

THE MOSES WISNER FAMILY 1815-1974

Ruth G. Priestley

Part II Moses Wisner--Governor, Colonel, Patriot

When Moses Wisner was elected Governor of Michigan in November, 1858, it was his first political victory. Among those who sent greetings was a former brother-in-law, William Richardson of New Haven, New York, who wrote: "I am delighted to congratulate you on your triumph . . . Your energy, talent, genius and virtue have enabled you to achieve this victory and . . . the same forces will enable you to discharge the duties of Governor with honor to yourself and the greatest satisfaction to your Country." Richardson was a leader of his party in Cayuga County and New York state politics. Other members of the Richardson family also held important state and federal offices.

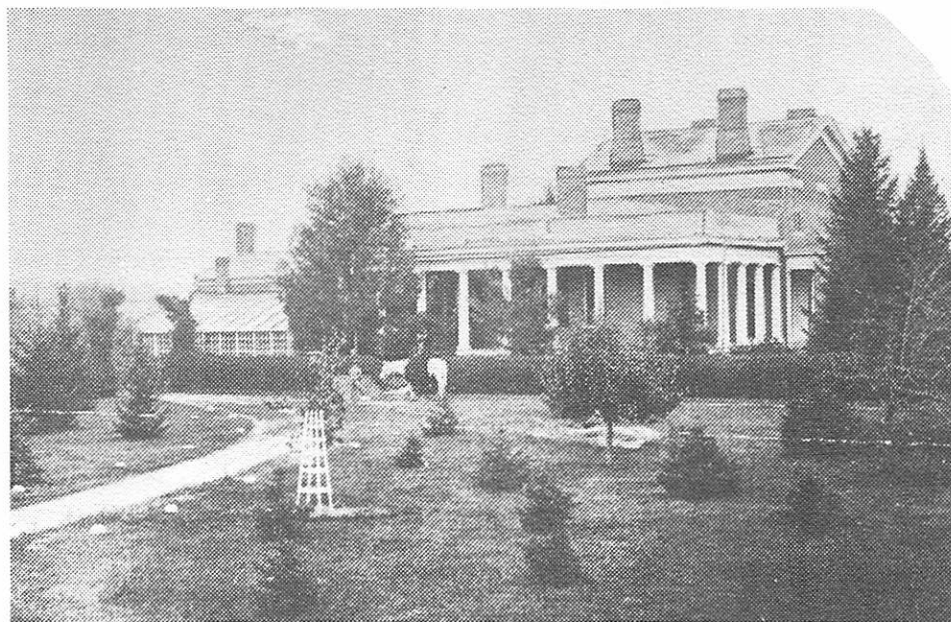
Several days before beginning his official duties, Moses, his nine year old son "Chip", and a nephew, Oscar F. Wisner, who was his Private Secretary, went by stagecoach to Lansing. On arrival, they found the capitol being made ready for the new administration. On December 29, A. B. Bagley delivered two brooms, 1½ lbs. soap, eight boxes matches, 12 lbs. candles and one market basket. December 31 Wm. H. Pinckney was paid \$22.68 for 15½ cords of wood.

After the inaugural ceremony on Saturday, January 1, 1859, the new Governor Wisner hurried back to his room and wrote to his wife:

My dear Angeline:

About one hour ago I went up to the Capitol and there in the presence of a room full of people who had assembled to witness the ceremony took upon myself the oath of office prescribed by the Constitution . . . I have today as a New Year's present pardoned two girls from the State prison.

My new position as Governor of this great state makes me feel a little awkward and a good deal timid. If you were only here to encourage me I believe I should get along a good deal better. I have completed my message and never in my life have I worked so hard night and day as I have the past week . . . I have saved the draft copy of my message and am going to have it bound and give to you and you must put it with my Commission and those of my



Pine Grove, the Governor's Home in Pontiac

Father and Grandfather and give them all to the one most deserving after my death, should you, as I trust and hope you will outlive me.

Chip behaves finely but is a little dirty with his clothes. Oh how I wish I could see my dear wife, little Frank and Jessie. The roads are now very nice and if you could be spared from the sick bed of your father so as to come out here on Tuesday next and stay until Thursday I would like it much—but you must judge best. I shall be terribly frightened when I read my message I know from the little fright I felt when I took my oath of office. Kiss the children for their father and your husband.

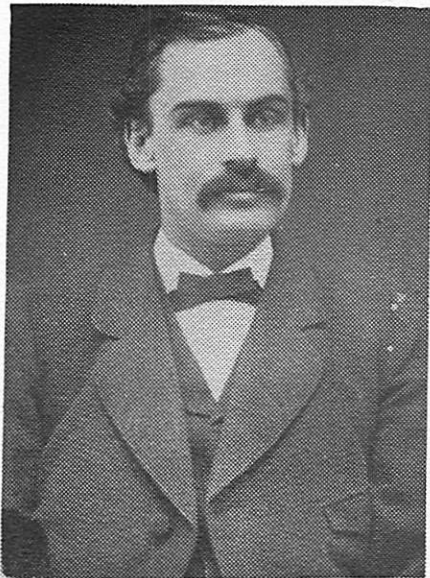
M. Wisner

Caroline Thompson and Laurie Elliott were convicted in Wayne County, October, 1854 of burglary and sentenced to the State Prison for five years. Pardoned January 1, 1859, Governor Wisner said: "I pardoned them on account of their good conduct in prison and upon the recommendation of the Matron and officers of the Institution." During his term of office he pardoned 79 persons, ranging in age from "a mere boy", sentenced for 3½ years for larceny, his first offense, who had served 15 months, to "a woman upwards of 60 years" convicted of receiving stolen goods, sentenced to 3½

years, who also served 15 months, released for good behavior.

On Thursday, January 6, 1859 the legislature met in a joint session to hear Governor Wisner's inaugural address. It is hoped that Angeolina was able to be there to give Moses the support he so greatly desired. Called to order at 10:00 A.M. by Lieutenant Governor Edmund B. Fairchild, the Governor, State Officers and Judges of the Supreme Court were conducted to their seats in the House of Representatives by a committee composed of Representatives McMahon and Senator Conger.

In his inaugural message, printed in the Dutch, German and French languages as well as in English, Governor Wisner stressed the need for rapid settlement of the uncultivated lands in the state and the further development of its immense store of natural resources. During his term of office a system of roads running into the unsettled areas was constructed, the St. Mary's Ship Canal was improved aiding copper and iron mining in the Upper Peninsula, salt was produced in the Saginaw Valley and the production of lumber steadily increased. A general registration law, requiring every elector to enter his name on the registration book of the township or ward, which he requested, was also passed during his administration. The University of Michigan Law School opened in 1859,



Edward M. Wisner, son of Moses and Eliza Richardson Wisner.

but at that time the University admitted only men students. Governor Wisner, had recommended the admission of women saying: "Although the portals of our university at Ann Arbor are not by law closed against them, yet no female has ever been admitted as a pupil within its walls. I therefore recommend that you take such steps as your wisdom may dictate, toward the establishment of a separate Female Department of learning at Ann Arbor connected with and under control of the University. In order to more effectively accomplish this purpose it may become necessary to erect a new edifice, disconnected from any of the present University buildings." No action was taken and he renewed his request in 1861 but co-education did not come about until 1870.

There was no state-owned home for the Governor in Lansing and Moses' annual salary of \$1,000.00 would scarcely allow them to maintain a second home at the Capitol, so Pine Grove became the official Governor's residence. The Wisner family liked to tell the story about the day Moses was working in the pine trees and shrubs when a horseman came galloping up the drive, jumped down and ordered the man trimming the trees to hold his reins. The visitor ran to the door and asked to see the Governor. Angeolina called out to her husband, but Moses, much to the young man's chagrin, answered that he had been ordered to hold the horse and must do so until relieved.

Angeolina loved to entertain and one of her fondest memories was of the time, in the fall of 1858, when they had helped entertain the Prince of Wales,



*Children of Moses and Angeolina Wisner
Charles [Chip], Frank, Jessie*

later King Edward VI, at the Russell House in Detroit. Much of the conversation in the parlor and at dinner parties at Pine Grove, however, must have been of a most serious nature, for the war clouds were growing darker all the time. John Brown's abolitionist raid on Harper's Ferry, in October, 1859, his trial for treason and subsequent hanging, and Helper's **The Impending Crisis**, (a well-worn copy is on the Wisner bookshelves at Pine Grove) were creating excitement wherever politics were being discussed. Union sentiment was particularly strong among the citizens of Michigan. When the 36th Congress opened in December, 1859 Senator Zachariah Chandler said: "I want it to go on record . . . whether that traitor be a Garrison abolitionist . . . or a Southern Governor who proclaims that in certain events he will raise his traitorous hand against the Constitution and the Union . . . let that traitor hang."

As a result of the mis-management of state funds in 1860, in the amount of \$110,198.75, by the State Treasurer, John McKinney, although Governor Wisner had no knowledge of what was taking place, he was not renominated. In the fall elections of 1860 Austin Blair, also an ardent abolitionist and liberal Republican, replaced Moses Wisner as Governor. In this election the Republican party gained strength in the state as well as a larger representation in Congress. When Moses Wisner stood up in the little church-like wooden Capitol to deliver his exaugural address to the legislature on January 1, 1861 one feels that this time he felt no fright. He was convinced that the stand he was about to take was the right one and the only one that would save the Country: "This is no time for timid or vacillating counsels, when the cry of treason and rebellion is ringing in our ears. Michigan cannot recognize the right of

a State to secede from the Union. We believe that the founders of our government designed it to be perpetual and we cannot consent to have one star obliterated from our flag. For upwards of 30 years this question of the right of a State to secede has been agitated. It is time it was settled. We ought not to leave it for our children to look after . . . I would calmly but firmly declare it to be the fixed determination of Michigan that the Federal Constitution, the rights of the States and the Union of the States must and shall be preserved." This was a strong statement, the words of a radical perhaps, but Moses Wisner was a radical when he talked about the preservation of the Union and the freedom of its people. At this time he was expressing the views shared by most of the people of Michigan. The following day the new Governor Blair in his inaugural address said, "I recommend to you at the earliest date to make manifest that Michigan is loyal to the Union, the Constitution and the laws and will defend them to the uttermost and to proffer to the President of the United States the whole military power of the state for that purpose."

Ex-Governor Wisner then returned to Pine Grove and resumed his law practice. He spent much of his spare time studying military tactics and learning the rules of drill and discipline, for he saw the impending war as resulting in much bloodshed and destruction before it could be finally resolved. He felt that Lincoln, in his first call for only 7500 volunteers was failing to fully comprehend the seriousness of the crisis. There were those who did question the ability of Michigan to support such a strong military stand. **The Detroit Free Press** pointed out that the state treasury was empty, the legislature was not in session

and the State militia consisted of only 28 scattered independent companies, having a total strength of 1,241 officers and men. The local militias were a fighting bunch, however, and considered themselves the backbone of the North's cause. As the war fever mounted, the volunteer companies met and offered their services.

The first Michigan Volunteer Regiment, assembled at Fort Wayne, arrived in Washington on May 16, 1861. Many of these were killed and some taken prisoners. The Second Regiment, led by General I. B. Richardson of Pontiac, followed in July. By December, 1861, thirteen regiments of infantry, three of cavalry and five batteries of artillery had been sent to the front. A popular marching song of the Union troops kept their spirits high as they marched to battle:

We are coming, we are coming,
Our Union to restore.
We are coming Father Abraham,
With six hundred thousand
more,
With six hundred thousand more.

Edward M. Wisner, Moses' eldest son, now in college, enlisted at Fort Wayne, in Company D Fifth Regiment of Infantry, as a sergeant on June 19, 1861. He was 19 years old. With 900 officers and men the regiment left Fort Wayne for Virginia on September 11, 1861 and joined the army of the Potomac. Shortly before leaving, Edward received this note from his father:

My dear Edward:

I herewith send the carpetbag. I also send a little Bible. Treasure it my dear boy as a parting gift from your father who prays that you may be returned to him safely after this most unnatural war. Recollect, my son that you are engaged in a holy cause and that your country expects you to do your whole duty. You are dear to me, and next to my Country you will be foremost in my thoughts but . . . I would sooner hear that you were killed in battle . . . than that you had faltered before the enemies of your country.

Goodbye and may God bless and give you courage and strength to battle manfully for that

government which your Great-grandfather helped establish.

Your father, M. Wisner

In October, 1861 Moses Wisner was asked to consider becoming a candidate to fill the vacancy caused by the death of U.S. Senator Kinsley S. Bingham. He declined the offer. He must have already had other plans for the future, for in the spring of 1862 he brought into his law office a young law student, Mark Brewer, who would assist him while continuing with his legal studies.

On July 17, 1862 Governor Blair appointed Moses Wisner to recruit and train the Twenty-Second Michigan Regiment of Infantry to be rendezvoused at Pontiac, Michigan. Recruits came from Lapeer, Livingston, Macomb, St. Clair, Sanilac and Oakland Counties and were encamped at the old fairgrounds located between Saginaw and Perry Streets, where Mathews and Fairgrove Streets are now. The camp was named for General Richardson. Moses, commissioned a Colonel, was untiring in his efforts to train and prepare his soldiers for their military duties. Although his discipline was rigid, he treated his men kindly and asked no more of them than of himself. Pine Grove was less than one-half mile from the camp, yet he lived in a tent alongside the soldiers. Late in August the regiment was mustered into service and Colonel Wisner received orders to leave camp on Thursday, September 4th.

The day of departure found Pontiac crowded with families and friends who had come to bid the soldiers goodbye. At the fairgrounds, the Young Ladies Soldiers Aid Society presented the regiment with a new flag, purchased with funds raised from weekly socials held at the homes of members. Colonel Wisner, receiving the flag turned to his men and said: "Soldiers of the 22nd Regiment, behold this beautiful flag and swear that this flag of our Union shall never go down in disgrace." Then the Colonel and his officers, followed by over one thousand "men in blue", proudly bearing the flag, marched down Saginaw Street to the depot on Jackson Street, crowded into freight cars and were off to war.

How proud Angeolina must have felt as she and the three small children watched her beloved Moses, so manly and handsome in his Colonel's uniform, march off to defend on the battlefield

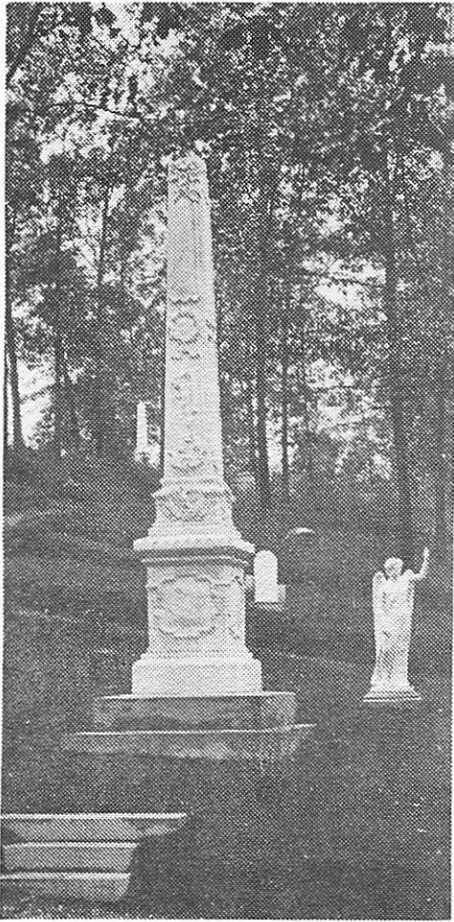


Lieutenant Colonel Haber LeFavour succeeded Colonel Wisner as commander of the 22nd Michigan Infantry.

those principles he had so strongly defended in the political arena. Yet, it's certain she felt some apprehension as to when they would be together again to share their confidences, hopes and aspirations as they had done so often during the fourteen years of their marriage. Moses must have had some premonition of the future, for in a will made on August 26 he enclosed the following:

"My dear children must never forget their father. I know my dear wife never will forget me. Upon the field of battle, next to my Country, my last thoughts will be of them."

Arriving in Detroit in the late afternoon of September 4th, the 22nd Regiment boarded the steamer, "Morning Star", for Cleveland and from there went on to Cincinnati by train, where at 2:00 A.M. on September 6th they were served breakfast provided by citizens of that city. Before leaving, the men were ordered to fill their knapsacks, and order that was never necessary to repeat whenever rations were in sight. After crossing the Ohio River on a pontoon bridge to Covington, Ky., they stretched out on the streets to rest. Later in the



*Burial place of Moses Wisner.
Oak Hill Cemetery*

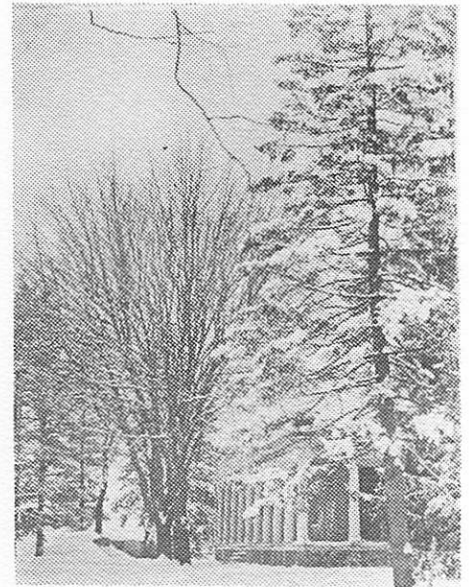
morning, marching five miles to a camp up into the hills, they were immediately called upon to resist a reported attack upon the city—only 48 hours after leaving home. Throughout September and October Colonel Wisner led his troops through various marches, skirmishes and encounters to protect the Ohio River and to push the enemy back out of Kentucky.

On one occasion Colonel Wisner was ordered by his General, G. Clay Smith, to furnish a "descriptive list of all contraband" that had come into his lines since arriving in Kentucky, including the name and residence of their owners. His response to that command was thus: "There are within my encampment 8 to 10 persons of African descent who have voluntarily sought my lines and are now in the employment of my officers as servants. These persons (as I am informed) were once slaves and from the best information I can obtain their former masters are now in the rebel army fighting to destroy this government. I came here to fight for my Country and can never consent to degrade myself to the level of a slave catcher or to inform

against fugitives from slavery. I cannot recognize the existence of the institution of slavery within my camp. Enclosed you will find the descriptive list you asked for as far as I am able to give it. It is not in my power to furnish you with the names and places of residence of the pretended owners of these "contraband" except as appears within the enclosed reports of the officers employing them. All of which is respectfully submitted under protest."

The 22nd Regiment had moved into winter quarters at Camp Ella Bishop at Lexington, Kentucky, on October 26, 1862. The winter was a severe one, with much snow and cold weather. Picket duty in open fields without shelter or fires and little food brought on much sickness. Pneumonia and typhoid fever were especially prevalent. At all times Colonel Wisner shared the hardships and privations of the field with his men. For this he earned their greatest respect and admiration. In early November Moses became ill with typhoid fever. His condition grew steadily worse and on November 17th he was moved to a private home in Lexington. Angeolina came to be with him the first of December. Despite the best available care and medical attention, by Sunday, January 4, 1863 there was no hope for his recovery. Angeolina, his son Edward and Chaplain A. E. Mather were with him during his last hours, but in his feverish delirium he was with his men, disciplining them, counseling them on the justice of their cause and the need for crushing the rebellion, and expressing his great frustration in not being able to come face to face in battle with the enemy. He died on Monday, January 5, 1863, just four days after President Lincoln had issued his Emancipation Proclamation.

Angeolina, anxious to return to her home and family, planned to leave for the depot on Monday afternoon at 4:00 P.M. The 22nd Regiment, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Haber LeFavour, shocked and saddened at the death of their Colonel, were to escort the body. Other regiments then expressed a desire to show their respect and at the appointed hour the entire force at Camp Ella Bishop were in attendance. After a short service by Chaplain Mather, the funeral procession began, led by bands of the 18th and 22nd Michigan Regiments, followed by the 22nd Regiment with arms. The hearse, with its sable plumes and the regimental colors draped with black, was attended by six officers from regiments of Ohio and Illinois as pallbearers. Then came



Pine Grove in winter.

the carriage with Angeolina and Edward. Mounted staff officers of the 22nd and 18th Michigan Regiments, the 12th of Illinois, 45th of Ohio and 18th of Kentucky, Brigadier Generals G. Clay Smith, H. M. Judah, Q. A. Gilmore and Major General Gordon Granger and their staffs, all in full dress uniforms, complemented by the splendid trappings of their horses, and thousands of boys in blue made up a line of march over 2 miles long. At the depot, the Generals passed to the front of the column and as the body was removed to the ladies waiting room to await departure of the train, the drums gave forth their muffled tones, the escort presented arms and with bowed uncovered heads and many a tear on young cheeks, Colonel Moses Wisner's comrades bade him a last farewell. Angeolina and Edward then began their long sad journey back to Michigan.

They arrived in Pontiac on Wednesday noon and Moses was taken back home to Pine Grove. The pine trees he so cherished and had looked upon for the last time just four months before were now covered by a mantle of sparkling snow. After the funeral on Friday afternoon, he was buried in the family plot in Oak Hill Cemetery. Governor Austin Blair in his tribute spoke for all who knew Moses Wisner best: "His conduct is his best eulogy . . . Deeply imbued with a love of those fine institutions which had done so much for his Country and himself, he put away from everything but this service and went forth . . . to peril all in defense of the Union . . . He died . . . in the doing of his duty." The United States, Michigan, Oakland County—all had lost a true patriot.