"Cedar Grove"; Tompkins, William, House

1/5 of a mile southeast of the intersection of the Kanawha and James River Turnpike and U.S. Route 60

Cedar Grove

West Virginia

346

Kanawha

039

Access to the Public

Yes:

Restricted

Unrestricted

Present Use (Check One or More as Appropriate)

Agricultural

Commercial

Educational

Entertainment

Government

Industrial

Military

Museum

Private Residence

Public Residence

Religious

Scientific

Transportation

Other (Specify)

Comments

Owner's Name:

Mrs. Roger Tompkins, Sr. and Mr. Roger Tompkins, Jr.

Cedar Grove

West Virginia

Kanawha

416 Kanawha Boulevard, East

Charleston

West Virginia

Kanawha

54
Constructed in 1844 in an area which had experienced growth due to the
prosperity of an extensive salt industry, "Cedar Grove" brought to this
section of the interior a colonial style which had Georgian features
blended with elements of more recent design adaptation. It is a "double-
pile" house drawn out to a two-room-deep rectangle with central hall and
double window width.

"Cedar Grove" now contains sixteen rooms plus a full attic. Twin
interior chimneys project through the gable roof at either end, providing
fireplaces on each level. The brick structure (brick was burned on the
premises) rests on a foundation of large, cut-stone blocks, and its facade
is broken regularly by windows and doors on all sides. The front has a
central entranceway with sidelights and overlight matched on the second
floor by a doorway which leads onto the upper level of a porch. The two
windows on each level on either side of the door (and all other windows
in the main original section) are 6/6 double hung with stone lintels and
louvered shutters. On the ends, windows (two on each floor and one in the
attic) are placed between the chimneys with an additional window near the
rear of the first floor of the east elevation. The roof is of moderate
steepness and is set off by a heavily bracketed cornice.

Presently, "Cedar Grove" has a small entrance portico with a sec-
dom floor balcony. This 1950 alteration matches the outlines of the original
double portico which was replaced by a first-floor porch (in the late
nineteenth or early twentieth century) which ran the entire length of the
front. The interior is little changed and shows fine carpentry work,
especially in the stairwell where a graceful walnut handrail is supported
on each step by two flat spindles.

When constructed, "Cedar Grove" had upper and lower verandas across
the rear, but these were enclosed about 1892 to provide more interior
rooms. As with most larger houses of its day, this had a separate kitchen
building which has since (about 1900) been attached to the main building.
The only other change in the size of the structure was made when the
kitchen was joined, for a brick meat house was added as a projection to the
right side.
"Cedar Grove" stands as a tribute to the growth of the Kanawha Valley in western Virginia prior to the Civil War. This growth was primarily due to the salt industry, and it was through ingenuity, invention, and hard work at the extraction of the mineral that William Tompkins was able to afford this large and stately house.

William Tompkins moved to the Kanawha Valley around 1818, evidently lured there by stories of the rapidly developing salt industry. He joined with his brother-in-law, Aaron Stockton, in a salt business and soon gained some advantage and prestige by developing several improvements in drilling techniques. About 1841 Tompkins piped natural gas to burn under his salt brine kettles, proving its commercial value in extracting salt from the brackish waters. Seeing his example, other manufacturers began using natural gas in place of coal or wood. Since brine and gas were often located closely to each other, one well could be used to get both products, the pressure of gas forcing the brine out of the well. This is believed by many to have been the first harnessing of natural gas for industrial use (Thoenen, History of the Oil and Gas Industry in West Virginia, pp. 94-97).

Soon after William received notice for his ingenuity, he began construction of his new home, "Cedar Grove." He had chosen Rachel Grant as his second wife in 1831; by the 1840s his growing family required a new residence. "Cedar Grove" was completed in 1844 on land earlier claimed by William Morris, one of the Valley's first settlers. The structure's somewhat heavy lines were mellowed by its symmetrical design, steep chimneys and two-story square portico while interior fineness was unusual so far into the interior at the time. Indeed, "Cedar Grove" stood as one of the great houses of the Kanawha Valley and demonstrated the increasing sophistication of the interior as transportation and industry provided wealth and speeded the flow toward more comfortable living.

Being along an important route during the Civil War, it is interesting that "Cedar Grove" withstood the pressures of passing Confederate and Union forces. Much of this is explained by the fact that Mrs. Tompkins was an aunt of Ulysses S. Grant and possessed a letter from him to display to questioning troops. Since her deceased husband had been a true Southerner (and some say she was a Southern sympathizer herself), she had little to fear from the Confederates.

"Cedar Grove" stands today much as it did when constructed in 1844. It is still a bit pretentious in comparison with most surrounding structures, but it is certainly not out of place. The ability to erect such a fine house was attributable to William Tompkins' inventiveness in the salt industry, the early reason for the growth of the Kanawha Valley.


Mrs. Roger W. Tompkins to James E. Harding, December 3, 1974. West Virginia Antiquities Commission, Old Mountainlair, West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia.


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**Official Document**

**Title:**

"William H. Century Old Tompkins Family Home Linked with Colorful and Tragic History of Valley."

**Volume:**

Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette, July 22, 1951.

**Authors:**

Mrs. Roger W. Tompkins

**To:**

James E. Harding

**Date:**

December 3, 1974

**Location:**

Old Mountainlair, West Virginia University

**Certification:**

Leonard M. Davis

**Date:**

January 27, 1975

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