no interest.

In 1892, the Board of Trade tried to raise \$200,000 to be used as a “factory bonus fund”. This would be a pool of donated money that would be used in the form of incentives to entice new manufacturing to locate in Muskegon. A fund-raising campaign started with men like Charles Hackley, Newcomb McGraft, A.V. Mann, C. T. Hills, Thomas Hume, John Torrent, and John Moon pledging tens of thousands of dollars each, with other citizens pledging what they could, but fell short of its \$200,000 goal.

In 1893, almost ten years after the original Board of Trade was formed, the situation in Muskegon had not changed as much as was hoped. The new Chamber of Commerce was formed with John Torrent as President, Newcomb McGraft and A. P. Connor as Vice Presidents, with Andrew Wierengo as Treasurer. They investigated the idea of selling city bonds to add to

the “bonus fund”. It turned out that it was against State laws to sell city bonds to create a bonus fund. If they couldn’t sell bonds to raise the money for the fund, they needed to come up with a different way. This is where Newcomb comes in with a plan that basically saved Muskegon.

The PLAN: In 1893, Newcomb McGraft proposed that the city purchase from him the park area he had offered to them before, but this time, not 12 acres or 65 acres, but 80 acres of the beautiful land he owned that we know as McGraft Park. The purchase price was to be \$100,000 with a few stipulations. One of his terms was that the city would have to spend at least \$5,000 within the next 10 years on improvements. These improvements would include: building a concrete bridge to replace the old wooden one that ran above Ruddiman Creek, connecting both sides of Lake Street, and dredging the creek and pond to make them passable by boaters coming from Muskegon Lake to the park; and the park must also be maintained by the city and forever be used as a “public” park to be enjoyed by all. If they failed in any of his terms, the property would revert back to him and/or his heirs. To get the money for the park, he proposed the city sells city bonds. (City bonds are like a promissory note sold by the city. These bonds are sold in certain denominations, carrying a set interest rate, and to mature by a specified date. The citizens could purchase/invest in these bonds and receive periodic income from the interest, and when the maturity date was reached, they would receive their initial purchase price/investment back.) The thought was, that because the park would be an “improvement to the city”, city bonds could be used for that purpose. The bond proposal was put before the citizens of Muskegon who voted overwhelmingly to approved the measure. So, you might be wondering, how does giving Newcomb McGraft \$100,000 for some land benefit the “bonus fund”?? Is he going to give some of it to the fund?? No. He didn’t give some of it to the fund...he gave all of it to the fund! What kind of man does that? The kind of man that Newcomb McGraft was. The entire \$100,000 he received was turned over to Charles H. Hackley as trustee, to be administered by the Chamber of Commerce for the “factory bonus fund”. Because of all the money that was poured into the bonus fund over the years by Mr. McGraft and other like-minded citizens, many new industries, like Amazon Knitting, Central Paper, and Shaw Walker, were enticed to bring their factories here, which helped this city to grow and to thrive.

During his lifetime in Muskegon, besides all that was mentioned above, Newcomb served as Mayor of Muskegon and was nominated by the Republican party for congress in the 9<sup>th</sup> district (which he did not win). After the Swedish Baptist Church burned down in 1891, he donated land to them so they could rebuild – he was not a member of that church. He spent much time and effort, at his own expense, to bring the “Muskegon, Grand Rapids, & Indiana Railroad” to Muskegon and served as its Vice President. He was also one of the key players in getting the Toledo, Saginaw, and Muskegon Railroad started. He served on the board of Corrections & Charities, on the board for Sargent Manufacturing Co., on the board of the Muskegon River Navigation Improvement Company, he was Chairman of the Board of Review, on the board of the Muskegon Milling Co., he was Vice President of the Muskegon Valley Furniture Co., and he also owned a beautiful farm in Lakeside where he raised prize winning cattle.

Newcomb’s daughter, Edith was a well-educated, very well-liked and popular young woman. She married Clarence Horace Wickham of Connecticut in 1900 and they never had children. In February 1901, there was a fire at McGraft Lumber Company. Repairs were made and they were back in operation the same month. The next month, McGraft Lumber Co. was dissolved

and became McGraft & Son. Newcomb's son, Ray, who had been managing the Opera House (located in the building Newcomb owned) for a number of years, became sole owner in 1902 and renamed it the "Grand Theater". In 1902, another larger fire destroyed the McGraft & Son plant. Although the business had a great reputation and was very successful, they never rebuilt. Ray McGraft died of T.B. on April 1, 1904. Newcomb never got over the death of his son and his own health started failing, having already been diagnosed with heart trouble. Newcomb Farwell McGraft also died in 1904 on November 6th.

The PARK: According to the terms of the 1893 sale of the McGraft property, the City of Muskegon had 10 years to fulfill its part of the bargain. The first year, about \$1,000 was spent clearing the ground. Nothing more was done. In 1907, since the terms of the sale still had not been met, and legally, it was no longer city property, a resolution was put before the city council to put the property back on the tax rolls. Alderman Paul Moon thought it would be a real loss for the city not to have this property as a park. He told the council that the land was practically useless for farming and not suited for building purposes so the taxes would be next to nothing. He asked if he could try to negotiate with the Michigan Trust Company, who was trustee for the McGraft estate, and Mrs. McGraft and her daughter, Edith (McGraft) Wickham, to broker a new deal. He was given the OK by the council to see what he could do. Alderman Moon succeeded in getting an agreement for a ten-year extension with the continuance of the original terms. Moon was praised for his efforts by the council and it was unanimously approved. Ten years to finish making what was now only \$4,000 in improvements...no problem, right? In 1908, the city was worried that the current cemeteries (Oakwood, Evergreen, and Lakeside) would soon be filled to capacity and it was trying to find new land for another one. One such parcel they were considering was McGraft Park, which still wasn't being improved. The Michigan Trust Company and the McGrafts agreed that they would cancel the old agreement and sell the land to the city for an amount not to exceed \$10,000 for the purposes of a cemetery. Fortunately for the citizens of Muskegon, this sale did not go through and another site was chosen. In 1913, with only 4 years to go on its contract with the McGraft estate, a group of interested parties started the ball rolling again. They started a campaign to get the people of Muskegon interested in having a beautiful, public park. If enough people got interested, they could put pressure on the City Council to appropriate the funds so the necessary improvements could be made. The group advertised "McGraft Park Days" – days set aside where residents of Muskegon (many who didn't even know or remember about the park) were invited to tour the property, have picnics, and enjoy the landscape. After the more than 5,000 who attended the Park Days got a look at the picturesque property and were told of its potential, they were hooked. Over the next few years, the improvements were made, the bridge was built, Mrs. Wickham was involved in having new landscape plans drawn up, and they purchased the five-acre track on Lakeshore Dr. that had been privately owned (which was a part of the original agreement). The 1917 deadline was met, and in March of 1918, the deed was officially transferred from the McGrafts to the City of Muskegon! Over the years, many more improvements have been made to the park, like the addition of a community building, the open-air band shell, a softball diamond, tennis courts, shuffle board courts, horseshoe pits, a disc golf course, and more. Mrs. Edith Wickham (Newcomb's daughter), funded some of these projects before her death in 1960 and after. In her Will, she left two-thirds of her estate in trust to the park that bears her father's name.

Ray (1879-1904), Newcomb (1840-1904), and Caroline (1846-1926), are entombed in the McGraft mausoleum in Evergreen Cemetery. Edith (1871-1960) is buried at Cedar Hill Cemetery in Manchester, Connecticut

Sources: Ancestry.com, findagrave.com, HPL Local History & Genealogy Dept., Lakeshore Museum Center, finance.zacks.com, History of Muskegon County MI (HR Page & Co), History of the Lumber & Forest Industry of the Northwest (George W. Hotchkiss), in2013dollars.com (inflation calculator), Headlight Flashes (Chicago Railroad Publishing Co.), log driving (en.wikipedia.org), Muskegon Chronicle (Genealogybank.com), Michigan's Lumbertowns (Jeremy W. Kilar), Park Picture (visitmuskegon.org.)

