

A Look Back in Time

The John McCaffary House, 5732 13th Court, is an individual contributor on the National Register of Historic Places as well as a local historic landmark. This property meets standards one by reflecting the City's cultural, social...history." The house was the residence of John McCaffary, the first and last man to be executed by the State of Wisconsin. His execution pushed anti-capital punishment sentiment, particularly by Kenoshan, C. Latham Sholes, to abolish the death penalty in Wisconsin. Standard two reads "Is identified with historic personages or with important events in the City's history." The house is the only extant building associated with the abolition of capital punishment in the state.

Built in 1842, the John McCaffary House is a simple two-story cream brick structure with a three-window facade, three rooms on each level, a low hipped roof, and flat modern lintels over windows and door. The cornice is decorated with simple denticulated and sawtooth brick courses. During the 1930s, the building was remodeled as a two apartment dwelling. An exterior stairway leads to the upper flat entrance at the left rear. There is no interior staircase. The basic structure has remained unchanged since construction.

The house and backyard owe their historical significance to a macabre chain of events culminating in the abolition of capital punishment in Wisconsin in 1853. Popular opposition to the death penalty was already a growing tradition when the territory became a state in 1848. Three years later, when John McCaffary was executed before a crowd of 2,000 - 3,000 people for the willful murder of his wife, Bridget, after receiving the mandatory death penalty, anti-capital punishment sentiment reached floodtide in the state. C. Latham Sholes, who would later spearhead the fight in the State Assembly for abolition of the death penalty, described the execution in his newspaper, the Kenosha Telegraph, commenting, "McCaffary has been murdered according to law. --We do not complain that the law has been enforced. We complain that the law exists."



On July 23, 1850, McCaffary had drowned his wife in a cistern in back of the house, ending a marriage which, according to their neighbors was anything but blissful. The sounds of yelling and breaking dishes and furniture reportedly had frequently punctuated the quiet of the neighborhood, then on the outskirts of Kenosha. Although McCaffary admitted his crime on the scaffold, he had steadfastly maintained his innocence both before and throughout his brief trial in May 1851. On May 23, 1851, the jury delivered its verdict, and in August, McCaffary became the first and last man to be executed by the State of Wisconsin.

The property presents potential for historical archeology because the murder involved a well or cistern supposedly consisting of a partially buried hogshhead in the backyard.

Meander by the McCaffary house which holds such significance in the history of Kenosha and the State of Wisconsin. Stop, look and listen as you recall the events that transpired there so many years ago and the consequences of John McCaffary's actions. This may be a dark portion of Kenosha's history, but a part of Kenosha's and the State of Wisconsin's history none-the-less that should be explored.