

THE BALLAD OF COURTHOUSE JACK

Stephen Wiist

On November 14, 1890, Matthias "Jack" Shaffer, a local Bloomsburg contractor, was awarded a contract by Columbia County in the amount of \$21,600 to remodel the front façade of the County Courthouse. On the same day the contract was approved, Shaffer began bringing building materials to the work site. Along with the piles of wood scaffolding, sand and stone,

Shaffer brought a large yellow dog named Jack. Jack, a six-year old mongrel, and Matthias were described as being inseparable. Matthias, in fact, thought so highly of his canine friend that he named him "Jack" after himself. In order to distinguish between the two, people often referred to the dog as "Little Jack" and his master as "Big Jack."

Little Jack's job on the work site was to make sure the building materials stayed safe from theft or vandals. Considering his rather benign personality, however, most potential thieves or vandals probably did not have much to be concerned about. Jack's life was fairly routine. At the end of each workday he would bid goodbye to Matthias, guard the work site during the night, and then spend the following day at the side of his beloved companion. This routine continued uninterrupted until the evening of April 30, 1891.

Matthias Shaffer was always considered a man of robust health. He hardly ever missed a day of work due to illness. During the day of April 30th, however, he began to feel sick and uncharacteristically went home early to rest. The same evening he suffered a heart attack and died, leaving behind a wife, four sons, two daughters, and Jack. The next morning news of Shaffer's death quickly spread around town. Three days later, on May 2nd, a large number of friends accompanied his remains to Rosemont Cemetery, only about one-quarter of a mile from the Courthouse work site and the spot where Little Jack was patiently waiting for his master to return.

Jack waited at the courthouse for Matthias to return for four and one-half years until he died on November 25, 1895. All the local newspapers, and some as far away as Williamsport and Wilkes-Barre, carried notice of Jack's death. The local *Columbian* carried the following story:

COURT HOUSE JACK DEAD

Every one who for the past five years has transacted business at the Court House, has noticed a large dog whom every one called "Jack" roaming, apparently aimlessly around the corridors and rooms. His history is known to nearly every one. When the addition to the courthouse was awarded to Mathias Shaffer . . . and as the work progressed, "Jack," who was owned by Mr. Shaffer, accompanied him to and from his work. During the progress of the work, Mr. Shaffer died, but Jack still continued making his trips, and would go from office to office seeking his master. As years went by, he became too old to make the daily journey, and adopted D. [David] R. Coffman, the janitor [the Court

Crier], as his master, who has been caring for his wants ever since. He had not however given up his search until last Monday, when he died. His body was carefully buried by Mr. Coffman [in the backyard garden of his home at 840 Market Street], who had become greatly attached to the dog, as had indeed every one who knew of his faithfulness to his former master." [*Columbian*, November 29, 1895]

Likewise, the local *Democratic Sentinel* noted that "Poor old Court House Jack no longer lies in the corridor of the Court House looking wistfully for his master. Poor old Jack died on Monday 25th inst. At 5 p.m., aged 10 years." "Jack," the author of the obituary observed, "never forgot his master or any one who were kind to him. May the same be said of us and all of us at the last."

During his four and one-half year stay at the courthouse, Jack's primary resting place was at the entrance to the Office of the County Commissioners. His exploits were frequently the cause of controversy. On at least two occasions, Jack was formally "arrested" and taken into custody by the Sheriff for offenses like urinating on the floor, chewing holes in the furniture, and gnawing on the large ornate doors leading to the Commissioner's Office. Once, after being detained by the sheriff, Jack made headlines by escaping from custody by "chawing the windows, going from one to the other making wood and splinters fly until finally one of the lights gave way and yellow Jack was again a free dog." [*Democratic Sentinel*, August 9, 1895]

Despite his occasional scrapes with the law, Jack was genuinely liked by almost everyone with whom he came into contact and he was universally admired for his unwavering devotion to Mathias Shaffer (his original owner) and Davey R. Coffman (his adopted owner). In an editorial appearing in the March 23, 1894 issue of the *Democratic Sentinel*, the writer reflecting on Jack's place in the community expressed a hope that when Jack "...at last goes, as his master has gone, THEY WILL ERECT A MONUMENT TO HIS MEMORY WHEREON WILL BE INSCRIBED IN GOLDEN LETTERS HIS MANY VIRTUES AND HIS SAD FATE.

When the Columbia County Commissioners, William Soberick, Chris Young, and Leroy Diehl, learned about the story of "Courthouse Jack," they placed plaque at the main entrance to the courthouse in November 2001 commemorating Jack's unique place in the history of the county.

