

# A Walk back in time – 1867

## Gordon-Roberts House Welcomes Visitors

Written by **Dan Whetzel**  
Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

### THE GORDON-ROBERTS HOUSE IS ONE OF CUMBERLAND'S MOST POPULAR HISTORICAL ATTRACTIONS.

Located in the heart of the Washington Street Historic District, the Second Empire building currently represents the upper middle class status of W. Milnor Roberts, whose family occupied the house for more than six decades. It also currently serves as home to the Allegany County Historical Society and a vast collection of local artifacts, so visitors are welcome year round to capture a moment in time from the late 19th Century.

The Gordon-Roberts House was constructed in 1867 at the request of Josiah and Katherine Gordon. Mr. Gordon, a local attorney, had the financial means to appoint the dwelling with first class amenities, including gas lights. While Gordon's economic well being was secured by that time, it had taken perseverance to achieve professional status and overcome personal setbacks.



Josiah Gordon's professional life was an eventful one. He served as a trial lawyer, Allegany County State's Attorney, and a member of the Maryland House of Delegates from 1859 to 1860. Following the outbreak of hostilities between the Union and Confederacy, Mr. Gordon and other delegation members were arrested and jailed for being secessionists. Following the Civil War, he was able to resume professional duties and construct a new house on Washington Street. In 1869, Mr. Gordon ventured into commerce by being elected President of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal; the terminus was located only a short distance from his Washington Street address. A later appointment as an Associate Judge of the Circuit Court confirmed Mr. Gordon's legal expertise.

Mr. Gordon's sudden death in 1887 eventually caused his Washington Street house to be sold to the W. Milnor Roberts family, the only other family to occupy the dwelling. Mr. Roberts, owner of the home, and his father of the same name, gained international recognition due to their railroad engineering feats, which included a major project in Brazil. Upon return to Cumberland, the younger Roberts entered into a business partnership with George F. Gephart by operating a foundry and machine shop. Following the end of the commercial partnership, he enjoyed farming a 250 acre tract that still bears his name about three miles outside the city. Mr. Roberts also found time to become an accomplished violinist and even built a studio in the house for making the instrument. His descendents continued to occupy the dwelling until 1950.

The Allegany County Historical Society purchased the building in 1954 for \$6,000 and began the task of organizing it into a museum. At that time the building was called "History House" and became a repository for a variety of local artifacts. Over the years the collection grew unwieldy, so a decision was made to feature the house as it would have appeared when the Roberts family owned it in the late 1890's. Through research of old photographs, oral histories, and a positive working relationship with the Robert's family, some original furnishings and artifacts have returned to a setting that reflects their original purposes. The buildings new purpose also brought about a name change to "Gordon-Roberts House."

Currently three stories are shown including the servants' work areas in the basement, living and dining areas of the first floor, and bedrooms and nurseries on the second floor. The look of the Gordon-Roberts House changes annually and highlights special exhibits. Also featured is a charming brick enclosed formal garden, a gift shop featuring tea pots, tea accessories, and more. Tea is served for every visit, be it a lone visitor or group event. Quite often docents wear costumes of the time period, thereby capturing the spirit of the late 1800's in Cumberland.

The Gordon-Roberts House is located at 218 Washington Street, Cumberland, Maryland and is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm. Contact [hhouse@allconet.org](mailto:hhouse@allconet.org) or phone **301-777-8678** for information regarding special events and tours.

