

SANDSCREST

A Sense of Place, A Sense of Past

by Nora Edinger

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Chapter 4

Harry Sands and the Sandscrest Farm Era: AD 1920-1962

Part 1

(Writer's note: Chapter 5 is a companion account concerning this era that offers first-person accounts of life at Sandscrest Farm.)

While the McCollochs were undeniably rooted in the Ohio Valley's frontier era, they lived out their 150 years at what is now Sandscrest Conference & Retreat Center (and the surrounding farms also in their ownership) focused on what could be rather than what had been.

The McCollochs were Sandscrests' first residents of European descent. They were the first of any ancestry to hold a paper deed that claimed ownership of a property with defined borders. They were the ones who cleared untouched forest. They plowed the first fields, raised the first barns and built a home that is still considered a mansion. They were not the first ones to whom the land yielded peace – Native Americans once had that. But, the McCollochs experienced a new kind of plenty that was quickly measurable in generational wealth.



Col. Harry Sands was the first non-McColloch to claim ownership of what was then called Fair View Farm. (He is pictured at left, standing at the front of the main house, and is referred to hereafter as Col. Harry to avoid confusion with references to numerous other family members of the same surname.)

He was cut from similarly forward-thinking cloth as the McCollochs – just perhaps cloth made of a finer, older weave. The Sands had already lived in America for more than 200 years and were a wealthy family whose members were engaged in upper-level professions when Col. Harry was born in 1867, just past the close of the Civil War.

Col. Harry – whose drive and imagination were ironically similar to Fair View Farm's founder, Major Samuel McColloch of McColloch's leap fame – made

the Sands family even more notable. And, in the process, he both continued the McColloch's legacy of a love for the land and created one uniquely linked to a love of God.

Harry Sands as Innovator

Col. Harry's obituary does little to explain how or why farming and preserving an unusual space for church life would become his lasting passion and enduring legacy. Indeed, much of the bare-bones details of his world cast him solely in the role of innovator.

To build a picture of how and why he got to Sandscrest, it's important to look, first, at both the family environment that fostered such a man and the era that facilitated his pursuits.

Col. Harry (1867-1952) was born in Fairmont, WV, one of the eight children of Joseph Sands and Mary Virginia Eyster Sands. The family had a home in Fairmont's downtown, but also operated a beloved rural property called Peacock Farm as a summer residence. Peacock Farm – the place where Col. Harry's mother chose to live until her death in 1922 – may have served as a model for Sandscrest, according to Sands descendants who noticed similarities while visiting in 2024. It is pictured below in its contemporary state.



Joseph Sands (1835-1909) was born in Annapolis, MD, to Dr. Williams Sands and Charlotte Duvall Sands. Joseph Sands began his work life as a merchant in Baltimore, but was a bank president in Fairmont by the end of his career. Joseph's wife, Mary Virginia (1837-1922), was born in Virginia but raised in Fairmont. She was also the daughter of a physician.

The earliest of Col. Harry's ancestors to arrive in America came in the mid 1600s -- from Wales, England and France. They mostly settled in what is now the Baltimore, MD area.

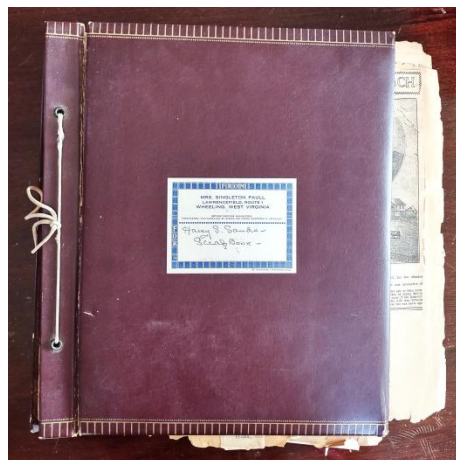
In 1893, Col. Harry married Helen Turner, the daughter Richard Turner (a Baltimore merchant) and Mary Sands Turner. Interestingly, Col. Harry's father and Helen's mother were half siblings, making Col. Harry and Helen half first cousins. Given Col. Harry's keen awareness of scientific advances of all kinds, it is possible their genetic connection is why they did not have children.

The marriage -- which was legal at the time -- seems to have had family support. In an 1893 letter from Lawrence Sands (Col. Harry's brother and a Wheeling-based banker who later became president of the First National Bank of Pittsburgh) to Col. Harry, Lawrence Sands gave Harry a thumbs up for getting all the wedding arrangements taken care of during a trip to Baltimore. He also encouraged him concerning the couple's impending move to Wheeling.

"We can make the thing go here if you once get a foothold," wrote Lawrence in a letter that Harry pasted into an extensive scrapbook that functioned as a journal of a sort. It is pictured below.

Lawrence Sands was himself already on the fast track of a banking administration career. He was referring to his younger brother's decision to diverge from past familial enterprises in favor of the high-technology of the day -- electricity.

Col. Harry was a freshly minted electrical engineer -- graduated from Cornell University of New York and ready to literally light up the world. His first contract in Wheeling concerned the Paull family, already a well-established presence in the city. The two families would later be connected through the marriage of Lawrence Sands' daughter, another Mary Virginia Sands, to A. Singleton Paull. But, Lawrence Sands took pains in the letter to say he had not intervened on Col. Harry's behalf in securing the contract.



Young Col. Harry quickly got more than a foothold in the Wheeling market. Electricity was a red hot enterprise in several ways.

His initial company -- H.S. Sands Electric & Manufacturing Co. of Wheeling -- and later enterprises in Akron, Ohio and Detroit, Mich. were instrumental in building lighting systems, power-generating plants, dynamos, motors, bells, speaking tubes, door openers, burglar and fire alarms and clocks all over the city and well beyond.

While Sands Electric was bringing power to individual homes and offices, Col. Harry's scrapbook clippings reveal much larger contracts with hotels in Fairmont and Clarksburg, Laughlin Nail Co., LaBelle Iron Works and Beaver Tin Plate Co. (Lisbon, Ohio). He did the electrical plant for Monongah Coal & Coke Co. in Fairmont. It is possible that he electrified Wheeling's Capitol Theatre, as well.

It was the connection to coal mining that was both a keystone achievement and the critical moneymaker of his career.

Col. Harry notably created a 100-horse-powered electric locomotive for the Monongah Coal & Coke Co. and was instrumental in building an illuminated, five-mile railroad inside a mine. This type of work brought an end to the use of burden-carrying mules and made mines brighter and safer as electric light eliminated the need for open flames.

A final note on the business side of Col. Harry's career. Having no children to carry on his electrical enterprises, Col. Harry trained a J.E. Rehm, who began working for Sands as a stock boy in 1913, to take over management of his Wheeling operations as Col. Harry focused his attention on Sandscrest Farm in later years. Sands Electric Co. still operates from downtown Wheeling to this day. It is the only one of Sands' many businesses to still carry his name.



Harry Sands as Benefactor

While Col. Harry was operating his electrical business at a literally industrial scale, there were also early signs of both a largely anonymous altruistic streak and a need to share a joy of life that defined him.

Concerning the former, it is only scrapbook clippings that reveal it was Col. Harry who bought and quietly brought the first Xray machine to Wheeling. And that, nearly immediately, it was used to assist a young girl who had accidentally swallowed an open safety pin.

He was a warden at his church, St. Luke's Episcopal on Wheeling Island. The church was a quick walk from the couple's first Wheeling home at 209 S. Front St. The island was a neighborhood of wealth at the time. Both properties – one ironically surrounded by electricity-carrying cables -- are pictured above.

While it is unlikely such things would be known without the scrapbook, Col. Harry is also revealed there as the creator of an annuity that supported a former pastor and his wife after retirement from ministry. He also created an endowment for the church.

In addition to being a member of multiple lodges – including the Shriners and Masons -- Col. Harry served the U.S. Navy as one of 250 engineers nationwide during World War I. Too old for

active military service but still in the prime of his career, he was responsible for assessing what Northern Panhandle industries would be capable of doing for the war effort.

This work is how he acquired his military title – which is another point of similarity to Major Samuel McColloch, who served as a fort commander and frontier scout during the Revolutionary War.

It was also Col. Harry who -- in admiration of contemporary Earl Oglebay's agricultural and business acumen -- commissioned Matthijs Theodorus Mauritius van Salk of Amsterdam (1864-1938) to paint a posthumous portrait of Oglebay that now hangs in Oglebay Mansion. A thank you note from Oglebay's daughter, Sarita Oglebay Burton Russel, is included in Col. Harry's scrapbook.

Van Salk – who was on extended stay in Wheeling during the height of the Great Depression, likely with Col. Harry's sponsorship -- also did portraits of Col. Harry and Helen Sands and other Wheeling notables such as the Quarrier family. The former are still displayed at Sandscrest. They are pictured below and on the next page.





On the joyful side of Col. Harry's nature, one newspaper clipping reveals that he once installed an abundance of colorful globe lights in the window of his office on Market Street, near the present location of the Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel building. The display was drawing crowds of enthusiastic spectators that grew massive enough to attract the newspaper's attention.

Harry Sands the Farmer

Sandscrest was not Col. Harry's first experiment with farming. Clearly inspired by Earl Oglebay's efforts at Waddington Farms, Col. Harry initially purchased a small summer home in Brooke County's Beech Bottom community. This "bungalow" was called The Gables and a limited amount of farming was done there before Col. Harry decided to go bigger.

Sometime between 1919 and 1921 – most likely in 1920 – Col. Harry took on ownership of the McCulloch's historic Fair View Farm. (The date is somewhat in question as the original purchase may have involved an auction and a purchasing partner, according to various accounts.)



During the 1920s, Col. Harry threw himself into a full-scale renovation project. From 1920 to 1923, the couple maintained their Wheeling Island home while the main house at Sandscrest was expanded in every direction – to appear as it does in the above scrapbook photo.

A dramatic porch and attic dormer windows were added. There was also a new sun porch on the north side of the house and a four-story addition (including attic and basement floors) to the back of the house. This latter space included an integral kitchen in addition to bedroom and bathroom areas for household staff.

The second floor was also expanded to the north and south, turning the home's original three bedrooms and one area that was likely used for storage by the McCollochs into four suites with dressing rooms and full baths.

What had been a minimal wing on the south side of the original 1847 house was converted into a farmers office. Later, when Col. Harry began having mobility problems and needed a cane, he added a massive elevator shaft that connected his office to the couple's suite on the floor above.

Perhaps because the façade of the additions did not match the original brickwork, the house

was painted a deep red with white trim. All the barns – of which there were many – were white.



By 1923, the Sands – now in their mid 50s – were living full time at Sandscrest Farm. And, Col. Harry was in full-scale farmer mode. Even in the first few years of his ownership, the farm was lauded for being state of the art.

In the 1920s, 300 poultry farmers from three states attended a field day at the farm in order to see how Sands was producing eggs. A tree-roosting, free-range hen might produce 50 eggs per year, according to newspaper coverage of the event. Sands' hens – pictured on the preceding page -- were producing about 300 eggs each per year.

Col. Harry achieved this milestone by mechanizing the process in a way that was similar but smaller in scale to today's factory farms. The concrete building that is now the Sandscrest guest house was built as home to some 2,000 laying hens. The two-story chicken house had five compartments on each level. There was automated ventilation and a heating system. Water and food came into the compartments by conveyor belt and waste left in similar fashion.

(An interesting side note: Later in Col. Harry's life, there were many fewer chickens and they again were pecking at bugs in a grassy pasture.)

Milk was also in factory-style production early on.

In the 1920s, Sands had about 60 head of Guernsey and Holstein dairy cows that produced nightly milk shipments for communities as far flung as Washington, D.C. This was possibly done with input from a Prof. Charles Howard Royce, a fellow Cornell alumnus and friend who was an expert on dairy production. Royce's obituary – the result of a farm accident – was among many of Col. Harry's friends and family to be included in his scrapbook.

Sandscrest cows were butter-fat bonanzas during this era. The top dairy cow among 147 in Ohio and Marshall counties – one owned by Col. Harry – produced 2,089 pounds of milk and 73.1 pounds of butterfat in 31 days. Sandscrest had five of the best 10 producing cows in the Northern Panhandle, according to one scrapbook article that is undated.

Fields were filled with corn, wheat and alfalfa that were rotated on a regular schedule for better soil quality. There were also sheep -- "as much as the dogs would allow," Col. Harry told a reporter.

Some clippings referred to him as a "hobby farmer." But, even within the 1920s, the operation was contrastingly noted as one of the largest in this region of the nation. Col. Harry considered himself a modeler of high-tech farming.

“I’m not playing here,” Col. Harry told a visiting newspaper reporter at one point. “We are carrying on practical farming.”

Interestingly, even in Col. Harry’s first decade of ownership, he was considering donating the farm to the state. “His desire was to demonstrate that a man of means could go from the city to the country and conduct farming operations so as to be profitable,” one article stated.

Indeed, the scrapbook contains articles and editorials on the business and economic viability of farming as opposed to living in cramped, industry-sullied cities.

One lengthy editorial that came out about the time Col. Harry purchased Sandscrest was full of financial data. The article stated land within five to 10 miles of downtown Wheeling was selling between \$65 and \$300 per acre. A car that could carry a load of 1,000 pounds was selling from about \$400 to \$600. Downtown apartment rent was \$100 per month. “Do the math,” the paper urged. Build a small house and later convert it into a barn or enlarge it into a better house.

Another editorial from 1925 opined that the nation had lost 75,737 small farms in the first half of the 1920s. This was of concern as Europe was struggling to feed itself at the time given the ravages of war but many farm workers had left agriculture in favor of industry.

Sandscrest appears to be Col. Harry’s upscaled response to such sentiments and concerns.

But, Col. Harry wanted to spread the wealth beyond his own property. He was involved in getting farmland property tax classifications changed to make farming more economically viable. He championed high-quality rural roads. He became president of the Tri-State Sheep and Wool Growers Association even though sheep were a minor part of his operation.

As he aged, Col. Harry scaled back and tweaked some farm operations – as seen in a companion section that offers first-person accounts of later Sandscrest Farm life. When the chickens moved back outside, their high-tech house became a four-stall garage, chauffeur’s apartment and – unlikely as it seems -- a ballroom. The latter was where the chapel is now.

Both Col. Harry and Helen lived at Sandscrest Farm until their respective deaths from a hip fracture (Helen) and congestive heart failure (Col. Harry) in early 1952. They are buried at Greenwood Cemetery, off Wheeling’s National Road.

Col. Harry’s will directed his beloved property to be split upon his death, with the nearly 300 acres west of GC&P Road going to the Episcopal Diocese of West Virginia and substantial acreage on the eastern (less developed) side going to the Boy Scouts of America.

While the Diocese pondered a use for its property and began to head in the direction of conferences and retreats, full-scale farming operations continued. In 1962, however, animal production ceased. Over the years, all but one of the many barns and outbuildings and at least two of the tenant houses were demolished.

One element stretching back to the McCollochs and as early as the 1790s remains. Current Sandscrest Director Cheryl Harshman leases the farmfields that were once forests to two brothers from Ohio County. They raise oats, corn and hay in fields that can be seen from every room in the house.

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Sources

- Harry Sands' scrapbook, which contains a multitude of newspaper clippings (many of which are undated and unattributed) and personal correspondence
- the Sands' family tree and a photo of the Sands' Peacock Farm in Fairmont, WV from the Sandscrest archives
- A September 2024 talk by Betsy Griffith Taggart and Susan Griffith Sampson, daughters of the late Joseph Griffith, a former staff member of Sandscrest Farm
- an undated history of Sandscrest done by Karen Grisell of Wheeling