

## "Beautiful Dreamer" songwriter's statue may find a home in Struthers

written by Denise Collingwood, Struthers Historical Society



photo compliments of the Art Commission of Pittsburgh, PA.

A year ago the city of Pittsburgh removed the statue of Stephen Foster from public view. At this time, the Struthers Historical Society showed interest in moving the statue to Struthers. We were asked to wait a year, giving Pittsburgh time to find an adequate home for it within their city. The year has passed and a home in Pittsburgh has not been found.

Stephen Foster Collins is recognized as the father of American music and known as America's first professional songwriter. The great popularity of "Old Folds at Home", "Uncle Ned", "Old Kentucky Home", "Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair", "Camptown Races", "Oh! Susannah" and over one hundred fifty other American songs were written by Mr. Foster.

Stephen Collins Foster was born on July 4, 1726 at the family home in Lawrenceville, PA, now a suburb of Pittsburgh. He was the youngest living son of William Barclay Foster and Eliza Clayland Tomlinson Foster. Stephen attended private academies in Allegheny, Athens, and Towanda, Pennsylvania and received an education in English grammar, diction, the classics, penmanship, Latin, Greek, and mathematics. His education included a brief period at Jefferson College in Washington, Pennsylvania, now Washington & Jefferson College. Stephen taught himself to play the clarinet, violin, guitar, flute, and piano.

He did not have formal instruction in composition but he was helped by Henry Kleber (1816–97), a German-born music dealer in Pittsburgh.

You may ask why the Struthers Historical Society desires to display the Stephen Collins Foster statue. Stephen's father, William was a younger brother of Mary Foster Struthers. Mary married John Struthers in 1785, making Stephen the nephew of John Struthers, the family of which the city of Struthers was named.

During his boyhood years, as was the custom, the Foster family would rent out their white cottage overlooking the village of Lawrenceville and the winding Allegheny River to go to Uncle Struthers during the hot weather. It was near Youngstown where sister Henrietta Foster Wick resided.

Brother Morrison Foster wrote about Stephen's visits to Uncle Struthers farm:

*"When he was from ten to thirteen years old, he visited a great deal an old uncle, John Struthers, who had been a surveyor, hunter, and Indian fighter in the first settlement of the country, and who now, past eighty years old, was very fond of Stephen, and always please to welcome him to his log house in the Northwest territory. Old Uncle Struthers had dogs and rifles, and himself would lead the hunt at night for 'coons opossums, and such like nocturnal game. It was tame work to the old pioneer, who had been used to bears, panthers and hostile Indians. These hunts and the stories of adventure told by his aged relative, of course gave great pleasure to Stephen, and kindled the flame of his vivid fancy. One cold day, he was missed from the house, and was hunted for everywhere outside. At last, his uncle discovered him sitting up to his neck in a pile of chaff, watching the movements of the chickens and other barnyard animals -- "just thinking." as he briefly explained. The old gentleman always prophesied that Stephen, who even then displayed great originality and musical talent, would be something famous if he lived to be a man."*

In 1860, Stephen went to New York to fulfill a profitable offer from his publishers. In 1864, while at the American Hotel, he was taken with fever. After several days he arose and while washing himself, he fainted and fell across the wash basin, which broke and cut a gash in his neck and face. He was found by a chambermaid delivering fresh towels to his room. With assistance, he was placed in bed. At his

request, he was taken to Bellevue Hospital. He was so weakened by fever and loss of blood that he did not rally. On the 13th of January 1864, he died peacefully and penniless.

The statue of Stephen Collins Foster stood in Pittsburgh for over 118 years. It was sculpted by Italian emigre Giuseppe Moretti. It was removed from Schenley Plaza, a Pittsburgh park in April 2018 after criticism that the work is demeaning because it includes a slave sitting at his feet, plucking a banjo. It has been sitting in a storage lot out of public view.

When Stephen was a child, he often attended a Negro church with Olivia, a servant of the Foster family. Stephen was fond of their singing and boisterous devotions. Stephen thought the Negro melodies were too good to be lost, which he stored in his mind and incorporated into his songs.

The statue portrays Stephen Collins Foster standing with pen in hand writing music. At his feet sits fictional "Old Uncle Ned" strumming Steven's music on his banjo. The statue is a tribute to Stephen Collins Foster, not "Uncle Ned", was a character portrayed in a song of the same name. The statue portrays a kinship between Foster and the blacks who helped to inspire, and who performed, his music. Thomas Sowell noted years ago that slavery existed from time immemorial on every continent except Antarctica. The extraordinary historical fact is not the existence of slavery, but rather its abolition.

The Pittsburgh Arts Commission has asked the Struthers Historical Society for feedback from the Struthers Community as to thoughts and opinions of bringing the Foster statue to our city. The statue would be permanently placed on the back patio at the Frankfort House, home of the Struthers Historical Society and Museum.

Comments and opinions can be emailed to [contact@struthershistoricalsociety.com](mailto:contact@struthershistoricalsociety.com) or visit the Struthers Historical Society on Facebook, leaving a comment under the post of the Stephen Collins Foster statue.