

## **THANK YOU—JOHN ARBUCKLE**

The largest gift ever given to Plymouth Church was from a member we barely remember today. If not for three quotes positioned over the entryway from the Beecher Garden into the Church House and above the fireplaces in the Reception and Music Rooms, it is likely we would have no current memory of this individual. The member's name is John Arbuckle and his 1913 gift was the land, design, buildings and furnishings of what is now Plymouth's Church House, Gymnasium and Arcade, plus the Beecher Garden. If the gift were given today, it would be valued at roughly \$100 million. So, who was John Arbuckle and what prompted him to make this extraordinary gift to Plymouth.

John Arbuckle came to New York City from Pittsburgh in 1871. The highly entrepreneurial and creative 32-year-old had worked in his family's grocery and spice business but now he wanted to bring his innovations to the center of the American coffee trade. Arbuckle settled in Brooklyn, joined Plymouth Church and proceeded to transform America's coffee drinking habits.

Prior to Arbuckle, grocers throughout America sold unroasted green beans from barrels to those wishing to make a cup of coffee. The coffee buyer would take the beans home to roast with two major problems: beans frequently spoiled before they were roasted or were easily burned during the home-roasting process. A single spoiled or burned bean would mean a bitter cup of coffee. The visionary Arbuckle proceeded to change everything. Among his major coffee-related creations included ovens for evenly roasting green coffee beans, a process for coating roasted beans with a sugar/egg mixture to preserve bean freshness and the new 1lb

pre-packaged bags of coffee sold by grocery stores. Arbuckle was a remarkable combination of a visionary, an inventor, an engineer and a marketing-genius unafraid to challenge the way things had always been done.

By the 1890's Arbuckle had become the largest coffee merchant in the country producing 839,000 pounds coffee a day. His coffee was distributed and sold throughout the country. Arbuckle's Brooklyn operations and offices occupied 12 square blocks of what is now DUMBO with piers for one of the largest fleets of ships and barges in private hands and a railroad for transporting coffee and sugar. Many of these buildings and some of the railroad tracks still exist in DUMBO today.

Arbuckle's company was completely self-contained, it did not outsource anything. Coffee beans arrived from South and Central America and the Caribbean on company-owned ships, beans were stored in company buildings, beans were glazed roasted, ground, packaged in company-owned factories and shipped on company-owned wagons. A large print shop created labels and branded packaging, plus value stamps that were collected by consumers and redeemed for all kinds of merchandise including dishes, jewelry and handkerchiefs, the only items brought in from outside. Arbuckle eventually established a separate company to take care of the tens of thousands of redemptions, which grew to become another large money-making enterprise.

By 1900, John Arbuckle had become one of the wealthiest men in New York City though he seemed never to be thoroughly accepted by the city's other elite. In a series of articles on "Captains of Industry" from *Cosmopolitan* in 1902, Samuel E. Moffett writes:

*You might think that a man accustomed to tossing millions about with airy nonchalance of the coffee king would be perceptibly gilded in appearance and habits. Not so Mr. Arbuckle. The Newport set would call him hopelessly “middle class.” He likes pie, and there are awful indications that he has not entirely outgrown the fried steak habit.*

Arbuckle’s highly profitable coffee business was so successful he began to look for an additional market to exercise his creativity. He had been buying enormous amounts of sugar from Henry O. Havermeyer who controlled the American Sugar Trust through Domino Sugar. At the time, sugar was sold only in barrels and Arbuckle had made an arrangement with Havermeyer package sugar in new, more marketable two-pound bags. No one knows exactly why a sugar war erupted between the two companies. Perhaps Arbuckle wanted a better price and Havermeyer refused. In any case, Arbuckle announced he planned to build a sugar refinery on his Brooklyn property and Havermeyer announced he was going into the coffee business by buying a controlling interest in the Woolson Spice Company in Toledo, Ohio. Havermeyer immediately lowered sugar and coffee prices and Arbuckle did the same. Eventually both companies were selling their products below their costs. After a combined loss of \$25,000,000 Havermeyer and Arbuckle met again and resolved their differences. Arbuckle came out the winner, being able to stay in the sugar business, and Havermeyer got out of the coffee trade.

Arbuckle’s visionary and creative instincts also affected the lives of those around him. As an ardent admirer of Henry Ward Beecher, Arbuckle’s spiritual passion seems to have centered on caring for his fellowman. Hundreds of poor were hired to work in his coffee and sugar factories. In addition to their pay, workers received free health care in the company

hospital and lunch and dinner in company dining rooms. Arbuckle used his fleet of ships, to take employees and other non-elite New Yorkers out on harbor waters at night and on weekends for clean air and nutritious food. One of the ships was an old full-rigger that Arbuckle turned into a home for working men and women called the Deep Sea Hotel.

Arbuckle built a retirement colony for older citizens who needed assistance. The community on Lake Mohonk included a hotel for his workers. In another visionary act Arbuckle made it a point to hire handicapped workers in the hotel to teach them a trade. He and his wife Mary Alice Kerr Arbuckle also bought seven farms totaling 1,200 acres in the New Paltz, New York area and invited the working poor and their children from Brooklyn and New York City to vacation at the John and Mary Arbuckle Farms.

One of Arbuckle's last humanitarian projects was his gift to Plymouth Church. He belonged to the church for more than 40 years. The idea behind the gift was to have Plymouth Church provide a school and clubhouse for the young less-educated adults who came to New York seeking their fortune. Arbuckle purchased the land, hired the architect and initiated plans for what is now the Church House, Arcade, Gymnasium and Beecher Garden. Arbuckle however did not live to see his gift realized. Reoccurring effects of malaria, contracted years before on a trip to his holdings in Mexico, Brazil or the Caribbean caused his death on March 27, 1912.

Arbuckle died at his Clinton Hill mansion at 315 Clinton Avenue. The funeral, which was attended only by family members at his home, was conducted by The Rev. Newell Dwight Hillis, Senior Minister of Plymouth Church, and members of the church's choir sang. Arbuckle's wife had died

in 1907 and there were no children. The New York Times estimated his fortune at his death at \$30,000,000 or roughly \$877 million in today's dollars.

Arbuckle's sisters, Mrs. Catherine Arbuckle Jamison and Miss Christina Arbuckle, fulfilled his vision for Plymouth. Originally known as the Arbuckle Institute, later the Plymouth Institute, the buildings were completed in 1913 and opened for classes the following year. By 1921 enrollment in the Institute had reached more than 1,000 students with New York University providing some professors. In addition, credits earned in some classes could be transferred to the NYU for degree completion. Institute facilities included separate clubrooms for men and women, a library, billiard room and bowling alley. There were also foreign language and dance classes and a choir and orchestra for student participation.

It's impossible to know what would have happened if John Arbuckle had not passed away at age 73. His energy and vision would certainly have influenced the direction for the Institute and Plymouth Church, but this was not to be. In 1921 when plans were drawn up by the church to add another four-story Institute building on property the church had acquired on Cranberry Street. Rev. Hillis had a painting of John Arbuckle commissioned which now hangs in the Music Room. Hillis approached the Arbuckle family for a major contribution but they no longer wished to participate. Alternative financing for this grand project was not raised and the church's playground now occupies this site.

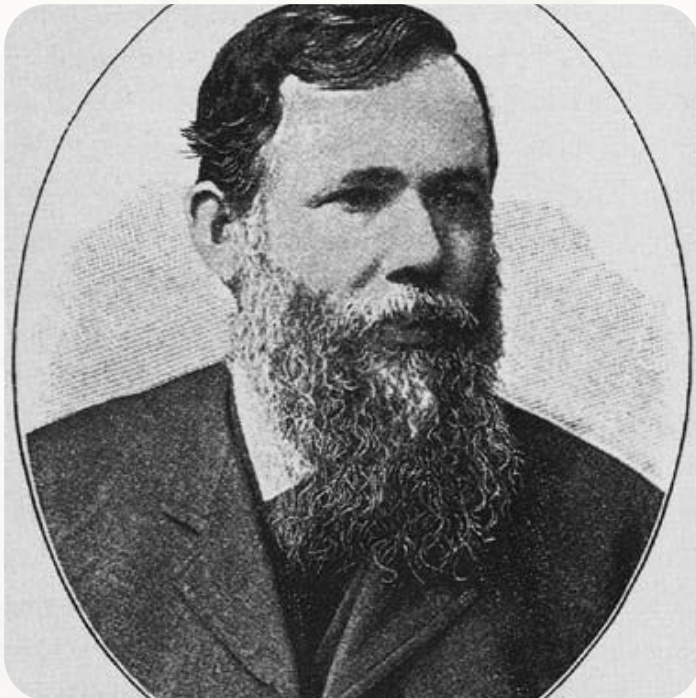
John Arbuckle's vision is still having immense influence on Plymouth Church. While the Plymouth Institute for the young adults of Brooklyn no longer exists, his gift of buildings and gardens is being heavily used every

*Dodransbicentennial Essay Series | 6 | March 24, 2022*

day for educational purposes by hundreds of children, youth and adults in programs including Sunday School, adult and youth education, music programs, small groups, and the Plymouth Church School. The Church House also contains the church offices.

As we regularly use this remarkable gift, it is important for all of us to periodically say “Thank You—John Arbuckle.”

~ James Waechter

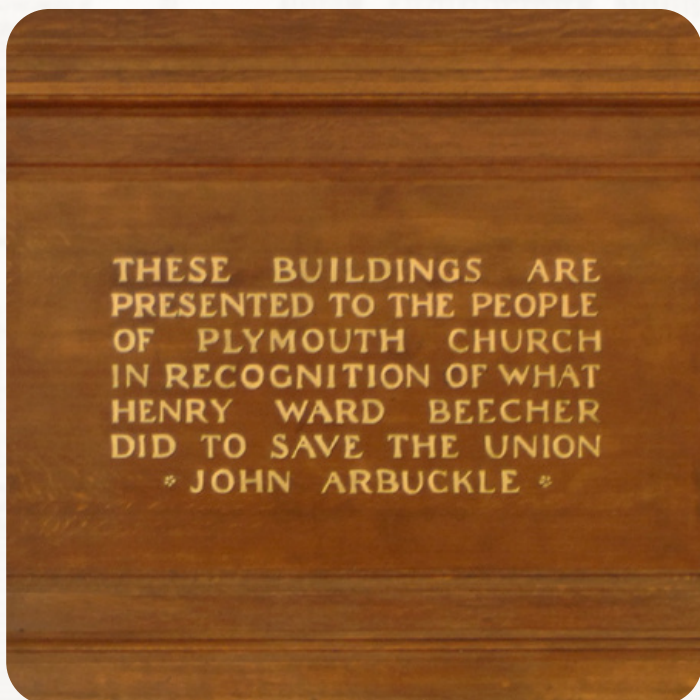


*A 32-year-old Arbuckle settled in Brooklyn, joined Plymouth Church and proceeded to transform America's coffee drinking habits.*



*Photo by Alan Barnett*

*In 1921, The Reverend Newell Dwight Hillis commissioned a painting of Arbuckle as part of a fundraising effort to build another 4-story Institute building on land the church had acquired on Cranberry Street. The money was not raised and the church playground now occupies this site.*



*Three quotes are part of Arbuckle's gift to Plymouth Church. One is cut in stone over the entryway to the Church House from the Beecher Garden. The second and third are painted on woodwork over the fireplaces in the Reception Room (pictured here) and the Music Room.*



*Yuban Coffee, Arbuckle's Yuletide Banquet blend, is the only national brand still in existence today. He annually gave it to his family and friends for Christmas. The brand is now owned by Kraft Heinz*



*Arbuckle's home at 315 Clinton Avenue was designed by Montrose W. Morris in the late 1880's. He died there on March 27, 1912.*

*Photo by Christopher Bride*



**Sources**

Clayton A. Coppin, "John Arbuckle: Entrepreneur, Trust Buster, Humanitarian" Foundation for Economic Education, May 1, 1990.

Paonessa, Laurie. "Arbuckle Warehouse," Clio: Your Guide to History, January 8, 2022.

Ruth McCartan. "The Arbuckle Family Fortune: Cotton, Coffee, Sugar" The Allegheny City Society Reporter Dispatch, Part I, February, 2000 and Part II, Spring/Summer, 2000.

Samuel E. Moffett, "Captains of Industry", Cosmopolitan, 1902.

Susan Spellen (aka Montrose Morris), "Walkabout: The Arbuckle Coffee Company's Sugar and Coffee War," Oct 15, 2015.

The New York Times archive.

The Plymouth Church archive.

Vivian Yess Wadlin, "About Town: Charity Begins...at the Mary and John Arbuckle Farm." March 21, 2022.