

ISAAC COSTON AND THE EMPIRE LAUNDRY

by Dorothy Davis

Isaac James Coston (Nov. 16, 1876 - May 16, 1957) was the embodiment of Horatio Alger. Having lost his father when he was nine years old and his mother when he was twelve,¹ Isaac Coston at age fifteen signed on as an apprentice in the shop of the weekly *Marylander and Herald* in Princess Anne, Maryland. In an age when no one counted working hours, Coston supplemented his apprenticeship pay by working in a grocery store during the evenings. At age 21, his apprenticeship completed, Isaac Coston withdrew from the bank his savings and went into the grocery business with his boyhood chum Newell Hayman.² The two youths, anxious to try the world beyond their childhood home, went to Baltimore to ask where in the United States lay the greatest opportunity. They were told Winston-Salem, NC, Austin, TX, and Northcentral West Virginia. They went to Winston-Salem and established a grocery store. They made friends with R. J. Reynolds, rented a room from him for housing and sold him groceries. Reynolds had invented a machine to mass-produce cigarettes and offered Coston and Hayman \$100 shares in the business and jobs in the factory Reynolds planned to build. Living before advertising had built a favorable atmosphere for the sale of tobacco and in a time when preachers waged war against tobacco products, Coston and Hayman refused to buy the stock and to work in the tobacco industry, thus missing a chance to become millionaires. Before long the grocerymen sold their store and headed for Northcentral West Virginia. They disembarked in Grafton, where a salesman told them they should ride a little farther to Clarksburg. They climbed back on the train and in 1901 settled in Clarksburg, the town where each would spend the rest of his life.³ They opened a grocery store at 210 West Main Street; and on Sept. 23, 1901, along with a third party, bought for an investment six lots in the Piedmont Addition to the town of Adamston.⁴ Coston did not waste his training as a printer. He opened a print shop in the 100 block of West Pike Street and ran the business for twenty years.⁵

The businesses must have prospered, for in March 1905 Isaac Coston purchased for \$4500 a house fronting on Lincoln Street in Carlisle Court.⁶ October 18, 1905, he married Allena May Holden, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Lee D. Holden of Clarksburg. The wedding took place in the Clarksburg Baptist Church with Reverend Herbert B. McDaniel officiating assisted by Dr. S. K. Arbuthnot of the Goff Methodist Episcopal Church.⁷ Five children were born to the couple.⁸

After almost a decade in business together, Coston and Hayman began to see other opportunities. Hayman must have left the grocery first for there is extant a letterhead of the Pure Food Grocers, 210 Main Street with Coston and F. M. Tully proprietors.⁹ Hayman left to establish a florist shop and then the Davis Funeral Home which he owned and operated until his death and which is still in existence in the 1990's.

Isaac Coston saw the need for a laundry in Clarksburg. He received a certificate from the State of West Virginia to establish one on April 14, 1908. 134 prospective stockholders met for a first yearly meeting in the office of Attorney George M. Hoffheimer on May 5, 1910. They bought 174 shares in the Empire Laundry Company at \$100 per share with Isaac Coston purchasing 70 of the shares. The stockholders voted to pay \$5,250 for land at 122-124 West Pike Street and to erect a building estimated to cost from \$7,445 to \$9,460. They voted to accept the by-laws already drawn up and elected a board of directors for one year consisting of J. H. Stephenson, Newell J. Hayman, W. Bruce Coston, C. C. Jarvis, Isaac J. Coston, Carl M. Neff and Wm. P. Barker. The directors voted to purchase a horse and wagon on Aug. 5, 1910, for the business about to open. A success from the start, the laundry by 1911 did \$27,245.87 in business with \$23,348.46 going for expenses. It had 30 employees with a weekly payroll of \$250. From the earnings \$2,600 had been paid for machinery, etc.¹⁰ The officers of the business in 1911 were I. Wade Coffman, president; Charles C. Jarvis, vice president; Isaac J. Coston, sec'y-treas. and manager.¹¹ Circa 1912-1918 basket shipments from the Empire Laundry went by railway express as far as to points in Maryland, to Richwood and to Ohio River towns. In 1914 the Empire bought ten new laundry wagons from the Schulte Body Works at \$142 each, the same year the business owned 12 horses.¹²

Stockholders on February 4, 1914, were exuberant. One of them proposed a 10% dividend on capital stock and a \$25 increase per month in the manager's salary. The dividend was pared down to 5%. But stockholders approved the purchase of the lot on Water Street for \$3,400 and the plan for the erection of a new building which would face West Main Street. The building at 106-108 West Main Street was nearing completion when the directors on Nov. 10, 1915, voted to send Isaac Coston to Youngstown, Ohio, to investigate a cleaning and pressing business.¹³ In February 1917 directors authorized the manager to purchase the sixth Ford car, this one "a second-hand machine for \$200 without a body as we have a body on hand" and in April 1917 to purchase the Clarksburg Steam Laundry for \$10,000. In 1919 stockholders voted to establish a carpet cleaning and dry cleaning unit "at the old stand" on West Pike Street; to pay directors \$3 for monthly meetings attended; and named Louis A. Johnson a director.¹⁴ The State of West Virginia had authorized increases in capital stock of the Empire Laundry to 350 shares Feb. 20, 1913; to 900 shares Feb. 2, 1914; and to 2000 shares April 10, 1920.¹⁵

For a long time Isaac Coston admired the residence James M. Coffman had built at 295 Clay Street circa 1902. He had said to Coffman, "If you ever sell your house, I want to buy it."¹⁶ By 1915 Coffman was ready to sell. On March 31, 1915, Coston bought the brick residence for \$5,500 plus the house Coston owned on Carlisle Court.¹⁷ He moved his family into his "dream house." This must have been a hectic year for the thirty-nine-year-old Coston. Among his effects is a card stating "Isaac Coston, Democrat Candidate for Water Works and Sewerage Board, April 6, 1915."¹⁸ He was one of the organizers of the Rotary International, Clarksburg Chapter, which was chartered in 1916.¹⁹ He had four children with the oldest age nine and he had a pregnant wife. He was supervising the construction of a new plant for his business and as usual he gave his life to running the laundry.

I. WADE COFFMAN, PRES.

DR. C. C. JARVIS, VICE PRES.

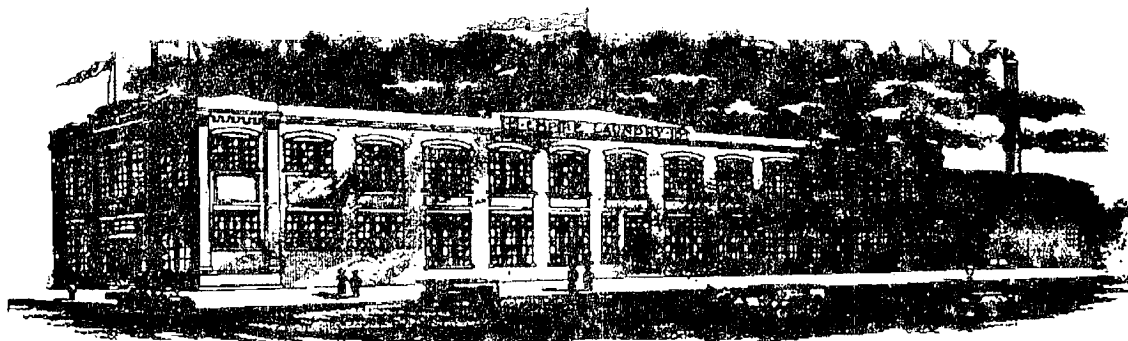
ISAAC J. COSTON, SEC., TREAS. & GEN. MGR.

CLEANERS

DYERS

RUG

CLEANERS



TOWEL

COAT

APRON

SERVICE

PHONES 600-601-602

COR. MAIN AND WATER STREETS

CLARKSBURG, WEST VIRGINIA

Letterhead of Empire Laundry Company

Every morning of his working life Isaac Coston arose at five o'clock, dressed in a shirt with a stiff collar and a suit, and as he put it, "placed my foot on the bottom step of the staircase when the morning train blew its whistle on Kelly Hill."²⁰ He loved breakfast. The night before he had put cereal in a bowl and had cut up the fruit he would place on top before he poured cream into the bowl. His daughter Louise reports that her father loved fruit and always kept a supply on hand. He would line up melons "This one for today; that one for tomorrow," etc. He owned a refrigerator with a large compartment at the bottom in which he stored peaches. Stalks of bananas hung in the basement near the oysters the man who once was an Eastern Shore boy bought by the bushel and kept alive by now and then throwing a little cornmeal into the container. Before six o'clock each morning Isaac Coston was on the way to the laundry, where he had finished an hour's work at his desk before the whistle of the laundry, which served as an alarm clock for all of central Clarksburg, blew at seven o'clock. He was a "hands-on" manager who never stopped working. "If not at his desk, he was out in the plant pushing baskets around like an employee. His feet killed him even though he wore high-topped shoes to give them extra support."²¹ Coston always had a boutonniere in the lapel of his coat. If flowers from his yard were out of season, he purchased a flower for his lapel.

Like most people before pasteurization of milk came along in the late 1920's, the Costons had a cow. Chickens in a pen on the property supplied what his daughter described as "Chicken Every Sunday." Coston raised a large garden and in summer yield from it was carried to a space near the house where the vegetables were washed, weighed and packaged. The Coston boys then placed the vegetables in a goat cart which they pulled through the neighborhood as they sold vegetables to customers.²² Isaac Coston had no hobbies.²³ On Sundays after attending the First Methodist Episcopal Church and eating dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Coston climbed into their automobile. They liked to drive up little roads that led into the country. They joined the Clarksburg Country Club and to entertain the children, they would sometimes ride the trolley to the club so that the children could swim in the pool. And in 1923 they bought at Lake Floyd and often drove the children there for a swim.²⁴

The business of the laundry during the 1920's ran parallel to the prosperity at the time all over the nation. Early in the decade stockholders authorized the management to build a garage on Machine Street, several other times voted the purchase of new equipment and auto trucks, and in 1925 passed a motion to install a ventilating system in the Main Street plant and to rent quarters in the Arcade Building in the 300-block of the business district for a pressing and receiving office. In 1927 the laundry initiated a linen and towel supply business. Increases in employees' salaries, including a \$100 a month to Isaac Coston in 1922, a 4% dividend on capital stock and the payment of \$10 to directors per meeting the same year, reflected the prosperity of the business.²⁵

By the end of the decade two of Isaac Coston's three sons had reached their majority. Their father expected them to come into the laundry. William, the oldest, liked the laundry; eventually became president of the company; and except for the years he served in the U. S. Army during World War II, helped run the business until its demise in 1956. James, the second son, had the soul of an artist and wanted to attend art school, but followed the father's wishes. At times he left the business to work elsewhere, but when William left for the U. S. Army in the 1940's, James came back "to help Dad."²⁶ Charles, the youngest, when he was old enough, worked at the laundry.

No business escaped The Great Depression unscathed. Dividends on capital stock cut to 2% in 1931 were to be from 1/2% to 2% "at the discretion of the treasurer" in 1937, when directors received \$2 per meeting. But employees in 1937 received a 5% raise in salary and February 1938 directors instructed Isaac Coston to investigate the fur storage business and to consider moving the dry cleaning unit to the Main Street plant. By 1940 the laundry appears to have regained its economic health. It had established in August 1939 a group health coverage for all employees through the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. And in 1940 directors ordered a new roof for the Main Street plant plus a fire wall, and a new roof for the Pike Street plant; the purchase of a new shirt unit to cost \$2,117; and three new delivery trucks. On December 1, 1941, directors asked the Costons to leave the meeting room and then voted Isaac Coston a \$400 bonus and William H. Coston a \$200 bonus. They

voted William Coston a raise in salary to \$250 a month beginning January 1942. They ordered a service price increase and a salary increase for all employees in due time. In January 1944 stockholders voted Isaac Coston a \$500 bonus. April 21, 1948, R. P. Mahaffey Co. in Pittsburgh presented to the Empire Laundry a blueprint for a complete remodeling of laundry facilities.²⁷

Changes in living habits and employee demands affected the laundry in the 1950's. Home laundry equipment caused citizens who had always depended on the services of the laundry to do the washing of clothes at home. A labor union was encouraging employees to organize.²⁸ At the annual meeting in 1956 stockholders received data that showed poor earnings beginning in 1953. Stockholders voted to close the business and liquidate its assets. September 27, 1956, directors sold to the Clarksburg Dairy Company all land and buildings for \$110,000. They ordered all fixtures converted to cash and by August 31, 1957, to distribute all cash to stockholders retaining \$10,000 for any contingent liabilities or expenses.²⁹ The officers at the time of the liquidation attests to the truth of Emerson's dictum: "Every institution is the lengthened shadow of one man." In 1956 William H. Coston was president; Newell J. Hayman, vice president; Isaac J. Coston, secretary-treasurer and general manager. The directors were William H. Coston, Mr. Hayman, Louis A. Johnson, James D. Coston, Isaac J. Coston and Francis M. Kennedy.³⁰

F. M. Kennedy had been an employee of the company for 45 years. He was a stockholder, one of the executives and beloved by employees and management. A citizen in 1991 remembers Howard Cunningham who worked as delivery man for the company for 45 years, "Never in a hurry and always kind, Mr. Cunningham, were I not at home, would leave my cleaned garments hanging on the back porch. I could pay him later."³¹ Other longtime employees were O. W. Holcomb with 48 years service, Mrs. Emma Blakesmith, Mr. and Mrs. Clyde Swisher, W. T. Maze and F. S. Maze, all with 35 years service. At the time of the closing, Isaac Coston stated that during the long service of Madeline Barr and Arela Barr Wright, who were sisters, that the two had "finished" an average of 5,000 shirts a week which would add up to something like seven million shirts over the period of thirty-some years they had worked.³² Management and workers always had rapport. May 4, 1925, directors issued a memorial to the memory of a deceased employee. Throughout the history of the firm resolutions of sympathy to relatives of deceased employees appear in the minutes.

Isaac Coston had been a quiet, kind, retiring man who did not know how to relax. His daughter Louise says he was "beside himself when the laundry closed down."³³ In January 1957 he became ill. He never recovered. He died May 16, 1957, at the age of 81 survived by his wife, five children and five grandchildren. His obituary stated that he had been a member of the official board of the First Methodist Church; of Herman Lodge No. 6. A. F. and A. M.; Adoniram Chapter No. 1 Royal Arch Masons; Clarksburg Commandry No. 13 Knights Templar; Scottish Rite Bodies and Nemesis Temple. He was a director of the Community Savings and Loan in Clarksburg. Funeral services were conducted by Reverend John E. Hanifan of the First Methodist Church and Reverend Paul E. Francis of the First Presbyterian Church at the Davis Funeral Home on May 17, 1957. Burial was in the Bridgeport Cemetery.³⁴ His wife survived him until Nov. 2, 1965, when she died at age 82.³⁵



FOOTNOTES

1. Isaac James Coston was the youngest child of five sons and one daughter born to Isaac James Coston (Mar. 5, 1838 - Feb. 2, 1885) and Rosina Humphreys Coston (May 5, 1840 - Jl. 18, 1888) Isaac Coston descended from an Isaac Coston whose will made Nov. 24, 1743, in Somerset County, MD, reads in part: "I leave my now dwelling house, Cydor House, ye third part of my barnes, ye third part of all my land called Bair Point, to my loving wife Rose Coston during her natural life. After her decease I give and bequeath unto my son Isaac Coston all that part of 100 acres of land called Coston's Trouble, lying on ye southwest side of a great mulberry tree now standing in my old field and my aforesaid son to be free to possess his land and whatsoever bequests I have hereby given him at ye age of sixteen years." Bair Point is reputed to have been granted the first Isaac Coston by Lord Baltimore. James D. Coston Papers.
2. "Let's Know More People," a clipping from a Clarksburg newspaper in the James D. Coston Papers.
3. Dorothy Davis, *History of Harrison County*, p. 79; James D. Coston Papers.
4. Harrison County, WV, *Deed Book*, 124, p. 478.
5. "Let's Know More People."
6. Harrison County, WV, *Deed Book*, 147, p. 118.
7. *Sunday Exponent-Telegram*, Clarksburg, WV, Oct. 16, 1955.
8. William Holden Coston (Aug. 26, 1906 - Sept. 13, 1977); James Dallas Coston (Nov. 30, 1907 - Je. 7, 1967); Dorothy Rose Coston (Mrs. Alan Swindler) (Jan. 28, 1908 - Nov. 14, 1988); Charles Fenton Coston (Sept. 28, 1912 - Mar. 16, 1980); Louise Coston (Mrs. James T. Courtney), (Nov. 18, 1915 -). Harrison County, WV, *Register of Deaths* 25, p. 418; 77, p. 339; 80, p. 115. Louise Courtney interview.
9. James D. Coston Papers.
10. Record books of the Empire Laundry Co., West Virginia and Regional Collection, WVU Libraries, Colson Hall, Morgantown, WV.
11. *Clarksburg Directory*, 1911.
12. *The Clarksburg Exponent-Telegram*, Oct. 21, 1956.
13. Directors voted to establish a carpet cleaning and a cleaning and pressing business June 2, 1919.
14. Record books of the Empire Laundry.
15. Harrison County, WV, *Articles of Incorporation* 4, p. 406; 5, p. 18; 6, p. 339.
16. Louise Coston Courtney interview.
17. Harrison County, WV, *Deed Book* 243, p. 131.
18. Louise Coston Courtney Papers.
19. *Clarksburg Telegram*, May 16, 1957.
20. Louise Coston Courtney interview.

21. *Ibid.* Louise Courtney worked in the office of the laundry from the time she ended her schooling until she married in 1944.
22. *Ibid.*
23. But a Clarksburg newspaper reported that he liked to fish off the Atlantic Coast of Virginia. James D. Coston Papers.
24. Louise Coston interview. Harrison County, WV *Deed Book* 342, p. 25.
25. Record books of the Empire Laundry Company.
26. Louise Coston Courtney interview.
27. Records of the Empire Laundry.
28. Pauline Jones Coston interview.
29. Records of the Empire Laundry.
30. *The Sunday Exponent-Telegram*, Oct. 21, 1956.
31. Mary McAndrew interview.
32. *The Sunday Exponent-Telegram*, Oct. 21, 1956.
33. Louise Coston Courtney interview.
34. *Clarksburg Telegram*, May 16, 1957.
35. Harrison County, WV, *Register of Deaths*, 24, p. 41D.

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Interviews

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 Louise Coston Courtney, Oct. 29, 1991. 295 Clay St., Clarksburg, WV.
 Mary McAndrew, Dec. 16, 1991. 112 Meigs Ave., Clarksburg, WV.

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