

The Colonel William M. Caswell House



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The Colonel Caswell House

The Colonel Caswell house is located on the northwest corner of North 4th and North 5th streets, or what was originally the intersection of North 5th and Caswell Street. As early as 1890 this was called the Caswell addition, named after Colonel William M. Caswell who developed this area on the near northeast side of Knoxville. In the 1890 Knoxville City Directory, William M. Caswell is listed as the president of Knoxville Savings and Development Company, with offices at 161 North 4th Avenue.

In 1915, Colonel Caswell built the large, two story massed plan brick house at what was then 903 N. 5th Avenue. The house is a classic vernacular form of the Prairie style, characterized by a low pitched roof with widely overhanging eaves, one story wings or porches, details emphasizing horizontal lines, and often with massive square porch supports. The Prairie style originated in Chicago, and vernacular examples spread widely by pattern books and popular magazines. Most were built between 1905 and 1915, the style quickly fading from fashion after World War I. The Prairie or American Foursquare as it is sometimes called, is one of the few indigenous American house styles. It was developed by a group of Chicago architects who have come to be known as the Prairie School. Frank Lloyd Wright is the acknowledged master of the Prairie style.

William M. Caswell was born on June 26, 1846 in Russellville, Tennessee, the youngest child of General William Richard Caswell and Elizabeth Carter Gillespie. The Caswells were one of the most prominent pioneer families of upper East Tennessee. Colonel Caswell's father was the great-grandson of General Richard Caswell, first governor of North Carolina, and his mother was the great-granddaughter of General Landon Carter, son of Colonel John Carter who was the head of the Watauga Association. Moving to Knoxville just before the Civil War, Colonel Caswell's father was appointed Brigadier General in the Confederate Army by Governor Isham Harris and young William served near his father as a courier. After the war, William attended Edgehill Military School in Princeton, N.J. and also went to Washington and Lee University in Virginia. Although he served in the Civil War and attended military school, it is likely that "Colonel" was an honorary title.

The Caswell farm or "plantation" was located east of Knoxville where the John Sevier railroad yards are now located. After leaving the farm and moving to Knoxville, William married Miss Elizabeth Wilson Boyd on May 4, 1871. They had no children. At the time, William was working as a clerk in a shoe store, but he soon became a partner in a furniture store known as Boyd and Caswell. During his illustrious career he also served on the staffs of three governors, was an alderman from the 4th ward, and was chairman of the city finance committee. After he retired from the furniture business, Colonel Caswell became a real estate developer, and built houses on the 60 acre tract known as Caswell Addition. He donated part of this development to the city as Caswell Park. He also owned many other commercial and residential properties in town. In his later years, the Colonel invested in citrus farms in Florida and owned hundreds of acres of orange and grapefruit groves. He spent the winters in Florida until just a couple of years before his death. Colonel William Caswell died on August 11, 1926 in his 80th year. He is buried in Greenwood Cemetery. A lengthy obituary of this prominent Knoxvillean is published in the August 12, 1926 edition of the Knoxville Sentinel.

Charles M. Faulkner
Department of Anthropology
UT Knoxville

Home

Col. Caswell and his park

by Jack Neely

Every inning at the season-ending game against Mobile Thursday evening, they gave away a star player's jersey or signed baseball to a lucky ticketholder. At the last giveaway in the ninth, the prizegiver announced, "We'll see you next year in our *new facility!*" He said it with emphasis, as if he was expecting cheers. Bill Meyer Stadium echoed with a loud round of boos.

"It wasn't my decision, folks!" he said over the P.A.

The commemorative placards were marked *Bill Meyer Stadium: 1953—Final Season—1999*. They didn't hint there was more to it than that. I like Bill Meyer Stadium, the third baseball stadium built in this park, but it's just stacked cinderblocks. Even when it was built, it was already the victim of the sort of money-saving architectural compromise we've gotten used to in this town.

This *place*, more than this building, is what made it for me. When a foul ball went out the first base side, the sound guy always played the *kerplunk* tape, as we pictured a baseball splashing into First Creek, as many surely did. When a foul went long over the third base side, you watched the big decrepit knitting mill secretly hoping it might make it all the way through another one of those thousand windows, dozens of them already testaments of homeruns and long fouls. Freight trains went by; baseball is a workingman's game, and at this park, you felt it.

Bill Meyer Stadium's 46 years old, but we've been playing baseball in this park for right about 80 years, since before radio, since before Babe Ruth—who would pop a few homers here in his day—signed with the Yankees.

The *name* of the place goes back decades farther even than the old park, all the way back to the first baseball game played in Tennessee. The name of the place is Caswell Park.

William Caswell's father was a wealthy landowner; when the war broke out, the

Confederates called him a brigadier-general. At 15, young William

tagged along with his dad, helping out as a courier. The elder

Caswell had a short career as a Confederate. In August, 1862,

Gen. Caswell was surveying his plantation just east of town near

the Holston River when "some

unknown fiend" shot him off his horse, then beat him and cut his throat. Despite a \$2000 reward, Gen. Caswell's murder was never solved.

Anyway, in the summer of 1865, 19-year-old William Caswell and a group of other Confederate veterans put together a baseball team and played against—who else—a team of Knoxville Unionists. Caswell's team, the Holstons, won. Maybe it didn't quite make up for Appomattox, but it helped. After that, some of his best pals were old Unionists.

This son of a landed aristocrat got a job as a clerk in a shoe store; Caswell was later partner in a furniture business, and still later a real-estate tycoon. He eventually owned parts of downtown, including much of the new residential area between Fifth Avenue and Glenwood.

Even as an old man, *Colonel* Caswell, as we called him, was a handsome guy with a mustache, his longish gray hair swept straight back.

The colonel and his wife never had kids; pushing 70, he may have been thinking about his legacy when he donated a large piece of bottomland along First



Creek to be a public park and playground for a city that sorely needed one. At the time, the Knoxville Reds had been playing out at Chilhowee Park, which many found too remote—but soon enough, they were playing hardball here at Col. Caswell's Park.

He and his wife lived the last several years of their lives on North Fifth Avenue, easy walking distance from the ball field; surely he strolled over to his park on a summer afternoon to watch young men play the sport he'd helped introduce to Tennessee by playing it himself, 60 years before.

Late in the summer of '26—the year the Cardinals beat Babe Ruth's Yankees in the World Series—Col. Caswell died. At 80, he was among the last surviving veterans of that first Tennessee game.

That much I found out at the library. Picturing old Col. Caswell strolling to ball games from his house got me curious. On our office map I tried to find his address, 903 North Fifth, but it was so close to the Broadway interstate exchange that I couldn't tell whether his block still existed in the real world or not. Last Friday afternoon, I walked out to the end of Gay, through a corner of Fourth and Gill, underneath the interstate, and found North Fifth climbing a hill—a desiccated commercial area doing as well as could be expected in this neighborhood cut into slivers by the highway.

Up at the very top of the rise, at the improbable corner of North Fourth and North Fifth, is a handsome two-story brick house that now houses a business called Farmers Mutual. Handsome but not especially old-looking, definitely 20th century, I figured it might have been built in the '30s, maybe on the site of Col. Caswell's house, sometime after his death. I walked across the broad front porch and peered into an office. The startled office workers inside gestured me around to the main entrance on the side.

I was trying to frame my question. All I wanted to know was how old the house

was, see, because there was this guy named Caswell who may have lived near this property 80 years ago. I'm still not comfortable with asking strangers bizarre questions. I just wanted someone to confirm to me what I suspected, that this 20th century house was built after the Civil War veteran's death.

I opened the door and hadn't even said hello before I saw a plaque on the wall, headed *The Colonel Caswell House*—with a text written by the redoubtable Charlie Faulkner, UT professor of anthropology. They even had little copies of Dr. Faulkner's text, and glass trivets depicting the house, which, it turns out, was built in 1915, about the time Caswell was donating his park. Manager Scott Kehne, who has done some research into the Caswells and their house, showed me around; most of the fixtures are original, he says, including Mrs. Caswell's extravagant oak cabinets and the heavy iron chandelier adorned with the hooded brass heads of four laughing monks. The Caswells were Christians, Kehne's quick to point out, but in 1915 it wasn't unusual to have a little something to scare away the evil spirits.

So far, they've done the job. But like most that is worthwhile in Knoxville, the house is threatened by TDOT. The proposed interstate expansion may doom Col. Caswell's last home.

I asked Mr. Kehne if he knew where the Caswells' bedroom was. He conducted me upstairs, to the front. I stepped over to the big front windows and saw, before anything else, the tall lights of Bill Meyer Stadium. Every morning when old Col. Caswell got out of bed, what he saw out his window was mainly Caswell Park.

It's still there for the moment, still a promising spot even if baseball no longer wants anything to do with it. You can probably guess where I'll be tonight: at the playoffs, watching what may be the last pro baseball game ever played at Col. Caswell's Park, wishing those laughing monks were a little more potent. ☉

WILLIAM RICHARD CASWELL

(1809 - 1862)

(Lot 214)

William Richard Caswell, great grandson of the first American governor of North Carolina, was the son of Richard W. Caswell and Sarah (Lytle) Caswell of Murfreesboro. After attending Nashville University, he removed to East Tennessee and married Elizabeth Carter Gillespie, descendant of a prominent family.

He served in the Tennessee Militia during the 1830s and later in the Mexican War. A lawyer by profession, he was active in the judicial and political life of Knox County. Here, also, he was a large land - and- slave - holder and an early advocate of the Confederacy.

Before Tennessee seceded from the Union, Governor Harris appointed Caswell one of the few Brigadier Generals in the Provisional Army of Tennessee, which by October 29, 1861 became a part of the Confederate Armed Forces. "The Caswell Artillery" became a part of Capt. Hugh L.W. McClung's Tennessee Light Artillery Company, mustered into Confederate service at Knoxville on November 29, 1861.

In August, 1862, General Caswell was murdered about a half-mile from his home in East Knox County. Blame was placed on a runaway slave.