



There is no other single site in the state of Kentucky as world-renowned as the house known as My Old Kentucky Home. And it claims its fame chiefly because of the song of the same name written by one Stephen Collins Foster.

Judge John Rowan, a cousin of Foster's father, completed the house in 1818 and named it "Federal Hill." It was on a fateful visit by Stephen Foster in 1852 that he was inspired to write his world-famous song. During his brief lifetime of 37 years, Foster wrote over 200 songs including the ever-popular "Oh Susannah," but none of his works are as famous as the song played before the Kentucky Derby each year; the one

cherished by the more than 3 million people that call Kentucky home.

William and John - The Rowans

Judge John Rowan, born in 1773 in York County, Pennsylvania, son of Captain William Rowan, was a renowned politician and U.S. Representative from Nelson County from 1813-1817. William was also a congressman from Nelson County in 1795, and a noted captain in the American Revolution.

At the close of the Revolution, William had hopes of repairing his financial situation, which had been shattered backing the American cause. So he led his, and five other families, down the Monongahela River to the Ohio and on to the Falls of the Ohio River (Louisville), a 600-mile journey from Pittsburgh. The trip took nine hard months to complete, and along the way the families encountered hostile Indians several times; three entire families were killed. The remaining members of the party finally arrived in Louisville in March 1783. The pioneers left the Falls in April 1784 (John was 11 years old) and headed for the Long Falls of Green River to settle on land that William had bought before he left Pennsylvania.

After living there for two to three years, the Rowan family moved to Bardstown in February 1787, largely because of educational opportunities for the children there. William enrolled his 17-year-old son John in the famed Salem Academy, conducted at Bardstown by the renowned Dr. Priestly. There he received a superior classical education. After leaving Salem Academy, he studied law in Lexington and was admitted to the bar in 1795. He soon gained high rank in his profession and was considered among the top lawyers of his day.

On October 29, 1794 he married Ann Lytle and settled on the 1,300-acre plantation near Bardstown that was deeded to him by his father-in-law, William Lytle. A part of this plantation is now My Old Kentucky Home State Park. In 1799, John Rowan was chosen as a member of the convention that formed the new state constitution. He was appointed Secretary of State in 1804, and in 1806 he was elected to the 11th Congress from Nelson County during the term of President Thomas Jefferson. Rowan loved law and his political positions were used as a means of lending prestige to his legal practice.

He was frequently a member of the state legislature and in 1818, John Rowan was appointed Judge of the Court of Appeals. Although he served in that capacity for only two years, the title of Judge continued with him for the rest of his life. In 1824, he was elected to the U.S. Senate, in which he served six years.

When he was only 28 years old, Judge Rowan fought a famous duel with a Dr. Chambers, a fellow Bardstonian. The dispute began at an inn at Bardstown over an insignificant matter which grew to such point of pride in the mind of Chambers that he felt compelled to challenge Rowan to a duel. Rowan, however, declined to accept the challenge and sent Dr. Chambers his apologies. However, Dr. Chambers did not accept his apologies and forcefully renewed the challenge. Even when the duelists reached the designated location of the duel, Rowan tried once more to reach an agreement with Chambers, but to no avail. The duel took place and Chambers was shot near the heart and died an hour later. The law was changed as a result of this duel: Kentucky public officials are now required to take an oath that they will not engage in a duel.

Judge Rowan is described in Lewis Collins' Historical Sketches of Kentucky as: "a man devoted in his friendships and exceedingly urban in his manners; kind and hospitable in all his relations. He possesses an imposing person and dignified bearing. His colloquial powers were of the highest order, and made him the life of every company in which he mingled."

A Landmark is Built

When John Rowan acquired the Federal Hill property from his father-in-law, a basic log house was built on the property around 1798 and he and his wife took up residence there. It was in 1810 that Rowan began the first stages of building the home that he was to call Federal Hill.

"I am still in cabins," he wrote to his brother-in-law in October 1809, "but I have prepared the chief of my materials and shall certainly build next summer."

Rowan's career in law and politics between 1795 and 1815 took him away from Bardstown quite often. The influence of other places, and evolving American styles and building practices, surely played a large part in the final design of Federal Hill. Rowan's final house plan, decided upon sometime around 1815, was greatly influenced by houses found in various Maryland counties lying between the port city of Baltimore and Washington, D.C.

It was not uncommon at that time for a gentleman to take great pride acting as his own architect. Men like Rowan, products of late 18th-century classical education, were well-versed in building designs and were routinely familiar with the pattern books of the day. It is also generally accepted that Alexander Moore, a gifted housewright and woodworker, also had an impact on the design and executed the original woodwork and trim on the house between 1815 and 1818.

The ell-shaped wing was completed in 1812, and later became the service wing of the house consisting of one small chamber, kitchen and smokehouse. It was originally built as an extension of the log house residence to accommodate a growing family, visitors and the attendant servants. However, the wing was never large enough to serve the growing Rowan family and a new house had to be planned. It is generally accepted that the design for the massive front wing was not fully formed or perhaps not even contemplated in 1812.

Rowan actually built such a large and imposing house because of his large family and prominent position in the community. Besides nine children and numerous servants, at least two elderly relatives lived at Federal Hill for extended periods. After the ell-shaped wing was completed, it took six more years to finish the whole house.

The main house, built in the style of early Georgian, was more akin to residential styles built between 1750 and 1800 than the new Federal-American style which reached full popularity between 1790 and 1825. He very effectively combined the Georgian two-story proportions and window arrangement with the striking Federal-style entry.

The main house includes a basement and two-and-one-half stories. The brick house has six large rooms, 22-feet square, with 13-and-a-half-foot ceilings and walls 13-inches thick. The hall, a copy of

Independence Hall in Philadelphia, has twelve stars on each side of the arch. There are 13 windows across the front of the house and the stairs were constructed in sections of 13, believed to represent the 13 original colonies.

Slavery at Federal Hill

John Rowan Sr. was a slave owner before the construction of Federal Hill and he was assessed continuously for slave property in Nelson and Jefferson counties until his death in 1843. He defended slavery publicly, including a speech made by him on the floor of the U. S. Senate in 1830. Rowan like other slave owners bought, sold and hired slaves and he made specific bequests in his will for the sale and purchase of slaves. The purchase, sale and hiring of enslaved African Americans would have resulted in the separation of families. Rowan had familial and professional ties to Harrodsburg slave trader Robert Boyce. John's eldest son William L. Rowan married Boyce's daughter at Federal Hill in 1826. John Rowan Sr. represented Boyce in a landmark case that reached the U. S. Supreme Court in 1829.

William L. Rowan managed Federal Hill from 1822-1833. He was appointed a patroller Captain in Nelson County in 1831 [Runaway Slave Patrol]. William owned three slaves when he died of cholera at Federal Hill in 1833: Ben, age 30: and Charlotte, age 17 and her daughter Emily, age 2.

John Rowan Jr. who managed Federal Hill from 1833-1855, was taxed for seven slaves in 1840. His widow, Rebecca, made repeated requests in the 1850's to the estate Trustees for funds with which to purchase slaves to work the Federal Hill farm. The Trustees did not provide her with these funds. It is known from civil suits involving the John Rowan Sr. estate that by 1854 there were only "two old slaves" [Andrew and Jenny] living at Federal Hill. By 1861 Andrew had died and Rebecca was taxed for one slave [Jenny].

During Judge John Rowan's lifetime he was on intimate terms with several U.S. Presidents, entertaining them at Federal Hill as well as his Louisville home. Among them were: Andrew Jackson, James Monroe, John Quincy Adams and Martin Van Buren. At Federal Hill he also entertained at various times LaFayette, Henry Clay and Aaron Burr.

His son John Jr. was a worthy successor to his father and was instrumental in providing the inspiration for the song that was to later immortalize the home and its traditions.

Stephen Foster and My Old Kentucky Home

Stephen Foster was born in Pittsburgh on the Fourth of July, 1826, 50 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. On the same day, two former U.S. Presidents, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, died. His father, William Barclay Foster, was a cousin of Judge Rowan through the Barclays. Stephen was two years old when his oldest sister, Charlotte, visited her cousins the Barclays in Louisville and the Rowans in Bardstown.

At the age of seven, Stephen made his first trip to Kentucky when his mother took him and another sister, Henrietta, on a boat trip down the Ohio to Cincinnati and Louisville.

Because of the 1833 cholera epidemic, she stayed only a week in Louisville and did not visit Federal Hill. It is fortunate that she didn't because eight members of the Rowan family and eight servants died within 24 hours at Federal Hill, including William Lytle Rowan, eldest son of the Judge. They are all buried in the family cemetery which lies east of Federal Hill.

At an early age, Stephen displayed a talent for music and started composing as a youth. By the time he was 18, his first song was published. At the age of 20, he moved to Cincinnati where he was employed as a bookkeeper for a steamboat agency, Irwin and Foster, which was owned by his brother Dunning. Dunning was also a steamboat captain and Stephen had the opportunity to travel

with him down the Ohio River to Louisville where he could take a stagecoach to Bardstown. He was an occasional visitor at Federal Hill.

During the three years that Stephen lived in Cincinnati, he wrote a dozen songs that were published, including "Oh Susannah." Because of his success, Stephen moved back to Pittsburgh in 1850 to devote full time to his music. It was also in 1850 that Stephen married Jane McDowell, for whom he later wrote "Jeanie With The Light Brown Hair."

In 1852 the Fosters and some friends took a steamboat trip to New Orleans. On the return trip, they docked at Louisville and visited Federal Hill. While there, Foster was inspired to write the chorus of a song he had been working on and titled it "My Old Kentucky Home."

Rebecca Rowan (wife of John Rowan, Jr.) often related to family and friends her memory of Foster's visit when he was a guest at Federal Hill:

"In the bright summer weather they were sitting in the hall, Foster at the writing desk - when (he) took his flute and commenced to play, taking pen and paper to write. When he finished the song - words and music of My Old Kentucky Home Goodnight were complete."

A Mr. E. Baker Smith of Bardstown related in 1919 that: "I myself never saw Foster. I was then just a very busy boy, but I knew he was at the Rowans. He was the great popular song writer of the day. We all knew he was here. I know nothing of its writing except the story told at the time that there was a young lady of sweet voice visiting there in the house party; that Foster had written a song of Federal Hill and, at a dance given there the night before, the young lady sang the song for the first time it was heard in public, under Foster's coaching and with Foster playing the accompaniment. No, I do not recall her name. She was a stranger here."

In an interview with Mrs. Andrew J. Robinson in the Pittsburgh Press on September 12, 1900, she said she and her husband made the trip to New Orleans with Foster and his wife. "Possibly 'My Old Kentucky Home' was the only song that he really wrote from a personal recollection of a place. It was a reference to Federal Hill ... situated near Bardstown and was visited by Foster on this trip."

Known as "America's Troubador," Foster moved to New York City in late 1860. He faced many financial problems for the next several years, and in January, 1864 he met an untimely death after a fall in his room. He was only 37 years old.

Evelyn Foster Morneweck, niece of the composer said, "The sad part of Stephen's life was that he died without having reaped much from his songs. He sold the rights to "Old Folks at Home" (the Florida State Song) for \$200 - he thought that was all he would ever make out of it. He didn't even live to see some of his best known songs become popular and bring in any revenue."

Gradually My Old Kentucky Home Goodnight became associated with Federal Hill and by the latter part of the 19th century the home became known to the general public as My Old Kentucky Home.

It was not until the 20th century however, that the title became official after the home was purchased and turned over to the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The home was dedicated a state shrine on Foster's birthday, July 4, 1923.

My Old Kentucky Home State Park officially became a part of the Kentucky State Park System on February 26, 1936 after 15 years of work by the My Old Kentucky Home Commission, a committee that was responsible for the fund-raising campaign, the acquisition of the property from Madge Rowan Frost and the establishment of the state park.