

**SAMUEL S. BURDETT:
SOLDIER, ATTORNEY, POLITICIAN, CIVIC LEADER**

By

Jack Hamilton Foster

In a glass-enclosed section of book shelves in the Glencarlyn Branch Library is an interesting collection of books which once formed the private library of Samuel S. Burdett. These books, along with the gift of land by "General" Burdett, became the basis for Arlington County's first public library. In view of this activity, along with his role as the co-developer of the Glencarlyn community, we might well consider this native of England as one of Arlington's first civic leaders.

Samuel Swinfin Burdett was born in Leicestershire, England on February 21, 1836. His father was pastor of a Baptist Church in Leicester for over 40 years. The Reverend Burdett's hero was George Washington and he considered America a utopia. When Sam was 12 years old he was sent by his father to live with his older brother in the United States. His father expected to follow him soon but death intervened. Sam was bound out to a farmer in the vicinity of Elyria, Ohio for food, clothes, and a three-month's school term in winter.

At the age of 16 young Sam managed to enter Oberlin College, earning his way by doing farm work. After graduating from Oberlin he migrated to Iowa in 1858, where he studied law under Judge Edward Graham. He was admitted to the Iowa bar in 1859.

At the outbreak of war in 1861, Burdett helped raise an Iowa cavalry unit, and he was commissioned a first lieutenant in Company B. In August of that year he was mustered in and sent to Southwest Missouri. For two years his unit, serving under General S. R. Curtis, carried on guerrilla warfare against the rebels in Arkansas and Missouri. In the meantime, he had been promoted to captain on Dec. 21, 1862.

Captain Burdett resigned from the army in August, 1864, citing as his reason, "on account of the continued sickness of my wife and business affairs which involved the interest of others as well as myself." It is unclear as to when he was married, but his wife was the widow of Judge Graham.

After the war, Burdett returned to Missouri where he practiced law for a short time in Osceola. He was then appointed U.S. District Attorney for Southwest Missouri. He was elected to Congress in 1868 and re-elected in 1870. In April, 1874, President Grant appointed him Commissioner of the

General Land Office. He served in that position from July 1, 1874 until October, 1877, when failing health obliged him to resign.

An around-the-world cruise apparently restored his health. After his return to Washington he was made a partner in the law firm of Curtis and Earle, which later became Curtis and Burdett. His law business thrived and he made much money, practicing chiefly before the Court of Claims. Undoubtedly his experience with the General Land Office was a large asset in his law practice. He maintained a beautiful home on M Street in Washington in which Mrs. Burdett entertained numerous visitors.



Lieutenant Burdett, Union Army, 1861. (Photo courtesy of Glencarlyn Library.)

Mr. Burdett became very active in the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.), the organization of veterans of the Union Army in the Civil War, and he was elected Commander of the Department of the Potomac in 1881 and 1882. In 1885, at the annual encampment in Portland, Maine, he was elected Commander of the national organization of the G.A.R. to serve during the calendar year 1886. From this activity he acquired the title of "General," which he was called forever after.

In 1887, William W. Curtis and Samuel S. Burdett purchased the farm of Andrew and Ann Carlin with the house which still stands on 3rd Street in the Glencarlyn community. This was 94 acres of the original John Ball grant of 166 acres obtained from Lord Fairfax in 1742. A plat was filed with the County Clerk's office showing a lay-out of streets, most of them with tree names. For example, present day 3rd Street South, on which the Ball-Sellers House is located, was originally Maple Street.

It is interesting to note that when Curtis and Burdett were taking the steps to build a fine residential community in what was then Alexandria County, the reputation of the county was at its lowest ebb. During this period, crime, illegal gambling, and prostitution were prevalent in the Jackson City and Rosslyn sections of the County.¹

A few years later, Burdett had a beautiful Victorian house built for his residence on the other side of Maple Street from the Ball house. After General Burdett's death the house was sold to a Dr. Hester. After Dr. Hester's death it was rented by his widow to Mr. and Mrs. Guy Burch, who lived there with their two daughters from 1934-1940. In 1940 it was purchased by John Benn Sr. and it remained in the Benn family until it was sold to Curt and Mary Reintsma on September 1 of this year.

In Jeanne Rose's "A Brief History of the Arlington County Libraries" she tells about the early library in Glencarlyn, which was operated by the Young People's Library Association; then she says, "The history of the present library, however, begins in 1914 when Gen. Samuel S. Burdett, a leading citizen of Glencarlyn, made provision in his will for the building of a public library 'at a cost of not more than \$3,000.'" A trust fund remains from the original contribution and the Glencarlyn Library still obtains benefits from the fund through occasional purchases of equipment and materials.

The books on the Burdett shelves in the Glencarlyn Library include a great variety of 19th century literature. There are classics, popular novels, psychology, sociology, and many history books, including Southern history. There are also encyclopedias, Bibles, and several scrapbooks of newspaper clippings, mostly related to G.A.R. activities.



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The Burdett House in Glencarlyn, located on the corner of Kensington and Third Street South.

Burdett also kept numerous notes, accounts, and papers of various sorts. An 1894 grocery account book lists purchases from "M.L. Wheeler, Dealer in Fancy Groceries, Corner K and 18th St. N.W., Washington."

General Burdett traveled far and often. There is an apocryphal account of a shipwreck on a trip to Alaska in which Burdett, then past 70 years of age, played an heroic role in saving the lives of women and children on board the ship.

I will conclude this brief biography of General Burdett with a few personal recollections. He was described by one who knew him as a "splendid physical specimen, about 5 ft. 10 in. tall and weighing about 200 pounds."

In an unpublished paper on file in the Virginia Room of the Central Library, Hadassah Backus, who knew Mr. Burdett, wrote:

"He was a rather imposing man. He was large and erect. His head was bald and shiny. He commanded great respect in the community as our most important and wealthy citizen. He had a parrot, Polly, and a large bay horse called Moses. He was driven to the train or trolley daily.

"He had a gift for oratory and would hold us spellbound when he gave a talk. He was loved and respected in the community."

After he was elected Commander of the G.A.R., F.D. Karkrider, editor of the Germantown Press, wrote:

Captain Burdett, as we used to call him out in Missouri in '65 and '66, although a red-hot dyed in the wool Republican, was a polished gentleman and was universally honored and respected by all who knew him. Even the most bitter old rebel we had in that country in those bitter times was the personal friend of Captain Burdett. The Editor of the Press knew him for years; ate with him, drank with him and slept with him and, although a bitter partisan Democrat, we helped send Sam to Congress when he made his first race. He was and is, every inch a gentleman, and we are glad to see the G.A.R. thus honor him.

On a trip to England in 1914, General Burdett died in the room where he was born. He is buried beside his wife in Arlington Cemetery.

Notes and References

Jack Foster, a Charter member and Past President of the Arlington Historical Society, is now the Resident Curator/Caretaker of the Ball-Sellers House. He spent his entire career in public personnel management, including almost 22 years as Director of Personnel for Arlington County. He has an AB degree from Western Michigan University and an MA degree from the University of Michigan.

Sources

The National Archives

Scrap books of Burdett in the Glencarlyn Library

A short unpublished biography of Burdett by Hadassah Backus in files of Virginia Room, Arlington Central Library

Plat of Subdivision of Carlin Springs, in Arlington County Court House Deed Book, Liber J4, p. 65

Jeanne Rose, "A Brief History of the Arlington County Libraries," *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, Vol. 1 No. 4, October 1960, pp. 28-38

Encyclopedia of American Political History

¹Two previous articles in *The Arlington Historical Magazine* discuss this situation: "Alexander's Island," Vol. 7, No. 2, October 1982, and "Crandal Mackey, Crusading Commonwealth Attorney," Vol. 7, No. 4, October 1984, both written by the author of this article.