

A Montclair Hero: William Brown Dickson

SUBMITTED BY MIKE FARRELLY,
TOWN HISTORIAN

A RECENT VISITOR to the Montclair History Center's Library and Archives prompted this month's glimpse at Montclair history.

William Dickson's great grandson, Kevin Carswell, stopped by to see if we had any information that he had not already come across in his own extensive research. In this month's article, Montclair's Town Historian Mike Farrelly shares the history of William B. Dickson, a man Farrelly calls "one of Montclair's heroes."

William B. Dickson, born in 1865, was a Carnegie Steel man. He started at Carnegie's Homestead Steel Works in Pennsylvania as a crane operator when he was 15 years old and rose through the ranks, becoming an assistant to the president and a director of the company. Andrew Carnegie surrounded himself with capable men, and Dickson was one of his protégées. Dickson also associated himself with Charles Schwab during Schwab's meteoric rise through the Carnegie organization. When J.P. Morgan bought Carnegie out in 1901, he selected Schwab to be the first president of US Steel. Dickson became a vice president. Schwab left a few years later to form Bethlehem Steel. Dickson disagreed with Morgan's labor practices and went to Midvale Steel, where he embraced labor reform: such as the end of the seven day work week, eight hour work days and making workers an equal partner by distributing stock to employees.



The Dickson sisters in a horse drawn sleigh 1901



The William B. Dickson Family with their automobile 1911

When Carnegie asked Dickson to write a history of the company, Carnegie hoped that Dickson would exonerate him for the role he played during the violent Homestead Strike. Carnegie publicly supported labor unions, but privately told his partner, Henry Clay Frick (the great patron of the arts, whose collection formed the basis of the Frick Museum in Manhattan), to do everything he could to break the union's hold over the plant. Management and replacement laborers put up a fence and barricaded themselves inside the plant. They hired Pinkerton detectives to make sure that members of the Amalgamated Association of

Iron and Steel Workers were locked out. Thousands of strikers surrounded the plant and forced management to stay in. Frick never gave an order to attack the strikers, but 300 armed Pinkerton men arrived by barge with every intention of smashing through the union lines. They were quickly surrounded by thousands of strikers, some of whom were also armed. A fire fight broke out. At the end of the day nine strikers and seven Pinkertons lay dead. Governor William Stone sent in the state militia to keep order.

Because of his hardened stance and stubbornness, early public sentiment was against Frick. However, when a madman, Alexander Berkman, made an attempt on Frick's life, the tide turned. The union started to fall apart. After a couple of months the union became virtually non-existent. The strike ended as a complete failure. The Carnegie organization punitively lengthened the work day and lowered salaries. It is safe to say that this episode stayed with William and influenced his later career which was laced with concern for hard working employees.

William Dickson refused to write a history of Carnegie Steel that glossed over this ugly period of American history. He did write a history of the Carnegie Veteran's Association, a group of former Carnegie managers that met at least once a year. He barely mentioned the Homestead riots and didn't mention Henry Frick at all.

Dickson and his wife, Mary, whose maiden name happened to

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be Dickson (they were not related), moved to Montclair in 1903. They bought a house on Llewellyn Road and put on massive extensions. They added a ballroom which was big enough to hold public concerts given by a full orchestra. He supported the Llewellyn Ensemble, which eventually became the Montclair Orchestra (later still – the NJ Symphony Orchestra). He and Mary donated quite a bit of land to the town in 1906, when Montclair became interested in green spaces. They moved to an equally grand house on South Fullerton. Neither house stands today.

Dickson was one of the founders of the Montclair Art Museum. In keeping with his passion for reform, he was a member of the NJ Board of Prison Inspectors. He was a member of the Board of Education.

His daughter, Emma, caught a bit of his spirit for reform. When others were simply collecting bandages and supplies to send to the troops during World War I, she went to France to serve on the front lines as a nurse. She married James Carswell. A compilation of her World War I journal is available online. They family lived in several Montclair houses, including 53 Melrose and 54 Prospect. Emma was a president of the Montclair Woman's Club on Union Street. Her picture hangs on the wall behind the balcony which overlooks the main hall. Her sister, Susan, was married to the long time vice president of the Montclair Art Museum, Fred Taylor. They lived at 85 Porter Street. Another of William and Mary's daughters, Eleanor, married Doctor Victor Seidler. They lived at 16 Plymouth. A son, Charles lived in Connecticut. Daughter, Helen, married Howard Ware and lived in Verona.

William and Mary bought a farm in Littleton, New Hampshire. William died there in 1942. ■



The Snowflakes Ensemble in New York City Ballet's George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*

Nutcracker Day At The Montclair Public Library

CONTRIBUTED BY MONTCLAIR PUBLIC LIBRARY

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8 will be Nutcracker Day at the Montclair Public Library.

"Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* is a wonderful holiday tradition. We are celebrating that tradition and our community with a wide array of activities, including two screenings of George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*," says Library Director Peter Coyl. This 100-minute version of the classic features 275 New York City Ballet dancers, including Justin Peck and Megan Fairchild.

The day will begin at 11:00 am with a special dress-up story time for youngsters. Children and their adults will enjoy a story, make a costume and do a little dance.

The young crowd, and their families, are also the focus of our first screening of *The Nutcracker* at 3:30 pm. This will be a kid-friendly show with crafts and treats. "Kids are encouraged

Nutcracker Photo Credit: Paul Kohnickw

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