

'Colonel Johnny,' boss of Louisville

Excerpt from the Encyclopedia of Northern Kentucky

By Jack Wessling

John Henry Whallen (1850-1913), Irish Catholic entrepreneur and Democratic Party boss, was the son of immigrants, Patrick and Bridget Burke Whallen.

When John was a young boy, the family moved from New Orleans to Maysville, Ky., and later to Newport. By the time Whallen was 11 years old, the family was living at Grants Lick, where John came into contact with some Confederate Army recruiters. In spite of being so young, he convinced the recruiters to allow him to enlist. John H. Whallen thus became one of the youngest soldiers ever to serve in the Confederate Army.

He was assigned to the Kentucky 4th Cavalry, the same unit in which Campbell countians Absolom Columbus Dickens, William Francis Corbin, Thomas Jefferson McGraw and Squire Grant also served.

Initially, Whallen was a gunpowder carrier and later a courier for Gen. John Hunt Morgan. Confederate Gen. Basil Duke and Capt. Bart Jenkins described Whallen as one of their best soldiers. Whallen served for about three years, mostly in Virginia.

For his military service, the Daughters of the Confederacy presented Whallen with their highest award, the Cross of Honor. State officials in Kentucky also honored him by making him a Kentucky Colonel, and thereafter he was affectionately known as "Colonel Johnny."

At the end of the Civil War, Whallen moved to Saratoga and Williamson (now 11th) streets in Newport, where he worked as a horsecar driver and as a lieutenant with the Newport Police Department. He also began operating a bar on what later became Liberty Street.

In 1880, Johnny and his younger brother James moved to Louisville, where they opened two vaudeville showplaces, the Buckingham Theater and the New Brunswick Saloon. The two theaters took up the entire block bounded by Green and Jefferson and Third and Fourth streets.

The brothers soon learned that family-type businesses did not return sufficient profit, so they switched to the bigger and bawdier burlesque shows. As their business grew, they expanded their holdings by purchasing the Empire and Casino theaters in Brooklyn, N.Y., and began operating a chain of burlesque theaters.

To protect his somewhat unsavory businesses, Whallen resorted to boss rule. He contributed to the emerging labor unions, paid off key officials, gave police free admission to his clubs, and set up assistance programs to help needy families. Many accused him of subverting the election process by paying people to vote and engaging in other ballot box irregularities. In addition, he is said to have hand-picked most of the Democratic candidates running for public office in Louisville. He also controlled the awarding of more than 1,200 city patronage jobs.

Whallen felt that these moves would help protect his businesses from governmental controls and periodic protests by citizens groups.

Although never elected to public office, Whallen virtually ran the City of Louisville from his Green Room at the Buckingham Theater. He became immensely popular, especially among Irish and German Catholics, blue-collar workers and immigrants.

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In 1905, confronted with considerable evidence of wrongdoing, the Kentucky Court of Appeals removed from office all recently elected officials and appointed newspaper publisher Robert Bingham the temporary mayor. Thus ended more than 30 years of Whallen's boss rule, and Louisville politics eventually returned to some semblance of normalcy.

John H. Whallen was married three times, first to Marian Hickey, by whom he had three children, Ella, Nora and Orri. His second wife, Sarah Jane Whallen, was childless. His third wife, Grace Edwards Goodrich, had a daughter, Gracie, whom Whallen later adopted.

John Henry Whallen died at age 63. Numerous friends and politicians, including Gov. James B. McCreary, attended his funeral service. Whallen was buried in a mausoleum at St. Louis Catholic Cemetery in Louisville.

After Whallen's death, his brother James attempted to continue running their empire but lacked his brother's charisma and political acumen.

The land on which John Henry Whallen's home and estate were located later became the site of Chickasaw Park. Following James Whallen's death in 1930, his home at 4420 River Park Drive was sold to the Archdiocese of Louisville and later became the site of Bishop Flaget High School.

Each Monday The Post prints excerpts from the forthcoming "The Encyclopedia of Northern Kentucky," edited by Paul A. Tenkotte and James C. Claypool. Visit www.nkyencyclopedia.org on the Web.