

Mishler's "Ten-Hour" House

So many inquiries have been made at various times anent that most remarkable feat in building annals in this city—the famous “ten-hour house”—that a few facts in regard thereto may be found worthy of a niche in the chronicles of the proceedings of your Society. Thirty-five years have rolled by since the master mechanic and humble laborer united their brain and brawn in a zealous attempt to execute what is to all intents and purposes a world's record in building, and as each year comes and goes the pretty little house at the southern extremity of Prince street grows in interest and curiosity. As a preliminary remark, it may be stated that, despite the disparagement of those people who would claim that a structure erected in the incredibly small space of ten hours must of necessity be of a most unsubstantial character, yet the dwelling to-day stands as firm and intact as many others which have required months in their construction—and even at that it has been tenanted continuously for thirty-five years.

Dr. Benjamin Mishler, the builder of the “ten-hour house,” was born in the year 1814, and died June 8, 1876, three years after the house was built. Dr. Mishler was the maker of the far-famed Mishler's Bitters, and a very well-known resident of Lancaster. Moreover, he was an advertiser far in advance of his day, as the files of the newspapers of that time clearly reveal. Being comfortably “fixed,” it is natural to presume that it was merely

in the pursuance of a whim that Dr. Mishler attempted and executed this feat, and in the consummation of which he has handed his name down to future generations linked with an unsullied record.

The "ten-hour house" was, however, not the first attempt made by Benjamin Mishler to build a house in record speed. His first effort, it appears, was to build a house in the space of twenty hours. The site of the building was on Howard Avenue (at that time Middle street), next door to the Old Lion Brewery, according to a note left in the handwriting of the late Walter A. Kieffer. On a visit to that section recently I was informed by a gentleman residing in the neighborhood that the building had been torn down some years ago, to make way for the American Caramel Company's immense plant. This dwelling, I was informed by another party, was built about the year 1868, which, if that date is correct, preceded the "ten-hour house" by about five years. A laborious search of the old newspaper files failed to throw any light upon the first attempt of Dr. Mishler, but it is claimed that it was built in the space of nineteen hours, one hour less than the proposed time.

After a rest of several years at least following the building of the nineteen-hour house, Dr. Mishler set at work to beat that record, and proposed to build a house in the yet shorter time of sixteen hours, or less.

The site of the "ten-hour house" is known as 533 South Prince street. The time for the execution of the feat was fixed as the first day of August, 1873. Advance notice, it seems, had been given out to the people of the city concerning the event, and great interest was occasioned on all sides,

so that on the day set for the building hundreds of people had gathered on the grounds, necessitating the presence of several policemen to curb the crowds, and prevent them from interfering with the workmen.

The cellar foundation had previously been laid, and the building materials collected on the grounds. In conversation with a gentleman lately who had been engaged in the construction of the dwelling I was told that all the advance work possible had been done prior to the day of building. The stairs had been put together, the window frames constructed ready to place in position and the stoops made, beside all the minor articles necessary to a finished house.

It is most natural to suppose that, when the signal for starting was given at six o'clock, on the morning of August 1, 1873, no sound of Babel voices rose from the throats of the more than one hundred workmen as they set about to erect the dwelling. It is easily to be conceived that each man had been given explicit instructions previously as to his respective duty, and that each and all glided about, here and there, with the easy motion of automatons, and that "confusion worse confounded" was only conspicuous by its absence in the building of the "ten-hour" house.

On commenting upon the great feat, the Lancaster Daily Express, in its issue of August 1, had the following:

"The Ten-Hour House: It has been a subject of some discussion throughout the city for several weeks past, that Benjamin Mishler, of Bitters notoriety, intended erecting a two-story brick house in sixteen hours—the material to be prepared and collected on the building site previous to the day of the great feat. To-day was the ap-

pointed time, and the extremity of South Prince street the site selected. At the appointed hour—six o'clock this morning—the material was found to be on hand, furnished as follows: The woodwork from the Centre Square establishment of Miller & Mercer; the bricks from Coonley's; the lime from Herr's; the tin roof and spouting from Jacob Gable & Co's., and the following master mechanics were on hand to superintendent and assist in the several branches of work: Jacob Gable & Co., to do the tinning; Peter Rutt, master mason; Broch & Benedict to superintend the plastering; Harry Horner and D. W. Landis the carpenter work; McCullom & Bateman the painting; in all there were upwards of 100 hands to do the work, including a number from Columbia and elsewhere. The cellar foundation was already laid and precisely at six o'clock the men went to work. The building is to be a two-story brick, with eight rooms and tin roof. At noon to-day the walls were up, and the roof was being put on, while the first story was not only rough, but white plastered, and the bricks were painted and penciled as neatly as we generally find in ordinary houses. There is no doubt that the building will be completed before six o'clock this evening, and it is expected that Harry Mishler (son of Dr. Benjamin Mishler and who is to occupy the building for a dwelling) will have his furniture moved in and be taking his supper at that hour; Mr. J. T. Reading, the well-known photographer, has been engaged to photograph the structure once every hour during the stages of its progression, and we understand that a set of these pictures is to be presented by Mr. Mishler to each of the one hundred men engaged in the work."

At half-past four o'clock in the afternoon, exactly ten and a half hours from the first trip-trip of the hammer, the last nail had been driven into the structure, and the dream of Dr. Mishler was an accomplished fact. Tables were quickly moved in, and, it is said, as if in verification of the statement of the "Express," supper was partaken of by the family.

The day following, August 2, the Lancaster Express printed the following notice of the event:

"Mishler's House: The great feat of building a comfortable brick house in ten and one-half hours was accomplished by our skilled mechanics, under the direction of Benjamin Mishler, and it is, perhaps, the greatest building feat on record. All honor to our Lancaster workmen! In our mention of the several firms yesterday it was stated that John Gable & Co. did the tinning. This was an error, and should have read George Gable & Co., Mr. Gable leading the work himself. There were five tinsmiths and they laid eight hundred square feet of tin in an hour and a half. Who can beat that? It should also have been stated, in connection with the carpenter work of the building, that Major Ephraim Spera, the veteran carpenter, and now foreman of the extensive steam sash and door factory of Sturgis & Spera, superintended the carpenters—leading them nobly in the work. He was assisted by seven other first-class workmen from the establishment."

The dwelling is at present occupied by Mr. John Abele, the efficient police officer of the Fourth ward.

Long stand the "ten-hour house!"

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