

# *Three Generations of Architects and Builders: The Evans Family*

By Melvern Evans, Jr.

**J**ohn Hantch Evans, reputed to be Lancaster's first architect, and also a contractor, was born July 27, 1824, the eldest son of Jacob Evans and Anna Maria Hantch, better known as "Polly". Jacob, a jackscrew maker, died when John was only six years old, so he was raised by his maternal grandmother, Magdalena (Kohl) Hantch. John had an older sister, Mary Ann, who married David Hantch, an engineer for the Fulton Cotton Mills, who was killed instantly when a three ton boiler exploded at Mill #5 on Duke and Lemon Streets on July 13, 1867. John also had a younger brother, Jacob Jr., who was a segar maker by trade and who was related to the Demuth family thru marriage into the Buckius clan.

On June 5, 1849 John married Sarah Heppenstall of Wrightsville, daughter of John Heppenstall and Sarah Newcomer. Their union produced ten children of whom two became architects and builders. Child number two was John Heppenstall Evans, who eventually went west to pursue his avocation. Child number eight was Clifton Evans who remained in Lancaster and assisted his father in the design and contracting business



*The Evans Family—Top Row (left to right): Mary Evans Stehman 1857-1914, John Heppenstall Evans 1852-1900 and Sally Evans Schindle 1855-1892. Center Row—Clifton Evans 1863-1919, Sarah Heppenstall Evans 1826-1901 (Mother), John Hantch Evans 1824-1894 (Father) and Caroline Evans Wirshing 1853-1929. Bottom Row—Annie W. Evans 1861-1873, Erminia Evans 1865-1892 and David Evans 1868-1933.*

and later succeeded him. Clifton married Annie Weaver and they had a son, Melvern R. Evans Sr., who represented the third generation of architects in the Evans family.

We shall now take each one in turn and learn more about their life style and their professional achievements.

John Hantch Evans learned the contracting trade from John Lorentz (or Lawrence) and later he developed his drafting expertise and started his own business while still a young man. He was a strong Republican and was active in both City Councils which he served for over 17 years. He also ran for the Legislature on the Greenback ticket. John lived on West

James Street near the present Reformed Theological Seminary. His property was quite large and extended from Mary Street all the way to Pine Street, along what is now Frederick Street. His house was frame with large bay windows and a wide porch in front. The spacious yard contained many fruit trees and a truck garden which he took pride in tending. After his death, his executors, Clifton Evans and Mary Evans Stehman, sold the property to John W. Reith (June 1897) to settle up a \$7,000 debt. John's daughters were raised in strict but comfortable fashion and married within their station. Caroline married William B. Wirshing, mayor of Sterling, Kansas. Sally married Benjamin Schindle, part owner and business manager of the Lancaster Newspapers. Mary Elizabeth married Andrew Stehman, owner of a precision tool company.

John's architectural office was located at 108 East King Street, just two doors from the Demuth Tobacco Shop. One of his earliest and most notable works was the design of Diagonthian Hall (1857) on the F. & M. campus. Of all his works, it is difficult to ascertain which he designed, which he built and which he remodeled. There is no doubt that he designed the Lancaster County Hospital (Alms House in March 1875) on East King Street, and the parsonage of St. John's Episcopal Church on West Chestnut Street, for these drawings, bearing his name, are now in the possession of the Lancaster County Historical Society. He probably also redesigned



*Architectural office of John H. Evans, at 108  
E. King St. Lancaster.*



*John Hantch Evans*

the Northern Market House after its collapse from weight of snow. He remodeled the Heister House (formerly the North American Hotel) which had been built in 1834 when he was still a child. He supervised the construction of the following buildings, but not in the order as listed here: Episcopal Church at Manheim, Town Hall at Marietta, Columbia High School, Inquirer Building, Eastern Market House, Duke Street Methodist Church, Wickersham Printing Building, Keystone House, and the Reformed Theological Seminary, which was finished after his death, by his son, Clifton. John's obituary credits him with the design of Central Market, but I think James Warner was the architect for that building. In addition to the above mentioned works, John also designed and built some prominent residences in the city and county, but records of these have not been found.

John was a contributing member of St. John's Episcopal Church and brought up his family in that faith. He was a member of the Odd Fellow's Lodge #67 and of the Washington Encampment #11 of the same order. He died from a stroke on August 13, 1894 and was buried in the Shreiner Cemetery on West Chestnut Street.

The achievements of John Heppenstall Evans remain a mystery! He was born on January 22, 1852, and we know he worked for his father until 1882 when he left for Chicago. Tradition has it that this father-son combination could not work together harmoniously since both had quick tempers, so the son decided to pull out and seek his fortune elsewhere. The American Institute of Architects, Chicago Chapter, was unable to furnish information on John's work there, but according to my late father, John played an important role in the design and construction of Chicago's first steel sky-scraper. I had heard my father say on several occasions that his uncle, John Heppenstall Evans, was a better all around architect than John Hantch Evans, but I do not know on what he based his opinion. John died in Chicago on October 1900, leaving a 2nd wife (Nellie Murphy) and two children, Nellie Evans Dorney and John Jr., who chose not to follow his father's profession.

Clifton Evans was born in Lancaster on June 9, 1863. He married Annie Weaver on April 29, 1885, and their first home was a row house at 518 North Mary Street, which almost touched the rear yard of his father's spacious property. About 1891 they moved to 28 S. Lime Street where he set up his office in the side room facing the alley. He was a staunch Democrat and played an active role in city government. He was a school director, a committeeman from the 3rd ward, and a candidate for alderman. In 1902 he ran for mayor of Lancaster against Chester Cummings, and was defeated by only 192 votes. His platform was for pure water, better streets, and an administration run purely on business principles. He was

a member of the Moose Lodge and a charter member of Elks Lodge #134. Cliff was an ardent hunter, a skillful billiard player, and an amateur artist. One of his early oil paintings titled, "Three Graces", depicted three young men, and he had a problem painting in the face on one of the lads, so he enlisted the aid of his friend and neighbor, Charles Demuth, who corrected his error.

Cliff played a major role in construction and remodeling of the John Farnum Cotton Mills which were originally built between 1846 and 1852. In fact this particular project kept him "going" for long periods of time. He also built the Cocalico Hotel in Ephrata, and the First Methodist Church. One of his last projects was the Moose Lodge Building on East King Street, in 1913. I found no records of his design work but I know he did a considerable amount of drafting, seated in his favorite captain's chair, feet firmly planted on the bottom rung, with a drawing board stretched across his lap. His working schedule was erratic to say the least! He would work diligently until the job was done and his fee paid, then he would enjoy an extended vacation which often stretched out for months on end. "Back to work" thoughts only crossed his mind when his money ran low. At one time during his career, he drank rather heavily, and this probably contributed to his early death at 56 years, for he died of



*Clifton Evans with son Melvern.*



*Clifton Evans Residence 28 S. Lime St. Lancaster*

a kidney stroke on March 11, 1919, and was buried in Woodward Hill Cemetery in a plot adjoining his wife's relatives.

Melvorn R. Evans, Sr. (only son of Clifton) was born on December 3, 1885. He learned the building trade at an early stage, starting off as a carpenter in his father's employ. He was a well known athlete, having played varsity football on the old Boy's High team, and pitching semi-pro baseball in the Class "A" County League. He also won the city pocket-billiard championship and the county figure ice-skating title. This annual skating competition was held on the frozen Conestoga River near Engleside. During the summer he worked at Rocky Springs Park at the merry-go-round concession, and soon became an expert at grabbing "brass-rings".

This father-son relationship left much to be desired because Cliff ruled his family with an iron hand, so Mel went to Pittsburgh about 1905 and apprenticed for an architectural firm by the name of Hornbustle, or something similar. In 1908 he returned to Lancaster to help his ailing father put his affairs in order, and that same year he married Myrtle Fieles and opened up his own office, which was located at 112 North Queen Street next he moved to East Orange Street, and from there he moved to the second block of East King Street almost next door to the site formerly occupied by his grandfather. The office I remember best was located on the second floor of the old Conestoga Bank Building at Penn Square. This was an ideal place from which to view local parades.

Small game hunting became one of his favorite sports and his gunning partner was Dr. John Atlee, Sr. Their annual trips to Virginia to shoot quail and doves became traditional. "Vern," as he was often called, was a member of the Hamilton Club, the Elks Lodge the Pennsylvania Society, and the Sons of Rest. The latter grew out of an all Lancaster football team of 1899, of which he was the last surviving member. (See LCHS Journal #84/2 for details on this unique organization.) He served on the first Housing Commission for the city and also the Planning Commission. On April 25, 1950 he received the Red Rose Award from Mayor K.C. "Casey" Bare for outstanding service to Lancaster city. He also served as President of the Southern Chapter of the American Institute of Architects from 1926 until 1929. He campaigned vigorously for the Democratic cause and personally knew and corresponded with such notables as Franklin D. Roosevelt, James Farley, Jack Garner, and many senators and governors.

**T**urning to his architectural achievements, we find from his old office ledger, some of his earlier design and construction work.

Hippodrome Theater—North Queen Street

Hotel Ransing—East Orange Street—October 1911



*Melvorn R. Evans, Sr.*

Salem U.B. Church—Manheim

Lurio Brothers Store—North Queen Street—April 1912

Eagle's Home addition—North Prince Street—April 1913

Leapord Hotel alterations—February 1914

Knights of Malta Lodge—January 1915

Rowe Motor Co.—November 1917

Alterations to Bowman's Tech. School—March 1914

Alterations to Leiderkrantz Society—March 1912

Alterations to S.R. Slaymaker residence, Gap—March 1912

S.S. Kresge store—May 1915

Dr. Atlee office alterations—February 1920

Additions to Stock Yards—January 1920

Some of his earlier designed residences were:

H. Roy Eshleman—President Avenue—March 1912

Fred Pyfer—College Avenue—January 1913

Amos H. Herr—Wheatland Avenue—July 1911

Harry Schlotzhauer—Marietta Avenue—January 1911

Dr. Guy Grabill—East Petersburg—November 1912

A.J. McConomy—Wheatland Avenue—July 1912



*H. Roy Eshelman residence,  
northeast corner of North  
President and Buchanan  
Avenues, Lancaster.*

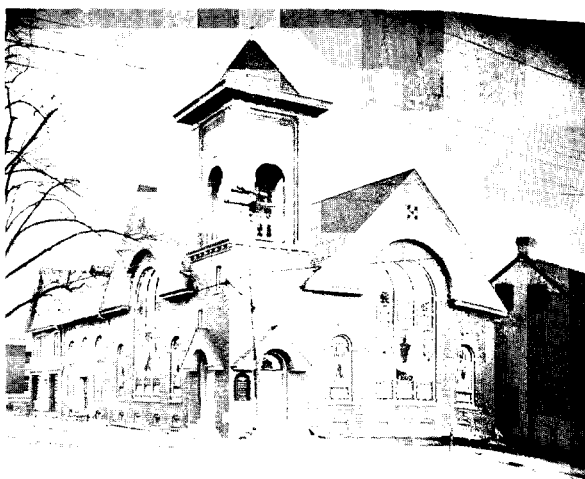
*Residence of Fred Wiker,  
Esquire, Columbia Pike.  
Razed 1968.*



*Residence of A.J.  
McConomy, Wheatland  
Avenue, Lancaster.*



*Lancaster Steam Laundry Building, East King Street, Lancaster.*



*Salem United Brethren Church, East High and South Main Streets, Manheim. Razed 1983.*

*Mohn Bros. Buick Salesroom and Garage, North Prince Street at McGovern Avenue, Lancaster.*





*Moving the Vondersmith Nurses' Dormitory, Lancaster General Hospital. Razed 1972.*

Later residential designs included:

Guy C. Eby	J. Alfred Eckman
Oliver J. Keller	Theo. O. Wohlsen
Dr. Barsumian	John Hager—Blossom Hill
Dr. Pontius—N.H. Pike	Wm. Hager—Columbia Pike
George Reynolds	M.T. Garvin
David F. Chambers	Fred Wiker—Col. Pike

It is a bit difficult to affix exact dates on much of his work, but the following projects fell in the time period of 1930-1940 or thereabouts!

- Lancaster Steam Laundry Building
- M.T. Garvin Store—East King Street
- Farmers Bank & Trust Co.—East King Street
- Edward Hand Jr. High (new gym and new auditorium)
- American Seed Co. office building
- Mohn Brothers Buick agency
- Glass Kitchen Restaurant—Lititz Pike & at Dover, Delaware
- Rest Rooms beneath City Hall (probably done earlier)

One of Mel's most remarkable works were the additions to the Lancaster General Hospital. To make space for the addition, it was necessary to jack up and move the 3-story brick Nurses Home building several hundred feet. This move proceeded so smoothly that nary a crack showed up in the plaster. I think that a few nurses even stayed inside the building while it was sliding gently on the rails.

Some of his more noteworthy remodeling projects included the residence of James Shand on East Orange Street, Hale Steinman's summer place in the river hills, and Dr. Atlee's "Wild Acres" on the Millersville Pike.

Undoubtedly, the list presented here is far from complete, but I think it points out the fact the Mel was considered one of Lancaster's better architects. I know he took particular pride in designing homes for several generations of the same family. He paid close attention to proper detailing of molding and trim, and his interior design ranked with the best. Mel was never one for legal contracts or paper work, so most of his business deals were consummated by a handshake, and I have never known a single instance where his word was not as good as his bond.

About 1967 he closed his office but continued to accept a few selected assignments in his "home-office" on East King Street. He died June 4, 1971 in his 85th year, and was buried in the old Leacock Presbyterian Cemetery, where his wife's relatives repose.

### *Sources:*

#### Obituaries:

Daily Examiner August 14, 1894—John Hantch Evans

New Era, August 15, 1894—John Hantch Evans

New Era, March 11, 1919—Clifton Evans

New Era, June 5, 1971—Mel Sr.

L.C.H.S. Journal, 75/1 John Hantch House, by Mary Heller

L.C.H.S. Journal 84/2 Sons of Rest Article

Ellis & Evans History—pages 212, 400, 628

Office records of Mel Sr.

Recollections of Mel Jr., and data from Evans Genealogy Book.