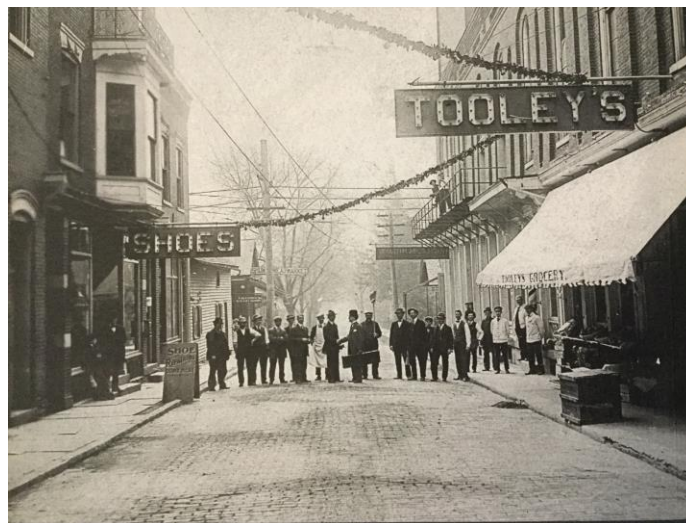


The Phillips Sisters



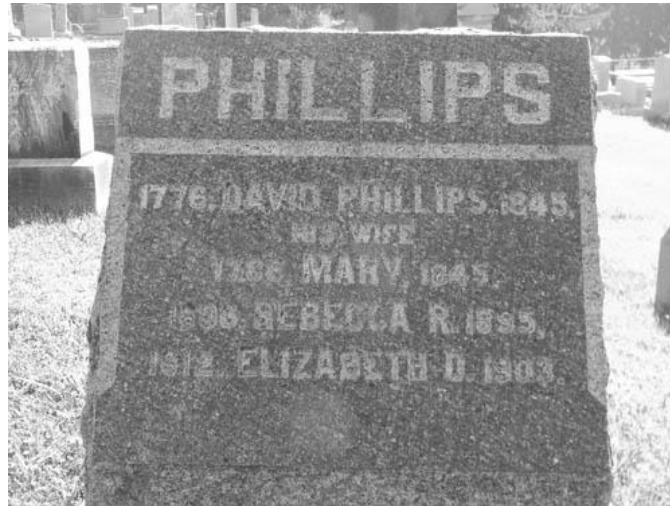
Photo Courtesy Morning Press, 2/22/1940

As the face of Main and Market Streets changes through the years, it's easy to get caught up in wondering what things were like in a certain location many moons ago. We've witnessed and benefitted from the expansion of the Bloomsburg Public Library and were aware of its prior location on the second floor above a shoe store on Centre Street. Note library bay window in photo below. So, what used to occupy the space where the current brick library building stands? That brings us to the delightful story of the Phillips Sisters: Rebecca (Becky) and Elizabeth (Betsy).



Centre Street, Bloomsburg – CCHGS photo collection

Rebecca R Phillips (1808-1895) and Elizabeth D. Phillips (1812-1903) were the spinster daughters of David (1776-1845) and Mary (1786-1845) Phillips. They had earlier lived in a log cabin where the J. P. Tustin mansion on First Street eventually was erected. The family then moved to a story-and-a-half frame house during the sisters' childhood which occupied the site of the present-day Bloomsburg Public Library.



In the 1860 census, they are nestled among other well-known Bloomsburg families, i.e. Neal and McKelvey among others, on the broad Market Street thoroughfare. They were both described as “mantuamakers” as their occupation. From Wikipedia: A mantua (from the French manteuil or "mantle") is an article of women's clothing worn in the late 17th century and 18th century. Originally a loose gown, the later mantua was an overgown or robe typically worn over stays, stomacher and a co-ordinating petticoat. In 1880 Becky is the head of household with ‘keeping house’ as her occupation and Betsy is a milliner.

Both sisters had been engaged to be married in their younger years, but both were jilted. This didn't faze them and they were beloved by everyone who knew them, including all the children in the neighborhood. One neighbor, William Neal, recalled this about the sisters' reluctance to discuss their age (Morning Press article, 2/22/1940):

William Neal, who was born in 1812 and whose home occupied the present site of the Caldwell Cathedral, always said that “Betsy” and he were the same age until they reached forty. “Then each year meant an added year to my age, but ‘Betsy’ always lost a year with each passing birthday anniversary.”

Rebecca suffered a fractured hip in her younger days confining her to a wheelchair for most of her life and Elizabeth, the more outgoing sister, provided her loving care. Betsy outlived her older sister by several years and eventually in her 90s, she required care herself. J. L. Dillon, by previous agreement with the sisters, cared for them in their declining years. They had signed over their house to him after their deaths in exchange for his care.

Their home was unquestionably one of the first built in Bloomsburg, with a huge fireplace on the first floor and a cellar that was always very cool in summer—a cellar in which Bryfogle Brothers placed their fruits and vegetables each night during the two years they operated a “green grocery” in the one story frame building that stood for years on the site of the present P.P. & L.

offices and where the First National Bank later added a wing to their building. Only a very gracious lady could have been thus bothered, but "Betsy" was always hospitality itself. "Becky" merely sat in her wheelchair and smiled. (Morning Press 2/22/1940 article)

Given their background of talent with a needle, they were remembered especially for their beautiful gowns which they brought out occasionally for show. Among Bloomsburg's pioneers, they would've been considered to live a life of affluence. Dr. Waller remembered them well. Their lifestyle allowed for traveling and the creation of fond memories together while away "visiting."

Following Betsy's death the house was used for several years as a storage house for the United Telephone Company. It was then purchased by the Y.M.C.A. directors as the site for a Y.M.C.A. building when the Masonic fraternity purchased the William Neal residence which had been remodeled for Y.M.C.A. use. The building was removed and the lot lay vacant until it was purchased from the surviving Y.M.C.A. directors as the site for the Bloomsburg Public Library. (Morning Press 2/22/1940 article).