A prosperous tobacconist and investor, John Anderson lived in Sleepy Hollow, and with his wealth, donated land that helped shape our town. His story is one of the most fascinating I’ve come across, not only because of his wealth and generosity, but because his life has an air of infamy that is riveting.

Commemorative Essay by Arya Glenn, Tarrytown

Sleepy Hollow High School, May, 2019
**John Anderson: The Man with Many Ghosts**

As a child, I had a map of 19th century North Tarrytown. It consisted of a few roads and landmarks, but mainly large parcels of land labeled with the names of the owners. I used to read the unfamiliar names, wondering about the generations of people that lived before me. Every nook and cranny of our town hosts a different, and incredible story, and I’m glad to be able to tell one of the most colorful.

John Anderson was born in 1812, in New York City, and became one of the best known self-made men in New York. As a young man, he worked as a wool puller and a bricklayer, before opening a tobacco store in New York City in his twenties. His tobacco grew in popularity when he pioneered the use of tinfoil wrapping for tobacco to keep it dry, and he began expanding, even sending shipments to Union troops during the Civil War. When his business was developing, he shared his shop with a partner, who secretly renewed their lease under his name alone. Anderson discovered this, and wanted his former partner to pay. His lawyers saw no way of taking legal action, but, remaining determined, he read the laws himself and developed a case, and won, making his ideas on partnership widely established law.

Anderson was also a skillful investor, and one of the original stockholders in the Broadway and 7th Avenue railroad line, an investment that returned great profit for him. He was generous with his money, donating to many causes he believed in. He donated $50,000 to a natural science professor for a school, showing his passion for the sciences. Anderson also believed strongly in the cause for Italian unification, and was a close friend and financial supporter of Giuseppe Garibaldi, a leader of the movement.
Anderson owned an estate in Sleepy Hollow, in what is now Webber Park. In his time there he donated to many projects, showing his love for the village. Most notably, he funded the statue of John Paulding that was added to the monument commemorating John Andre’s capture. This statue marks the border between Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow, and one of the most famous events in our town’s history.

However, Anderson’s success didn’t protect him from scandal. His involvement in the Cigar Girl Murder of 1841 is what he is most known for. Anderson hired Mary Rogers to work in his shop, and being very attractive, she created a lot of buzz for Anderson’s business. In 1838 she mysteriously disappeared, and, several days later, she returned with no explanation. Concern over her wellbeing had spread during her disappearance, and after her return, New Yorkers flocked to the shop to see her — buying tobacco from Anderson while they were at it. Later, many suspected that Anderson staged the disappearance to generate more business. Several years later, Mary Rogers disappeared again, and this time reappeared floating in the Hudson, the victim of a violent murder. Anderson was one of the prime suspects in her case, which remains unsolved. Theories about Anderson’s involvement are sparked by suspicions he was behind her earlier disappearance, that Rogers lived with him, and that a witness claimed her death was caused by a botched abortion. The murder became the talk of New York City, inspiring a frequenter of Anderson’s tobacco shop, Edgar Allen Poe, to write a story based on the case, The Mystery of Marie Rogêt, which some suspected Anderson encouraged him to write, considering that Poe cleared Marie Roget’s employer of suspicion in his story. Though the case was eventually dismissed, and Anderson retained his wealth and slightly damaged prestige, Roger’s murder followed him the rest of his life. As he aged, he slipped into insanity, paranoid that his relatives were after him, and that he was visited by
ghosts, especially those of his late son Willie, and Mary Rogers.

Anderson led a life of prosperity, tinged with mystery. Though many might see his infamy as detrimental to his impact on our town, the mystique of a murder case brings intrigue to our town’s history. Anderson was eclectic, and when he believed in something, he didn’t hesitate to support it. He was able to build a tobacco empire from nothing, make hundreds of thousands of dollars on investments, and still have money at the end of his life to donate and give to his relatives. He shaped the map of our town, his life fills it with spirit, and shows that every story behind our map is worth telling.

Sources

Other sources found on file at the Historical Society