

# GEORGE STEBBINS (1846-1945)

BY C.W. LATTIN  
Orleans County historian

George Coles Stebbins (1846-1945), a noted composer, born on Kent Road in Carlton wrote the music for hundreds of hymns. "Jesus Is Tenderly Calling To Thee," "True-Hearted, Whole-Hearted," "Ye Must Be Born Again," "There Is A Green Hill Far Away" and "Saved By Grace" were set to music by this singer-composer.

The house where George Stebbins was born Feb. 26, 1846, was built in the early 1840s in the Greek Revival style and is pictured here.

George showed musical ability at an early age. His family went to church services in a district school-house in Kent. There, too, for several weeks each fall and winter, a "singing school" was conducted by an itinerant "singing master." Young George, quoted later in life, said, "I entered into the exercises of learning Do-Re-Mi with the greatest interest and pleasure."

By the time George entered Albion Academy, after a few years in the district school, he was able to earn his tuition by leading the singing at the opening exercises.

George's father was William V. Stebbins (1811-58), a well-to-do farmer who had settled in 1838 in Orleans County, moving to this area from Schoharie County. George Stebbins' mother, Teresa Waring (1813-88), was born in Albany County. In the 1855 Census of Orleans County, William and Teresa are listed as 44 and 42, respectively, with five children. Among these was George, 9 years old in 1855.

William was a competent farmer, who built up his farm and added to it. Some time around 1862, a large, square grand piano was



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO



brought to the Stebbins home — the first piano George had ever seen. He quickly learned to play and showed enough talent to justify being sent to music school in Buffalo, and then on to Rochester where he began to compose tunes.

In 1868, when George was 22, he married Elma Miller, daughter of a local minister. They were married at the Methodist Church in Albion. Elma, too, was musical, having a good voice. When George had become a famous composer and wanted to introduce a new hymn, he and his wife would sing it as a duet.

The young couple soon moved to Chicago, where George was employed by the Lyon & Healy Co., a firm that published music and also sold pianos and other musical instruments. Very shortly, the young composer had an additional job — directing the choir in the First Baptist Church of Chicago. He was then 24 (1870).

An interesting phase of his career was his part in developing four-part arrangements, especially for male quartets. He is

given credit for the vogue for male quartets that lasted from that time well into this century. He produced a book of four-part songs, which set off a demand of quartets. He became a charter member of the Apollo Club in Chicago, devoted to music.

The Chicago Fire in 1871 wiped out the Lyon & Healy business for a while and induced George Stebbins and Elma to move to Boston. There, George soon had a position as director of the choir in the Clarendon Street Baptist Church. In 1876, he became musical director at the great Tremont Temple.

Soon after, Stebbins became active in evangelistic campaigns with Dwight L. Moody and Ira Sankey, two famous evangelists. He was their musical director, training and leading their choirs, singing solos himself and arranging hymns or composing new tunes for them.

George and Elma had a son, George Waring Stebbins (1869-1930) who studied organ, voice and composition in New York City, London and Paris. He became a noted organist and also published many compositions for the organ, as well as anthems and choruses. He was a founder of the American Guild of Organists.