

GEORGE W. MORRISON

AN ARTIST WHO CALLED NEW ALBANY HOME

In the spring of 1841 there arrived in New Albany a red-haired young man of 21 who was destined literally to leave his mark on the booming river town. He was George W. Morrison, seeking a likely spot to practice his profession as portrait and landscape painter. His choice of a location was a wise one, for his arrival marked the beginning of a 50-year career as an artist who called New Albany his home.

In the days before the development of photography the portrait painter found a ready market for his talents in all larger communities. The arrival of George Morrison in New Albany from Baltimore in 1841 was indicative of the growth of the city. Traveling portrait painters had visited the town in earlier years, putting on canvas the features of well-to-do citizens, then packing paints and brushes, had moved on to fresh markets. But George Morrison was able to make New Albany his home and earn his livelihood as an artist . . . a sure indication that the town had become a city.

He was a native of Baltimore and had learned the craft there in his teens. No doubt he was a student of Rembrandt and Raphael Peale, famous painter sons of an even more famous painter father, Charles Dilson Peale. The Peales operated the only art school in Baltimore at that time.

When Morrison moved west to seek his fortune, he first went to Connersville, Indiana, at the head of the Whitewater River Valley, an area early

known for its support of art and learning. But he apparently was unable to find there a sufficient volume of work, for within a year he was in New Albany.

He announced his arrival with a small advertisement in the *New Albany Gazette* and invited the public to examine specimens of his work at his studio on Main Street near Bank. The public liked what they saw, for soon the commissions began coming in and many of the portraits he painted are still prize possessions of New Albany families. Others are at the New Albany Public Library, and one hangs in the State House in Indianapolis . . . his portrait of Ashabel P. Willard, the governor from New Albany.

His fame spread beyond New Albany and he received many commissions from Jeffersonville and a wide area of Southern Indiana, and even from Louisville despite the fact that other portrait painters were working there. Many examples of his work are also said to be spread throughout the Mississippi Valley and particularly New Orleans because of the close contacts of New Albany with the South during the palmy days of river boating.

Morrison did not confine his painting to portraits. His work included canvases of river boats and quite a number of landscapes. One large canvas of a view of New Albany from Silver Hills painted in the early 1850s hangs now in the New Albany Public Library. Morrison made many paintings of the Silver Hills area, one of his favorite spots around New Albany. He loved the view from the hill so much that he built his home there . . . on property now owned by the Endris family . . . and at his death in 1893 he was buried there . . . but his body has since been moved to Fairview Cemetery. His home on the hill burned to the ground in 1899, six years after the artist's death.

Those who knew Morrison described him as quiet and retiring, with a flair for poetry and a passionate love of painting. Though he was modest and unassuming, he never skipped an opportunity to place his work before the

public. In the days when art galleries were an unknown institution in the Middle West, he exhibited at the Indiana State Fair and at the Floyd County Fair, as other artists from over the state did. His work always won high award and often was judged best of all.

Though Morrison never achieved worldly wealth by painting, he won a host of friends in New Albany who remembered fondly the familiar figure dressed in a soft felt hat, flowing black tie and black broadcloth suit. And the work he left is a treasured legacy of the past, an essential part of the New Albany heritage.

[Vol. III, Historical Series No. 14]