

A salute to McKinley



CantonRep.com photo / Julie Vennitti

A crowd gathers to dedicate Saxton-McKinley House as the William McKinley Historical Home during a ceremony Thursday afternoon.

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Posted Sep 03, 2009 @ 06:43 PM

CANTON -

Those who toured the Saxton-McKinley House after it was rededicated as the William McKinley Historic Home walked where a president walked.

The house that once was owned by William McKinley's father-in-law, James Saxton, and which was lived in for parts of 28 years by McKinley and his wife, Ida, was designated a presidential historical site during a ceremony Thursday.

A plaque on the front of the Victorian structure marking the house as the William McKinley Historic Home was unveiled by Gov. Ted Strickland and Mary Regula, founder and president of the National First Ladies' Library, which operates the home as a museum.

On hand were a host of government dignitaries, First Ladies' Library officials, McKinley and Saxton family members, community leaders, and a crowd of people interested in the historical significance of the home.

"No other private home of William McKinley exists," the governor said, calling McKinley perhaps the greatest of the eight presidents from Ohio. "So it is fitting that we

gather here to honor the memory.”

FAMILY RECOLLECTIONS

Some onlookers had personal memories of the home.

Among them was William McKinley Duncan-O’Neal - McKinley was his great-great-uncle — and his wife, Jan, who was wearing what she noted was William McKinley’s wedding ring. The two came from a suburb of Kansas City for the ceremony.

Seated on the historical home’s front porch was Elizabeth “Betty” Martin of Sandyville. Ida McKinley was her great-aunt, she said.

“I never lived here, but I visited here,” she said. “My favorite spot was sitting just inside this window,” she remembered, pointing toward a pane only a few feet from where she sat. “I’d look out and see everything going by.”

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Regula noted that the fact that Saxton-McKinley House was passed down through four generations of the Saxton family by women — “from daughter to daughter, not son to son” — serves as “testimony to the great role so many first ladies played in helping their husbands’ rise to the presidency.”

She said that because Ida and William McKinley lived here for portions of almost three decades, including the years of McKinley’s presidential administration, the historical structure is on the same level as such other presidential homes as Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Hyde Park.

U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown pointed out that McKinley, as a congressman, wrote an historic tariff bill in an office on the McKinley Historic Home’s third floor.

“I’m honored to join in today’s dedication,” Brown said. “I hope it continues to teach all Ohioans the great history of our state and rich accomplishments of its citizens.”

He praised Regula for her “persistence and leadership” in obtaining for the home the designation as an historical site.

“If you get something designated as an historic site, it raises the profile of the community,” said John Kiste, executive director of Canton-Stark County Convention & Visitors’ Bureau. “It shows that there are people who are working to preserve these sorts of things and to maintain them.”

Equally important, perhaps, the dedication of the William McKinley Historic Home served to show the tightness of the ties the Canton community keeps to its past.

The McKinley High School Band played prior to the ceremony; and Regula reminded its members that their school was named after President McKinley and his sister, Anna.

During the dedication, Mayor William J. Healy II looked at McKinley and Saxton family members and said he felt part of their families.

“Those of us who grew up here, we’ve always felt a part of the family,” he said. “We’ve always claimed Ida, and have considered President McKinley one of our own.”

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There might not have been a Saxton-McKinley House to turn into the William McKinley Historic Home if the late Marsh Belden Sr. hadn’t once remembered sliding down a banister.

“This was not a house that anybody cared about,” National First Ladies Library founder Mary Regula often notes.

Indeed, the house didn’t garner as much interest in 1978 when its false business fronts were boarded up and the building was scheduled to be razed, Regula recalled during Thursday’s dedication ceremony.

Regula remembered how Belden, who as a descendent of the Saxtons lived in the home as a child, walked past his old homestead on the day in 1978 that it was to be torn down. The wrecking ball was poised beside it.

“He told me, ‘I remembered when I was a child I walked up the stairs and I decided I was going to ride down the banister all the way to the bottom. When I got to the end, there was my grandmother, waiting for me.’ He was severely reprimanded,” said Regula.

Belden’s memories made him march over to the mayor’s office and offer to buy the building. “He spent more than a million and a half dollars renovating it.”

And this is why the home exists as an artifact of history to this day.