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The blue-eyed lassie and the  
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<sup>e</sup>  
The Blue-Eyed Lassie  
and the  
Renwicks in Ithaca

BY WILLIAM HEIDT, JR.  
<sup>1)</sup>  
*Ithaca City Historian*



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## Note

For several years we have read references here and there that the Blue-Eyed Lassie of Robert Burns' poem lived and died in the Renwick Heights suburb. Compiling these brief references has resulted in this fragment rather than the more detailed account anticipated.

In her native Scotland, she was Jean or Jane Jeffrey, but here she was the wife of William Renwick, son of the owner by purchase of Lot 88 in the original Military survey. Most of her life was spent as his widow who had been left with seven children.

These are but the basic facts of her life here. Little otherwise of that life seems to have been recorded notwithstanding a search that included possible sources in Seattle, Wash., New York City, London, Glasgow, Liverpool, and Washington, D. C. At this point the search was abandoned. Yet there lingers the belief that hidden in some forgotten scrapbook will be found the complete account of a fascinating experience that befell this Scottish lassie.

Perhaps publication of this fragment will initiate a new interest that will eventually reveal the lost narrative. To all who read this goes an invitation to take up the challenge and prepare an account appropriate for another of the historical pamphlets in the DeWitt Historical Society series.

## *The Blue-Eyed Lassie Charms the Poet*

The Blue-Eyed Lassie of Robert Burns' poem, *I Gaed a Waefu' Gate Yestreen*, once made her home within the environs of today's Ithaca. She came during the early years of the nineteenth century as the widow of William Renwick who had inherited one half of his father's undeveloped estate of hillside and flatlands at the head of Cayuga Lake.

Date of her coming is not now known, nor is it known how many of her seven children came to dwell with her in the family residence on the hillside across Esty Road from Indian Spring. Fire destroyed the house in 1871, and during development of the present high-school complex the spring, too, was obliterated as a landmark. Older residents, however, still point out its location on East Shore Drive on Route 34, about midway northward along the eastern line of the school property.

Though we do not know the date of her coming to occupy the estate, her death, and burial in City Cemetery, are reported as having occurred in 1850, when she was 77 years old. A recent search of the so-called "Old Obituary Book" of cemetery records failed to enlarge this meager information. Nor can it be determined whether the family dwelt here the year around or were part-time residents of New York City, base of the Renwick family of merchants, professionals and factotums.

The lassie who charmed the poet was Jean Jeffrey, a daughter of the Rev. Andrew Jeffrey, minister of the Presbyterian Church at Lochmeban, Dumfries, Scotland. Burns had paid a social call on the minister's family when the lassie was in her fifteenth year, the specific date not stated. This year, however, has been determined by working back from her age of 35 at her husband's death in 1808 to fix her birth year as 1773. This date is substantiated by her age of 77 when she died in 1850. Thus, the ages

point to 1788 as the year of the poet's visit to the Jeffrey home.

At the time this computation was made, it was necessary to forego allowance for the months and days of the month on which events essential to a factual conclusion could be based. Several years after this determination, however, the specific date was established as 1789. This date is given as the year in which the poem was written, and, from this fact, the date of Burns' visit is established. This date appears in the list of contents of *The Poems of Robert Burns* in the sixth volume of *The Five-Foot Shelf of Books* commonly referred to as *The Harvard Classics*. It was published by P. F. Collier & Son, New York; copyrighted 1909.

Ever susceptible to feminine personalities, Burns expressed himself as delighted with the charming manner in which Jean assisted in the entertainment provided him. As a token of heartfelt appreciation, upon departure Burns presented his Scottish charmer with the poem composed at the time and popularly referred to as *The Blue-Eyed Lassie*.

The two stanzas were written upon the flyleaf of the family Bible, a choice on which one may wish to spend a moment's speculation. Was this selection a conceit of the poet, or was it a reaction of a lassie tinged with romanticism engendered by the events of the moment? Whatever the motivation, the Bible became the repository for the poet's effusion which survived the minister's admired daughter for twenty-one years, only to succumb to a fire that levelled the Renwick family residence here in 1871.

The poet's two stanzas presented here are from *The Poetical Works and Letters of Robert Burns with Introduction and Notes* by Robert Ford. Glasgow, 1903. The John C. Winston Co.

## *The Poem*

I GAED A WAEFU' GATE YESTREEN

*(I Went a Woeful Way Yesterday Night)*

I gaed a waefu' gate yestreen,  
A gate I fear I'll dearly rue;  
I gat my death frae twa sweet een,  
Twa lovely een o' bonie blue.  
'Twas not her golden ringlets bright,  
Her lips, like roses wet wi' dew,  
Her heaving bosom, lily-white—  
It was her een sae bonie blue.

She talk'd, she smil'd, my heart she wyl'd;  
She charm'd my soul I wist na how;  
And ay the stound, the deadly wound,  
Cam fra her een sae bonie blue.  
But "spare to speak, and spare to speed;"  
She'll aiblins listen to my vow:  
Should she refuse, I'll lay me dead  
To her twa een sae bonie blue,

A glossary of these unfamiliar Scottish terms follows:  
*gaed*, went; *waefu'*, woeful; *gate*, way; *frae*, from; *een*, eyes; *wyl'd*,  
enticed; *stound*, heart pang; *sae*, so: *aihlins*, perhaps.

Should readers find the lassie's name sometimes given as Jean or Jane, Ford's detailed research even refers to her in a footnote as Jeanie. This is taken to indicate than Jean is the correct form of her Christian name, especially since it is one favored in Scotland. Jean Armour, whom Burns married, and Jean, duchess of

Gordon, were at least two women so named who played roles in the poet's troubled life.

Finally, legend has Jean Jeffrey coming to America with her parents and living in Aurora, N. Y., before locating here. This year or that of her marriage have 'not been determined. But the year of her husband, William Renwick's, death in 1808 is a matter of court record in which she is listed as 35 years old and the mother of seven children. These facts point to a youthful marriage a few years after the poet's visit, a conclusion that finds support in the birth of her son, Robert Jeffrey Renwick, at Liverpool in 1793.



## *She Comes Here as William Renwick's Wife*

The Ithaca residence of the newcomers was set amidst a 600-acre tract lying along the southern and eastern shores of Cayuga Lake adjacent to the northern boundary of Simeon DeWitt's domain. Commonly known as the Renwick Tract for more than a century and a half, today much of the area is embraced by Stewart Park and the residential suburb of Renwick Heights.

In the Heights area were located the farm buildings, all east of East Shore Drive. The barn was up the hill a short distance, on the foundation of which "Dick" Hutchinson erected a residence that in recent years was owned by Hugh Fenner. Most of the land had been cleared early and made arable so that large crops of potatoes were long produced on site of today's high school.

Renwick Tract actually began as Lot No. 88 in the military township of Ulysses as mapped under the direction of Simeon DeWitt, surveyor general of New York. Between 1784 and 1790 he supervised the laying out of twenty-six such townships in the former Iroquois possessions in the heartland of the State. This mapping was done in preparation for drawings by Revolutionary War veterans of bounty lands promised them by the State for military service.

It was on July 9, 1790, that the area known under the Renwick designation formally entered local history when Andrew Moody, or Moodie, of Lamb's Artillery, drew Lot No. 88, as recorded in the Balloting Book. He did not retain the wilderness acreage long for on December 12 of that year he sold the tract to James Renwick of New York City. The new owner died intestate in 1802. It is not known what efforts he may have undertaken to improve his holdings.

By a subsequent court decision, it was determined that James Renwick, at the time of his death, possessed the premises in fee

simple. Surviving him were his son William and a granddaughter, Sarah Kemple, as his only heirs-at-law. The son died in 1808 at New York City, possessed in fee simple of one undivided individual half interest in the Ithaca property which his father had owned.

Subsequent to the death of William Renwick, his niece Sarah Kemp, commenced action in the Court of Chancery of New York State against her cousins, the children of William, for the purpose of partitioning the land owned by the original James. In July 1815, the court made and entered a decree to the effect that Sarah Kemp was the owner in fee simple of one undivided half of the premises formerly owned by James, deceased, which partition was duly set apart as her share therein.

The court further adjudged and decreed that the children of William Renwick, deceased, were possessed in fee simple of the other undivided half of the property which was set apart to them as tenants in common, subject, however, to the dower right of their mother Jane Renwick. (Note use of Jane.)

Shortly after the final decree of the Court of Chancery, Sarah entered into the actual possession and enjoyment of the premises set apart to her, and so remained until her death. She left a will, duly proven in Queens County, by which will she devised all the property to her cousins, the children of William, excepting James and Robert J [effrey] whose shares she bequeathed to their children in fee simple.

It has been claimed that about 1853 the Renwick heirs sued some of the Moody heirs for a slander of title and that the defendants paid handsomely. There has been found no official record of such a suit, however. There is a record that in May 1864 the Moody heirs executed a mortgage of \$15,000 on the property to Matthew Hollenbeck. This mortgage was assigned to Hollenbeck's executor, Matthew H. Livingston, and by him assigned to Franklin C. Cornell.

It was claimed by the Renwick heirs that, at the time this mortgage was executed, the Moody heirs were none of them in possession of any part of the property or held any title what-

ever to the same. They further claimed that the mortgage was without any consideration and that the subsequent assignments also were made without consideration.

Soon after assignment of the mortgage to Cornell, he began an action in foreclosure. In due time the estate was sold under foreclosure proceedings and purchased by Horace I. Smith of Ithaca, who immediately began ejectment proceedings against the local Renwick heirs. Their interest embraced about a fifth of the original tract but they were in possession of it. Renwick heirs residing in New York City were owners of the larger interest.

This suit in ejectment was at issue in the March 1883 term of Circuit Court in Tompkins County, but was adjourned on account of the death of the prosecuting attorney's mother. Preparations were then made by the defendants for later trial, but the plaintiff abandoned the suit. This action left the Renwicks in possession of the estate.

At his death William Renwick left surviving him his widow, Jean Jeffrey Renwick, and their seven children: James, William, John, Isabella, Agnes, Jane and Robert Jeffrey Renwick. The last named was known in Ithaca as Major Renwick in recognition of the rank he attained while serving in the Black Watch Regiment of the Highlanders during the Napoleonic wars. Jane became the wife of Admiral Charles Wilkes (1798-1877), commander of the United States Antarctic Expedition of 1840.

Major Renwick, born November 14, 1793, at Liverpool, England, appears to have taken possession of the Ithaca property in 1820, presumably as manager for his mother, for the brother John was then a minor at 17. Postmaster at Ithaca from May to December 1821, the Major at one time resided on the northwest corner of Tioga and Seneca Streets. This property he sold to Thomas C. Thompson, a merchant tailor living there in 1864.

Ralph Thatcher, a young clerk in Quigg's store during the 1870's, in later years recalled seeing Major Renwick and his trustworthy saddle horse. Frequently the Major would ride uptown, tarry at his favorite drinking spots, and then mount his steed and start for home. Wearing a beaver hat and sitting

his mount, Thatcher averred he was a striking figure even during his last years. On occasion he slid from his saddle to the ground where he lay in a stupor but guarded by the faithful horse until the Major was able to remount and ride again.

## *His Children the Major's Heirs*

Major Renwick died in Ithaca May 24, 1875, aged 81. In his will dated August 6, 1873, he lists James J [effrey] Renwick and Louise Williams as his executors and names as heirs-at-law and next of kin:

“Louise J. Williams, Alice J. Mowry, Victoria R. Mix, all over twenty-one years of age, and all reside in the Town of Ithaca, except Victoria R. Mix (wife of James R. Mix) and she resides at Westfield, Chautauqua County, N. Y., and all children of the testator.

“Also William R. Renwick, Frederick Renwick, Mary A. Swan and Mary A. Callendar, all of whom are over twenty-one years of age and reside in the City of New York, and all are children of the testator, except Mary A. Callendar, who is a granddaughter, being the only child of his deceased daughter Jane.”

Eleanor Renwick, widow of Major Renwick, was born at Newark, N. J., in 1816, a daughter of Archibald and Mary Bird. <sup>1902</sup> She died May 12, 1902, at the home of her daughter Louise (Mrs. J. J. Williams), 120 East Fall Street, Ithaca. She had lived alone for many years, coming to her daughter's three months before her death. Burial was made in City Cemetery.

Eleanor was a second wife, as Major Renwick indicated in his will when he stated, “I make no bequest to my children by my first wife for the reason that they are already well provided for.” Names of these children were not listed.

Although James Jeffrey Renwick is not mentioned as a survivor in a copy of the petition for probate of the Major's will, he is elsewhere referred to in a list of children. Born on June 25, 1849, he died September 19, 1928, at his residence 120 East Fall Street, aged 79. He was the last of the Ithaca branch of the family whose members had occupied the Renwick tract for more than a century and a quarter.

W. Glenn Norris, late county historian, operated during the mid-1920's an automobile paint shop in the Fall Creek area, and oft recalled "Jeff" as one of his almost daily shop visitors. By that time he had become somewhat eccentric. It was on one of these calls that he received an injury which caused his death.

The old man chewed tobacco rather liberally and was uncleanly about it. On an occasion another visitor, a young man, criticized him for his carelessness, whereupon "Jeff" squared off and pretended to box his tormentor's ears. As he drew his arm back, a large wart on one hand was scraped off against a post, blood poisoning set in, and the old landmark soon succumbed.

His immediate survivors were sons Charles, Robert and William, and their mother. She was Mary Jane, a daughter of Robert Henry Speed and Louise Dederer Hyde. In a contemporary Ithaca newspaper is found this wedding announcement,

HYDE-RENWICK—December 23, 1876, at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. John Rightmire, Caroline, by the Rev. A. Pimpff, Miss Mary Hyde of Speedsville to Jeffrey Renwick of Ithaca.

Mary Hyde Renwick died March 28, 1938, at her home, 120 East Fall Street, aged 88. Her obituary stated that she was born on a farm near Speedsville, June 9, 1849, and that her father had been a major in the 15th Cavalry during the Civil War. She was a granddaughter of Henry Speed who came as a pioneer settler in Tompkins County in 1805 and located in the section that became Speedsville. A resident of Ithaca for more than sixty years, she was buried in Lake View Cemetery.

Located over city limits along the east shore of Cayuga Lake, the greater part of the 600-acre tract remained undeveloped beyond farming for 104 years. This mile-square property embraced areas now known as Stewart Park, the Remington salt works once designated Remington, Renwick Heights, Cayuga Heights, part of Cornell Heights, and Lake View Cemetery.

This is the way Henry Abt described its ultimate development in his *Ithaca* published in 1926:

"In December 1891, Herman Bergholtz, an electrical engineer,

and Horace Hand, financier, came to Ithaca and purchased control of the street railway and electric light companies. Later, the Renwick Park and Traffic Association was incorporated. After the street railway was extended to Railroad Avenue, now Lincoln Street, its owners incorporated the Cayuga Lake Railway Company, which purchased lakeshore property from the James Renwick estate, and during the summer of 1894 built a line from Railroad Avenue to the lake. Then followed development of forty acres at the terminus of the line as Renwick Park. Jeffrey James Renwick was made superintendent of the gardens.

“In this amusement park, with lawns, woods, and paths laid out by a landscape artist of the firm that planned Central Park in New York City, there was a landing where small boats were rented, a zoological garden, a theater for vaudeville performances, and a pavilion where ‘Patsy’ Conway’s band gave concerts during the summer months. Thousands of visitors came, often by boat or railroad excursions from some distance, to enjoy the attractions.”

In 1896, a newspaper commented: “Fifteen cents pays for a clean bathing suit, polite attention, and all the time one cares to spend in Lake Cayuga waters at Renwick Beach.”

## *New Development Begins*

Jared T. Newman and Charles F. Blood started on November 19, 1901, a road through the Bergholtz Tract, as the area had become known. This acreage they had acquired through purchase, and now started another phase of its development. The new road began just below the lower streetcar bridge and continued generally with Stewart Avenue, across Kline Road to border Lake View Cemetery toward Renwick Road.

But when amusement parks lost their attraction, the company fell upon difficult times. In the autumn of 1914, the park was leased to Wharton Studios of New York City for filming motion pictures. Commenting on this striking development, Abt says:

“Under the Whartons, the leading actresses and actors of the day were brought to Ithaca to produce silent films, and under the Ithaca label the city became recognized as an important part of the burgeoning movie industry. Looking for some more equable climate, in 1920 the Whartons left Renwick for California.”

During the mayoralty of Edwin C. Stewart (1920-21) the city purchased Renwick Park in the latter year for \$30,000. Mayor Stewart died before completing his term, but left by his will \$150,000 for development of the park which was renamed Stewart Park as a memorial to his civic contributions.

“Herman Bergholtz, original owner and developer of the park, was now given the task of restoring the facility which had been badly neglected. Buildings, pavilions and piers were run down, and the landscape disfigured by ugly shacks and dilapidated moving picture sets.” This is the way the site appeared to Abt, a contemporary student at Cornell.

On his visits to the Norris paint shop, “Jeff” said that when the development was underway, men were hired with teams at



\$2.50 for a ten-hour day to haul sand and gravel for fill. This fill was hauled from a knoll at Lake View Cemetery and deposited in potholes along the lake shore. At the time this knoll extended across the present highway and into an adjacent swamp.

It has been remarked that the project must have proved rather costly, even with the low prevailing wages, for it was an era of slow motion and a time when mass production had not reached the Vale of Ithaca. The wagons had pole bottoms upon which a yard of material was shoveled by hand, and then dumped by slowly turning each pole by handpower. Observers recall that it took longer to unload than to load one of the horse-drawn gravel wagons.

Before the park was developed, the lakeshore appeared as a series of long sandbars. From early days the park area was a favorite resort for gentlemen horse owners to train and race their hopefuls.