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## Memories of the Ketchins of Tariffville Part 3: Ensign, Bickford & Company Buildings and More

*The second installment of this series, based on the memoirs of William Mansfield Ketchin, told of A. J. Ketchin & Son's monument business and its diversification into stone bridge construction and stone home building. On the personal side, William Ketchin told of the February 9, 1892, sledding accident that paralyzed his brother, Archie, below the twelfth vertebra. Indirectly, Archie's misfortune led to young Will's finding the love of his life.*

Archie's accident, William Ketchin reflected "caused a change in the lives of each member of the family." The community of Tariffville rallied and provided what assistance it could. He remembered:

After Arch was injured, the young boys and girls called almost daily to see him. Among others was a sixteen-year-old girl named Hattye E. Moore, a baker's daughter. Besides keeping house for her Father, she helped with the baking, so many of her visits to see Arch were made at night. Hattye was a fine piano player, and as the Ketchins were all fond of music, Hattye would play our organ when she came. This finally became a treat to all, whenever she could get away from her work at the bakery.

There were several saloons in this village and it was not safe for young girls to be out at night, so I would often accompany Hattye to her home. She was a bright, lively girl and I became very much interested in her. We both were fond of skating and had many enjoyable hours skating on the Farmington River. She enjoyed teasing me and would skate on "the shore ice" as it was called, despite the warning from me that it was not safe, as the center of the river was open. She knew that I would follow her. She was a good skater and once I had to skate a mile "with my heart in my mouth" before I caught her. After that I would not go skating unless she would promise to keep off the "shore ice."

When Hattye was nineteen and I was twenty-three, we were married in the Tariffville Baptist Church on Nov. 21, 1894. We both were good bicycle riders, and we decided to spend our honeymoon riding through Conn. The first day we rode to Middletown and spent the night with my Grandmother Spencer. Then down to New Haven and along the shore to New London and home.

We were getting tired of peddling, although we were hardened peddlers. When we reached Bloomfield, about six miles from home, it began to snow and I wanted Hattye to take the train, for I knew that we would have to walk over the mountain. She said, "No! We can make it." I knew that she was very tired, and I also knew that her real reason was that she didn't want people on the train gazing at her bloomers. Bloomers for girls were very new then and Hattye was very sensitive wherever we went. However, I insisted, and we put the wheels on the train. It was well that we did, because we had difficulty getting from the station to our home through the snow.

We stayed with my family for a short time until I bought the Roberts house opposite the Ketchin home.<sup>1</sup> There we moved and there our five children were born, and there we made our home for twenty-seven years of ideal mutual happiness.

William Ketchin's Scottish grandfather, John Kitchen, had worked as a mason for Toy, Bickford & Company. Upon the death of Joseph Toy in 1887, the firm was renamed Ensign, Bickford & Company in recognition of Toy's son-in-law who succeeded him, Ralph Hart Ensign. William wrote that after the company decided to replace their wooden buildings with stone, his grandfather had built the fuse factory's "coiling shop, machine shop, engine room, two fuse rooms and the blacksmith shop."<sup>2</sup> He also noted that a

Dr. John Kitchen Mason Tariffville Ct.		1860
March	309 To Sunde.	110
	312 " "	2
Apr	322 " "	300
May	333 " "	170
June	346 " "	465
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	July 368 " "	288 75
	Sept 375 " "	115 39
		1173

“John Kitchen Mason Tariffville Ct.” is the heading for William Ketchin’s grandfather’s account in the 1851-1862 Toy-Bickford & Company ledger, shown in part above. The account, on page 473, lists the debits and credits running from March to September 1860. The account continues on page 528 through December 1860. The company paid John Ketchin a total of \$2,325.78 that year, about \$55,753 in today’s dollars. Born in Paisley, Scotland, and brought to this country as a child, he was forty-three in 1860.

horse was a luxury that his grandfather could never afford; he walked from Tariffville to the fuse factory, four miles each way.

John Kitchen retired from his masonry business about 1889 because of crippling rheumatism. William’s father, Andrew J. Ketchin, stepped into his place, while still making cemetery monuments in Tariffville. “More and more stone building was taken on until the monumental business was crowded out and the ‘Marble Shop’ sold,” William wrote. The first major building that A. J. Ketchin built for Ensign, Bickford & Company was the cotton mill. He was just about finished with his apprenticeship, William recalled, dating the construction of cotton mill about 1888. For that building, William wrote that he “cut the corners and caps and sills of the windows and jambs of doors and windows.”

He wrote that from the time that Ensign, Bickford & Company took over the Climax Fuse Company in Avon, Connecticut, until 1925, A. J. Ketchin & Son built all the stone buildings for the company, both in Avon and Simsbury.<sup>3</sup> As William recalled,

Our firm tore down wooden buildings and rebuilt of stone. The little old brick office [in Simsbury] was torn down and the present stone office built instead. The stone for the new office [was] quarried from a boulder found in the pasture lot of Aaron Eno. His boulder came out with smooth beds and in thickness from 3 inches to 8 inches, requiring no cutting. It was grayish red and ... very hard and the seam beds were as smooth as if cut. The architect for the office building was delighted with it, but we were afraid that it would not produce enough of the fine color and smooth beds to complete the building. We finally chanced it and it produced JUST enough and NO MORE. The entire construction was erected from that boulder. Caps, sills, window jambs came from the quarries of A. J. Ketchin & Son at Tariffville and Avon. The entire boulder was consumed in that building, at least that part of it that produced the smooth beds. I personally had the pleasure of cutting the date shields and date of the Ensign Bickford office.<sup>4</sup>

He says in a different section of his memoirs that they “opened a quarry from a brownstone outcrop on the property of Aaron Eno in Simsbury,” apparently in addition to the boulder. He mentions that the stone for the Ensign, Bickford & Company cotton mill was quarried “in the pasture at the rear of Aaron Eno’s house.”<sup>5</sup> He wrote, “Father could almost smell the size of a boulder about our part of the state, even if it only stuck out of the ground a couple of feet.” He also wrote, “Later we got considerable stone from a hole adjacent to the Wilcox place on ‘Goose Hill.’”

As their construction business prospered, the Ketchins added their two largest quarries:

Finally, we located an outcrop about a mile from Tariffville on the Terry's Plain Road and purchased a three-acre spot from Chancy Eno and from there we quarried all the stone for the Ensign-Bickford buildings at Simsbury, except for the office building.<sup>6</sup>

For the E-B & Co. buildings at Avon, Conn., we bought a ten-acre lot on the side of the Talcott Mountain where we had located a boulder outcrop, which was about one and a half mile from the works. By soundings we found that the rock extended over a sufficient territory for our purpose. The stone was a lively brown and some softer than our Tariffville stone.<sup>7</sup> On the Joseph Ensign home at Simsbury, all corners, jambs, window caps and mouldings were quarried at Avon and brought to Simsbury as that stone was easier to cut than that at [our] Tariffville quarry.<sup>8</sup>

In quarrying stone for the Ensign [Bickford] buildings at Simsbury and Avon, we had to quarry blocks large enough to make caps and sills for windows and doors. These had to be 6'0" x 1'0" x 6 inches for caps and sills and [for] corners had to finish 12" x 18" x 6" at least; so we had to be careful in blasting that the charge did not shatter the block or blow the stone out in small pieces. This could not be controlled with dynamite, so we used powder. We would usually run a 2-inch hole down 4 to 6 feet and put in a small charge to open up the seams, then put in a second charge that would work out through the seams and loosen some pieces large enough for our purpose.

On February 2, 1893, an article in the *Harford Courant* said, "Ensign, Bickford & Co. have nearly finished rebuilding their shops damaged by the powder explosion and expect to run full time about March 1." William Ketchin wrote:

The Ensign-Bickford Co. had an explosion at Simsbury which demolished several stone "fuse rooms" and A. J. K. & Son were called to rebuild them. That winter was very severe and cement would freeze as soon as it struck the wall. Finally, all cement mortar was mixed with water from barrels in which was kept a bag of cattle salt. All through Feb. the thermometer stayed near zero. Masons and tenders wore heavy clothing, felt boots and heavy gloves, but the cement mixed with "brine" enabled the men to lay up the walls.

Up to the floor line of these fuse rooms, the walls were 24 inches thick; above the floor line they were 18 inches thick. The stones would vary from 5 lbs. to 150 lbs. and were simply fitted in place, not cut, but hammer dressed. Four years after these buildings were built, some changes were made where 1½-inch pipes were put through the 24-inch walls below the floor. The Co. sent [for] me, who was building some other buildings for the Co., and asked me to send someone over to the fuse rooms to drill some holes for the plumber. Remember these walls were made of small and large stones and the cement was mixed with salt water. The 2-inch holes were drilled through the wall without disturbing the surrounding stones, showing that the mortar in which they were laid was as hard as stone. With the above experience in mind, when years later I established a Cement Products Plant in Florida making blocks, brick, pipe, etc., I used sea sand to make harder, better products than could be made with the local or bank sand.

William Ketchin described his firm's business arrangement with Ensign, Bickford & Company in this way:

In the early days, A. J. Ketchin & Son furnished E. B. & Co. their outside labor, such as unloading jute



The Simsbury Land Trust owns and maintains the Ketchin Quarry on the east side of Quarry Road. The Trust has placed explanatory signs along the short walk it has laid out.

*These photos were taken last December during a walk with Trustee Sally Rieger.*



and coal cars, concrete walks, and any other outside-of-shop labor. The factory buildings and office were built under contract, while most of the outside-of-shop labor was cost plus 10%.

In building the E. B. & Co. buildings, A. J. K. & Son furnished the stone and built the walls, while the company carpenter handled the woodwork. The contract on this work was so much pr. Perch (16½ cu. Ft.) measured in the wall. The foundations, as to width and depth, were left to the judgment of A. J. K. & Son, so they were particular to get a firm bottom. Some foundations buried many perch of stone below ground before a "hard pan" bottom was reached, but the company backed the judgment of A. J. K. & Son, on every building but one, "the old shipping room," where two soft spots were encountered and the Co. insisted that large flat stones be used instead of going to hard pan.

Several factors contributed to the initial success of their stone construction business and to problems they later encountered. William wrote:

I took a home study course in architecture with the I.C.S. [International Correspondence School]. This helped the construction firm, and, with the sound Scotch judgment at A. J. Ketchin, the firm was successful. The office was at Tariffville and we kept our operations within 10 miles of the office. Most of the work was stone buildings, although all kinds of work were handled.

In those days (1896-1925) or the fore part of that period, the labor unions were not strong, and as A. J. K. & Son were twelve miles from Hartford and the firm took no contracts outside a ten mile radius from Tariffville. The quarries were also within that radius. This advantage enabled the firm to underbid any outside contractors bidding on work within the Simsbury area (any stone work).

The first stone building that the firm built (stone walls only) was the Walter Phelps Dodge residence at Bushy Hill, Simsbury.<sup>9</sup> Chas. A. Ensign of Tariffville had the general contract and the stone walls were sublet to A. J. Ketchin & Son. Some of the masons were hired locally and some came from Hartford. Most of the Hartford masons were union men, but as A. J. K. & Son paid union wages and their masons lost no time waiting for building materials, as was the case in city construction, masons soon learned that more money was made working for A. J. K. & Son in the country, dropped their union dues and acquired homes in Simsbury. This arrangement did not help to support a union "walking delegate" so they (the union) watched for a chance to "jump" A. J. K. & Son.

An article in the *Hartford Courant* on January 9, 1906, announced, "A. J. Ketchin & Son have finished the stone work on J. R. Ensign's new house. Robert Porteus of Hartford has the contract for the carpenter work." William gave this account of the job:

When the firm started the Joseph R. Ensign residence in Simsbury, a fine stone building (stone from A. J. K. & Son quarry), on which they had the contract for furnishing, cutting and laying the walls, the union thought they saw their chance to "jump." All window sills, caps, and jambs were cut stone. Windows were capped by "flat arches" and door jambs moulded. Nine stone cutters were employed. Of the nine, only one, a Scotchman from New Haven could follow a pattern for door mouldings. One of the nine, a union man from Hartford, was not even able to cut the flat arches over the windows and finish with a "filling" key. This "bird" reported to the union that Brown of New Haven was on the job and was "unfair" with the union.

One day Kelley of Kelley Bros. of Hartford (brownstone sawyers), who was the "walking delegate" of the union, appeared on the job. Coming to me, he said, "You have a cutter here who is unfair with the union, and you must let him go, or all the other union cutters will strike." He said the man was Brown of New Haven and he owed the union eight-five dollars. As Brown was the only cutter on the job who could cut mouldings, I said, "Let me talk with Brown."

Brown had a young family, and at Christmas time he had been out of work so much that it looked like a gloomy Christmas. He took a job "on his own" to build a house cellar, which enabled him to have "a bit of a Christmas" for his three kiddies, and because he did not first go to the union and pay them twenty-five dollars for a contractor's permit, the union fined him eight-five dollars. He could not pay it, so was dropped and listed "unfair."

I told Kelley that I thought under the circumstances the fine was high. I argued that it was November and very little cutting was going on. Furthermore, the owner would not care if the work was shut down until spring. But Kelly was adamant. Brown wanted to quit to save the other cutters, but I asked him to wait developments.

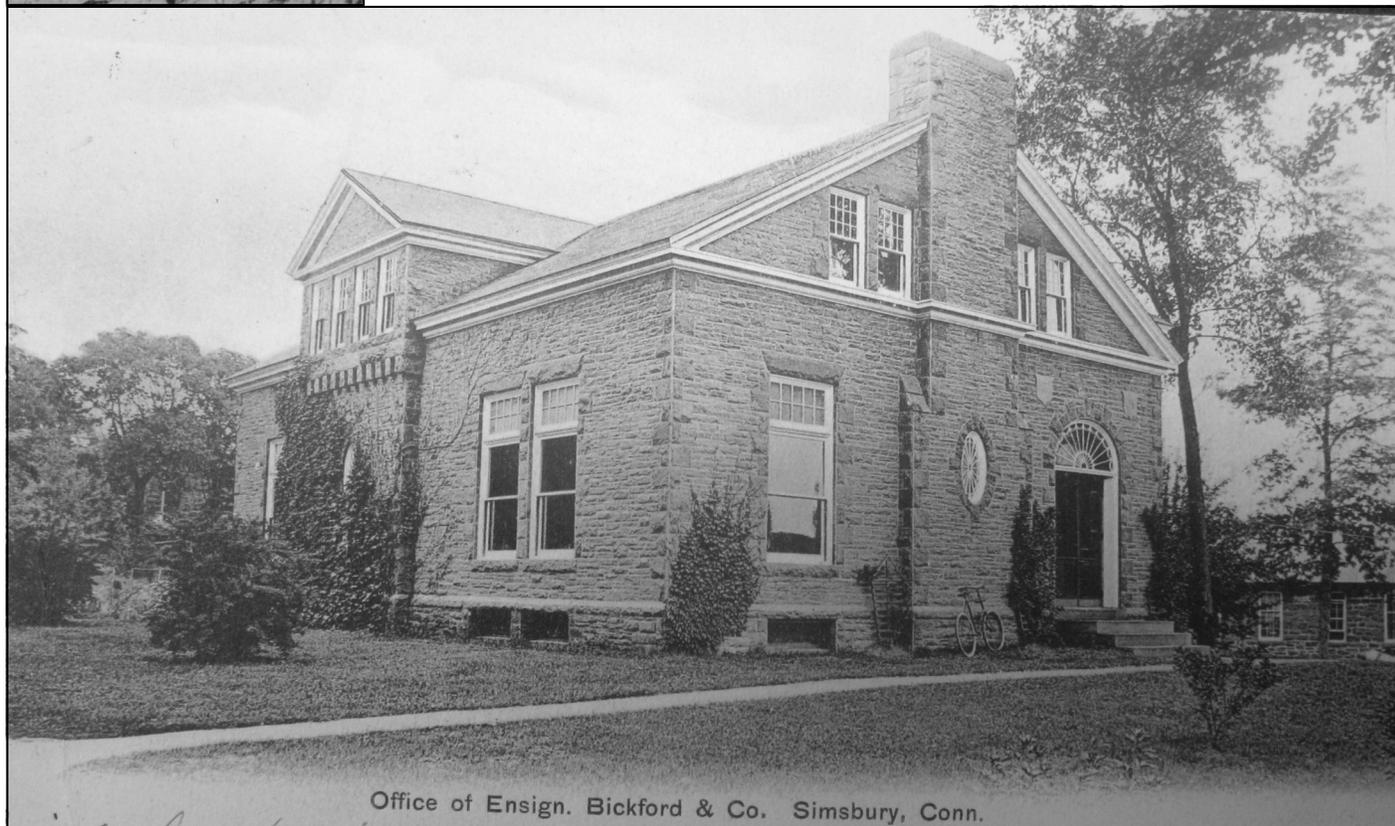
Kelley had to wait three hours for his train back to Hartford. This gave me a chance to think. A. J. K. & Son had another contract on the Wilcox residence in Simsbury.<sup>10</sup> In this contract was a large pergola. [The] pergola floor, steps, and columns were to be of sawed brownstone. There were also two large chimney caps of sawed brownstone. The furnishing of the sawed stone on the job amounted to twenty-five hundred dollars. I knew that this job was ideal for Kelley Bros., so while Kelley was out to lunch, I spread the Wilcox plans out on this table, being careful to have the sawed brownstone plans in sight

Kelley came around to talk and became very much interested in the Wilcox plans showing the sawed brownstone. He asked me if I had the job, saying that he (Kelley Bros.) had just installed a new saw and that kind of sawing was right up his alley, and he asked if he could figure the job. I told him that he could, but all the copies were out and I could not spare those. However, if he would promise to have them back the next



The shield (left) is one of the pair that William Mansfield Ketchin carved to place on either side of the main door of Ensign, Bickford & Company's Simsbury office (below). The shields bear the dates 1836 and 1896, the year that the company was founded and the year that the office was built. William Ketchin wrote in his memoirs that A. J. Ketchin & Son tore down an earlier small brick office and replaced it with this stone two-story building, constructed from a single boulder.

*Photograph and postcard courtesy of the Simsbury Historical Society*



Office of Ensign, Bickford & Co. Simsbury, Conn.

day, he might take them. So when Kelley took the train to Hartford, he had the plans.

I boarded the train with a plan *in my head*. Walking through the cars I came on Kelley with the plans already spread before him. I stopped and made a few remarks, passed on and came back in fifteen or twenty minutes. I stopped and said, "Do you realize, Kelley, that trouble on the Ensign house with Brown is going to knock nine men out of employment? Because as soon as the owner knows about it, he will shut the job down until spring. It would be cheaper for him anyway, as the job is cost plus. I believe we could straighten out that Brown trouble if you would call a union meeting and arrange to have that unjust fine of eighty-five dollars cancelled if Brown will pay up his regular dues. There is no other stone cutting going on now, and that would give the men another month's work before we shut down for the winter. If you will call a meeting of the union, I will arrange to send the nine men on my job to attend. I am sure you could arrange to wipe that fine off the books as easily as it was put on." Kelley called the meeting and the fine was cancelled, but the sawing of the brownstone for the Wilcox job went to the Bell Co. of Portland, Conn.

Elsewhere in his memoirs, William wrote that they had been hired to build the stone addition on the north side and the porte-cochere on the south side of the Wilcox house. They used brownstone from the quarry in Portland because it was much softer and more easily worked than the stone in the Ketchin quarries.

The problems between the Ketchins and the stonecutters' union continued. William Ketchin remembered,

The next time the union jumped A. J. K. & Son was at the Westminster School job, where I had designed the Gym., Swimming Pool, servants' quarters and some of the Dormitories. But before telling of that union trouble, the difference between the Portland, Conn., brownstone and that of the A. J. K. & Son quarries of Simsbury, Conn., and some of the union rules, must be explained.

As stated, A. J. K. & Son established quarries at Tariffville and Avon, Conn. These quarries were outcrops of brownstone, not soft, however, like the brownstone at Portland, Conn., which could be easily cut by using a wooden mallet and headed steel tools. But the Ketchin stone was so hard that it could be cut only by using granite tools. Furthermore, the union had established two stonecutters' unions, the soft stone cutters were distinct from the hard stone cutters. The soft stone cutters of Conn. worked with mallet and headed tools, while the granite or hard stone cutters of Vermont worked with steel hammers.

Rather than send for cutters from the granite quarries, A. J. K. & Son had for several years furnished granite tools for the Conn. men. The cutters were paid soft stone union wages, although A. J. K. & Son did not recognize any union. Under union rules, sixty day's notice must be sent to contractors of any contemplated changes in the scale of wages. This was to protect contractors in figuring work.

After the Westminster work was well started, the soft stone cutters' union notified us that their cutters should be paid 10¢ pr. hour more; that they had notified the firm of the raise sixty days before the work started. The firm replied that no notice had been received. Of course, we knew that the union was trying to make their threat good to "put the Ketchins out of business."

The firm at that time was paying the soft stone cutters 10¢ pr. hour more than the hard stone cutters were getting in Mass. and Vermont and furnishing them with hard stone tools beside. We then invited the President and Secretary of the soft stone cutters' union to come to Simsbury and look the job over before declaring us "unfair." This they agreed to do; so, on the appointed day, I put a "maul" (wooden mallet) and a "drove" (wide steel chisel used in cutting soft brownstone) into my car, and met the officers of the soft stone union, and drove to the quarry at Tariffville. There I handed [the President] the wooden maul and drove and asked [him] to note how easily *our* brownstone worked with *soft stone tools*.

With the first blow, the drove bounced off the stone as if it had been a block of steel. The President looked astonished and asked if all our stone was as hard. Of course he was told that the firm had furnished granite tools to the cutters, because they were Conn. men. But to save further trouble with the soft stone cutters, we had hired granite cutters from Mass. and Vermont to take the place of the soft stone cutters, who really had no business doing the work. The Pres. and Sec'y then proposed that the Conn. men be kept on at

the old wage until the job was done, but were told that it was too late. The soft stone union let us alone after that.

William Ketchin wrote that in his Grandfather John's day "a mason journeyman was supposed to be skilled in laying stone, brick or plastering." While building for the Westminster School, A. J. Ketchin & Son did some stuccoing. He wrote,

We designed and built the Gym. and Swimming Pool at Westminster School that were built of a hard, shelly stone found in the Tariffville quarry. When that particular vein of stone came out, it was hard as granite. But when exposed to the air and frost, it began to break up, so we dared not use it on any exposed wall. We had to get rid of that stone or that vein, and, in figuring the Westminster Gym. and Pool, we figured it could be used to advantage by laying it up rough (not hammer dressed as usual) and stuccoing both sides with Portland cement. This we did, saving the School considerable and giving them a permanent job.<sup>11</sup>

William mentioned that although they constructed the gymnasium and swimming pool of stone and cement, the servants' quarters were built of wood. The company did very few wooden structures, but had the ability to build them. Also, while doing work for the Village Water Company, their company "laid the water pipe up to Simsbury Street [probably the present Hopmeadow Street] and through the street to Westminster School." William and Hattye's son, William Andrew Ketchin, later graduated from the school.

Returning to the construction company's work for Ensign, Bickford & Company, William recalled that his men used to eat lunch at the boarding house that was near the company's Simsbury factory. The 1900 Federal census shows a boarding house run by James Welton, 71, and his wife, Laura, 67. They lived in the house along with a servant and twenty-three boarders. The boarders were women and men of various ages and they were a mix of native-born and foreign-born people. Most worked at the fuse works, but one was a brakeman for the railroad, one was a patent medicine dealer, two were "musical artists," and three were stone masons.

William told this story having to do with meals at the boarding house and the meatless Fridays observed by his Catholic workmen. He titled the story *Pat and the Fish Dinner*.

Whenever we were building at the Ensign-Bickford plant at Simsbury, we were close to the Welton boarding house, so most of us arranged to have a hot luncheon. A long table was set aside for our men. One Friday as about twenty of us sat down, the waitress came in, and quickly passing from one to another, she would lean down and quietly say, "Meat or fish?" As the waitress came to the man next to Pat, the man said "meat" and as she came to Pat he simply nodded his head. When the dinner came in, Pat's plate was heaped with meat. He looked at it an instant, then crossing himself said, "God knows twa fish I asked for." However, the mistake did not dampen his appetite.

He had several more lunchtime stories. This one he called *Adventures of John Hill*.

John was an Irish stone mason who had worked for my Grandfather, so we kept him on the payroll. Our work was scattered and most of the time not near any place where we could get a hot lunch, so we all carried lunches in a "Dinner pail." This pail was a tall thin pail. Coffee was carried on the bottom, there was a middle section for bread and the meat, and a top tray for pie and on the top cover, a tin cup.

The day in question, we all placed our pails on the ground under an apple tree near our work. At noon we all gathered under the shade of the tree to eat our lunch. Everybody let out a wild yell as he took the cover from his pail, for small red ants had taken possession. There was nothing to do but carefully scrape the ants off and retrieve as much of the lunch as possible.

While everybody was busy doing this, I noticed that John Hill was busily eating. I looked at his bread and sure enough, it was covered with ants. I said, "John, look at your bread. It is covered with ants." Without batting an eye, John kept right on eating and said, "It's a dam sight worse for them than it is for me."

William wasn't above telling tales of his own misadventures. For example, seeing that the company needed only a part of their ten-acre lot on Talcott Mountain for their Avon quarry, he pondered how to use the rest of the land.

It was said that apples were better if grown on the mountainside, and we needed but a small portion of the lot for quarry purposes. I thought to set out an apple orchard. This thought crystallized when I found an old, neglected apple tree on the place with some most excellent "sheep nose" apples on it. So I purchased and set out 100 apple trees.

They grew well and when they had been set a year they were sturdy trees, one inch or more in diameter. That winter snow came to a depth [of] 18 inches, followed by a cold rain, which froze and covered the snow with a heavy crust. This prevented rats, mice and rabbits from burrowing under the snow for food. So they stood on the snow crust and "girdled" my young trees ... about a foot from the ground. They had eaten the bark as far up as they could reach, completely around, thus killing every one of them. If I had consulted some old apple grower, he would have told me to wrap my young trees with building paper to the height of 3 feet to protect the tender bark.

The following incident also took place in Avon. William called this story *A Quarry Upset*.

This upset occurred at the Avon quarry after we had uncovered a considerable table of nice brownstone. This stone was much easier to work than the quarry at Tariffville. We erected a "shack" about 12' x 20' and built rough bunks so that 8 or 10 of our men could stay there through the week instead of driving each day from Tariffville (10 miles). We put in an old cook stove, a sink and a few simple utensils. A fine spring on the lot furnished good water. A rough board table and empty powder kegs for chairs completed the furnishings. The powder kegs [were] wood barrels about 12 inches in diameter and 16 inches high with a 2-inch bung hole in one end. They held 25 lbs of blasting powder and came to us from E.B. & Co.

For safety, when they came to us, we immediately emptied them to a tight-stoppered copper container and filled the barrel with water for 24 hours, after which the barrel became a chair.

One night the 8 men were seated on the empty powder kegs around the table smoking and playing cards. The foreman, W<sup>m</sup> Sacolasky, lighted his pipe and, as he had often done before (for safety), dropped the burnt match through the bung hole of the keg on which he was sitting. Instantly there was a loud explosion and men, table and cards were lifted to the ceiling. No bones were broken or serious cuts, but plenty of scratches and bruises. They all claimed that every keg had been properly watered and soaked. But thereafter all keg bung holes were "plugged" after emptying.

Apparently, A. J. Ketchin & Son never had a workman killed on a job. The most serious accident William reported was in this story titled *Tariffville Quarry and Joe Boras*.

Joe Boras was Polish, a strong, well-built chap of 25-30, and, after working for us a short time, he became a "handyman." When occasion required, he was sent to help out at the building, farm or quarry. He became especially fond of working at the quarry, where William Sacolasky, a big, husky Pole, was foreman. Sacolasky asked me to keep Boras away from the quarry because he thought Boras was too fond of handling powder. I had to go to New York for 2 or 3 days and, acting on what Sacolasky had told me, I assigned Boras to the farm gang until my return, telling him particularly *not* to go to the quarry.

Arriving back from New York at 11 P.M., my cousin Harold Coley (Foreman of Labor) met me at Hartford and said, "Will, we have had a bad accident at the Tariffville quarry, and Joe Boras is at St. Francis Hospital. You better go right over there, because Dr. Sullivan wants to see you right away. He don't hold out much hope of saving Joe's life."

It seems that despite my orders to Joe, he went to the quarry and told Sacolasky that I sent him. During the day a blast hole 6 feet was run down with a 2" thumper drill. Sacolasky loaded the hole and touched off the fuse but, as sometimes happened, it "missed fire." Sacolasky carefully withdrew the charge and scraped out the hole with a "spoon." This "spoon" was a long, 1/4-inch-round iron rod fashioned at the end like a spoon. He then took a pail and started to the spring 200 feet away for water to wash out the blast hole.



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He saw Boras near the hole with the iron spoon in his hand and ordered him away from the hole. The next instant there was an explosion. Boras had scraped out all the powder particles (he thought) with the iron spoon, then he dropped a match down the hole to prove to Sacolasky that washing the hole of a “missed” blast was wasting time. The blast had caught Boras squarely in the face, literally filling it with black bits of powder and sand. The long iron spoon was wound around his hand like a bracelet and had to be cut away.

I went with Coley to the hospital and was shocked sick when I saw a black object, hardly resembling a human face and head, swelled beyond belief, simply slits where the eyes and nose were.

Dr. Sullivan came and said, “Ketchin, if you would save this man’s life, we must remove his eyes immediately. They are both filled with powder, and infection is sure to set in.” Dr. Bacon of Hartford, an eye specialist, was a Masonic friend of mine, and I wanted to talk with him. Dr. Sullivan did not like the delay, but I got Bacon out of bed and described the case as best I could, and told him of Dr. Sullivan’s decision. He said, “Don’t let anyone touch that man until I get there.” Of course, he could not tell me much then, but asked me to put the case in his hands. This I did and in 3 days he reported that one eye was shot so badly that it must be removed, but he had hopes of saving the other. Four months from that time, Joe walked into my office looking healthy as ever, except his face was “pockmarked” from powder, but I could not detect anything wrong with his eyes. Dr. Bacon had so well preserved the eye muscles that they moved the glass eye, which perfectly matched the good eye.

The doctor said that Joe should remove the glass eye every night to save wear. He said that eventually the muscles would wear the glass eye so that it would not fit snug enough to be moved by the muscles. When that happened, Joe would have to get a new one fitted.

The accident cost us about a thousand dollars. We carried no insurance on our men as the insurance rate was the very highest or quarry rate. However, we paid all hospital and doctors’ expense and Joe’s regular wages, and I told him that I would give him a year-round job.

A. J. Ketchin & Son continued to build all the stone buildings that the Ensign-Bickford Company erected in Simsbury and Avon, and the masonry company took on as many other projects as it could.



*The next installment, continuing the Ketchins’ construction business and introducing their tobacco business, will appear in the Spring 2012 issue. This series is being compiled by Mary Jane Springman from the several manuscripts of William Mansfield Ketchin’s memoirs provided by Frederick Henry Herpel, his great grandson.*

### Notes

1. William Ketchin wrote that his parents had bought “the McKew Cottage on the corner opposite the Catholic Church.” In his article “The Gift Givers of St. Bernard’s Catholic Church” (Summer-Fall 2005), Thomas F. Howard wrote that between 1876 and 1892, the Catholic church in Tariffville was on the north side of Winthrop Street, where the parish cemetery is today. After that building was destroyed by fire, the present St. Bernard’s Catholic Church was built across Winthrop Street on the corner of Maple Avenue.
2. William Ketchin also said that his grandfather “built the Belden still,” by which he probably meant the Belden gin distillery on Hop Brook that was destroyed by the flood of 1955.
3. The Climax Fuse Company merged with the Ensign-Bickford Company, with the latter taking control of the management, in April 1907. However, Ralph Ensign had already acquired a one-half interest in the Avon company in 1892. See *Avon, Connecticut: An Historical Story* by Mary-Frances L. MacKie (Canaan, NH: Phoenix Publishing for the Avon Historical Society, 1988) 164, 170.
4. This quote, like some others, combines elements on the subject taken from several sections of William Ketchin’s memoirs.
5. This may be the house, now a law office, that stands at 987 Hopmeadow Street.

## William Ketchin and his Changing Modes of Transportation

Newlyweds William and Hattye Ketchin peddled off on their honeymoon in November 1894. He doesn't say what kind of bicycles they rode, but he goes into detail about the bicycles he had owned since he was sixteen years old. His father was doing well enough in 1886 to be able to purchase a horse and business wagon. As for himself, he wrote:

In 1887 I thought to improve my transportation by getting a bicycle. The "Ordinary," so called, had been in use for years. It was a high wheel with crank and pedals attached to the hub. The wheels varied in height according to the length of the rider's legs, from 48 to 56 inches. It had a 12-inch wheel in the rear, and to mount to the seat on top of the wheel, it was necessary to grasp the handle bar, put one foot on a small step attached to the small rear wheel, get the wheel rolling by hopping along on one foot, then vault into the seat. If you didn't land in the seat in a lean-back position, you would keep on going over to the ground. I learned to ride one of those killers, but never owned one, but when Will Ellsworth offered me his "Star Safety" for \$25, I bought it.

This so-called "Safety" was a 56-inch wheel and was propelled by a spring and leather straps. The pedals were pumped up and down. The safety part was the 12-inch wheel in front of the high wheel instead of the rear, as on the "Ordinary." It was mounted in the same way as the Ordinary, but the small wheel being in front helped to keep one from continuing over the handle bars to the ground when mounting. In the early days, I rode this wheel while we were building for Ensign-Bickford at Avon, Conn., 10 miles each way daily.

My next step in "Transportation" was a present-day [1940s] safety with cushion tires, no coaster brake, and many a tumble I had while braking the wheel by putting the toe of my shoe through the forks of the wheel to the tire. I should mention that my first wheel had hard rubber tires about one inch in diameter. Then came the "Cushion" tire. The "Cushion" was simply a rubber tube about one inch in diameter, and finally the air tire, which was very poor compared to the present product. The air tires would last but a short time before they became porous. We would stretch the use of these tires by pumping a cup of milk into them. The milk soured and the air pressure forced it into the leaks.

We purchased our first Automobile in 1908 – a Model 17 Buick. Cost 2200<sup>00</sup>. We ran this car 160,000 miles and finally broke the rear housing carrying 13 men to work. The first Auto Truck we had was a Buick half ton. It had a regulator to hold the speed to 12 miles pr. and it cranked on the side and [had] chain drive, a man killer.

Thus far I have ventured to "Fly" to Cuba and Connecticut. Outside the Auto, I think I prefer the new rail cars. It certainly has been a wonderful experience to have seen and been a part of the changes in Transportation in the past 75 years.



High Wheel  
Bicycle

6. The quarry that William Ketchin refers to is on Quarry Road in the Terry's Plain section of Simsbury. A title search done by former Simsbury Land Conservation Trust President Richard Davis in 1996 documented that the Ketchins bought the first four acres of this quarry from Erwin Chase in 1897. In 1906, they bought two smaller adjacent parcels to the north and south from Harry W. and Norwood T. Case and from Chancey H. Eno, bringing the total acreage to about 7.5 acres. This title search is available at the Land Trust's office on Phelps Lane. In 1996, the Ensign-Bickford Company gave the former Ketchin quarry to the Land Trust.
7. The location of the Ketchins' Avon quarry has not been determined at this time.
8. Joseph Ralph Ensign succeeded his father, Ralph Hart Ensign, as chairman of the Ensign-Bickford Company. His home at 690 Hopmeadow Street now houses a branch of Webster Bank.
9. See Part 2 of this series for William Ketchin's account of building the Walter Phelps Dodge house. Also, the *Hartford Courant* mentions the Dodge house in an article dated August 10, 1894, so it was built before the 1896 date that William Ketchin stated in this section.
10. In Part 1 of this series, William Ketchin told of his grandfather's work on the first section of the Wilcox house. The house now serves as the Vincent Funeral Home at 880 Hopmeadow Street.
11. Founded in Dobbs Ferry, New York, in 1888 as a school for boys, the Westminster School moved to Simsbury in 1900. In *By Grit and Grace: The First One Hundred Years of Westminster School* by Reverdy Whitlock, the caption under the picture of the gymnasium on page 48 says that the building, begun in the summer of 1907, was completed in March 1908.

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☆ Exciting New Changes Planned for 2012 ☆

Watch for many new and exciting programs and events at the Simsbury Free Library in the coming year. Our plans include a series of workshops titled *Introduction to Genealogy*; Genealogy Saturdays; a Monday lunch series of talks and programs; evening programs; History Book Clubs, both daytime and evening; and much more. In addition, the library will host a variety of exhibits by local artists, with opening night "Meet the Artist" wine and cheese receptions.

The new programs and events will begin in late January and February of 2012. The library will also have new days and hours of operation. Be watching for the new *Simsbury Free Library Calendar of Events and Programs* in the mail and on our Web site: [www.simsburyfreelibrary.org](http://www.simsburyfreelibrary.org).

If you would like to receive e-mail notifications about our events, please contact Amy Zeiner at [azeinersfl@aol.com](mailto:azeinersfl@aol.com) or leave a message at the Simsbury Free Library by calling (860) 408-1336. Include in your message your name, address and an e-mail address so we can send you a calendar and program information as it becomes available. If you are interested in joining a daytime or evening History Book Club, please let us know that as well. Don't miss out – call or send us your e-mail address today!

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☆ Simsbury Probate Court Records in the Archives ☆

Probate Court Administrator Paul Knierim asked the Simsbury Free Library earlier this year to become the repository for the Simsbury Probate Records from the years 1920 to about 2001, when the court stopped keeping its records in hard copy. (Records earlier than 1920 were accepted by the Connecticut State Library.) The library is delighted to have these wills, estate settlements, and other probate records that Simsbury town clerks diligently copied and bound into books over these years.

The books of probate records occupy fifty-five lineal feet of shelf space in the library's archives and there is an index for them. They are available to all researchers and they are an invaluable source of family and town history. The library is indebted to Judge Knierim for choosing to deposit the records with us. We hope to see them put to good use by our members and patrons.

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☆ Library Renovations Continue ☆

Have you noticed the new look of the library's entryway? Under the supervision of Facilities Chairman Richard Schoenhardt, interior designer Chrissie D'Esposito of Avon has given the already gracious front hall a look in keeping with the Gilded Age, when the building was designed and built.

Mr. Schoenhardt is also continuing to have the paintings in the library cleaned and restored, one by one. David Kimball of the Stagecoach Gallery in Granby is doing this work.

In a more utilitarian vein, he has had storm windows installed on the west side of the library and has had the ceramic floor tile in the restroom replaced.

Thanks to his efforts, a plaque to the left of the front door now announces that the library building is on the National Register of Historic Places as a Historic District Property, a status it was awarded in 1996. The trustees and members appreciate having architect Schoenhardt as the indefatigable steward of our treasured building.



Just published: *SIMSBURY*, Images of America Series, by Arcadia Publishing  
Sponsored by the Simsbury Historical Society to celebrate its Centennial Year, this 128-page pictorial history, written by Mary Jane Springman and Alan Lahue, is for sale in the historical society's museum store.

The Simsbury Free Library Presents .....

# Simsbury Through An Artist's Eye

An Exhibit of Oil Paintings by  
Catherine M. Elliott

Award-winning and nationally-known Simsbury artist Catherine M. Elliott will exhibit her original oil paintings depicting scenes and landscapes of her native town. Opening during Simsbury Celebrates!, her show will remain on display through Christmas. For information about the artist, visit her Web site at [www.catherinemelliott.com](http://www.catherinemelliott.com)

Please stop in and see this special art show and meet the artist!

Saturday, November 26  
4:30 to 7:15 P.M.

In the library during  
**Simsbury Celebrates!**

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Thurs.-Sat. 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Closed major holidays.  
Allison B. Krug, Library Director  
Mary Jane Springman, Newsletter Editor

