

Sewickley Valley Historical Society

Signals

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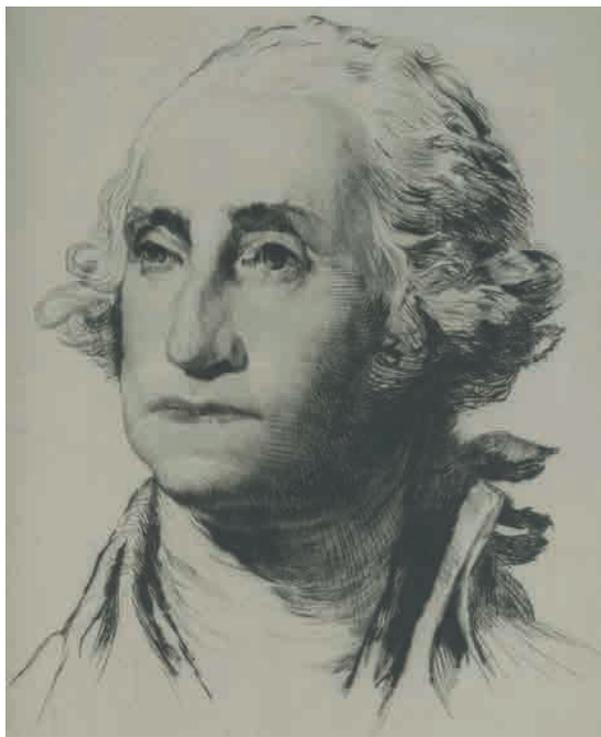
George Washington Walked Here: Washington's Six Visits to Western Pennsylvania

A Presentation by Gary Augustine, Historian

George Washington came first to Western Pennsylvania as a diplomat and a soldier, but later as an investor and landlord.

In the winter of 1753-54, Washington carried a demand from Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia seeking an end to French incursions in what the English regarded as their Ohio Valley. Washington traveled to the eventual site of the City of Pittsburgh, Logstown and the French forts Venango and LeBoeuf. He passed through the Sewickley Valley on horseback on his way to Logstown.

In May 1754, Washington, tasked with keeping an eye on French activity in Western Pennsylvania, pretty much started the Seven Years War with his ambush of a French and Indian detachment at Jumonville Glen.



In July 1755, Washington was present and nearly killed at the disastrous defeat of General Edward Braddock at the battle of the Monongahela.

In summer 1758, Washington came back to Western Pennsylvania with the victorious army of General John Forbes, which forced the French to destroy Fort Duquesne and evacuate up the Allegheny River.

In the fall of 1770, Washington came west again to view his real estate holdings. He had an interest in more than 20,000 acres of land.

In the fall of 1784, Washington came again at the behest of Thomas Jefferson, Governor of Virginia, to investigate the feasibility of a canal linking the Potomac River system to the Ohio River.

Gary Augustine is a well known local historian. He was born in Beaver County and has lived in Ambridge all his life. He attended Ambridge High School and received a BS from the University of Chicago in 1960. He was in the U. S. Navy from 1960 to 1964, serving on LST [Landing Ship, Tank] #1156, the USS *Terrebonne Parish*, named after a place in Louisiana. Gary subsequently worked at IBM for 29 years and currently is employed by PNC Bank. Gary is married and is the father of three grown daughters, all of whom live in the area. Gary's father sparked his interest in American History with frequent expeditions to historical sites, but he was also surrounded by the past, living in Ambridge in one of the Harmony Society brick houses, a few blocks from the Laughlin Memorial Library, with the nearby fields and woods where Logstown and Legionville used to be providing endless fascination. The American Civil War has been of particular interest to Gary, and he has been active in the Civil War Round Table, but he is conversant in the history of many periods, including the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. He is currently working on a book about the many LSTs that were built during WWII by the Dravo Corporation on Neville Island and by the American Bridge Company at Ambridge.

The mission of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society
is to promote interest in and to record, collect, preserve, and document the history of the Sewickley Valley.

In the September *Signals*, Agnes L. Ellis, writing as “Uncle Joe” in recording memories of the Sewickley Valley in the mid-19th century, recalls hearing a Sewickley boy speaking of his experience as a prisoner during the Civil War. This was John Irwin Nevin. Of him she says: “When our prisoner returned from Libby [Prison], we all went to the completed new church [the Presbyterian] to hear his experience of prison life. I remember he began his lecture by saying, ‘In the first place, I was not asleep,’ -as it has been reported that being overcome with fatigue and want of rest he had fallen asleep by the wayside, and thus been captured. Certainly no one slept during that lecture, and those who for many years read his editorials in the Pittsburgh paper, which he so ably conducted, knew him as a very wide awake man, with more than an ordinary amount of intellect.”

John Irwin Nevin (1837-1884) was born in Allegheny City to the Rev. Daniel E. and Margaret Nevin. He graduated from Jefferson College and taught History at Sewickley Academy. Nevin was among the earliest to respond in April, 1861, to the call of President Lincoln, and he helped to recruit companies A and G of the 28th Pennsylvania Volunteers in Sewickley. He was chosen Second Lieutenant of Company A and reported in Philadelphia to Colonel John W. Geary, commanding the regiment. On February 28, 1862, he was captured and confined in Libby and Salisbury prisons for six months. On being exchanged, he organized Independent Battery H, and was made Captain. Later he became Lieutenant Colonel of the Ninety-Third Pennsylvania Volunteers, participating with it in the Gettysburg campaign. He was in command of the regiment as it played a prominent part in the defense of Little Round Top. Nevin enjoyed a successful career postwar as editor of the *Pittsburgh Leader*. The Historical Society has Irwin’s handwritten account of his time in Confederate prisons.

[The 28th Regiment, having crossed the Potomac River from Washington City, was on the march in Virginia.]

“I awoke in the morning thoroughly chilled, stiff and sick. I could not eat of the crackers that formed our breakfast and when the order was given to fall in the Captain and our First Lieutenant looking at my haggard face insisted that I must go to a neighboring cottage and lie down for a few moments, and if I should feel better, I could easily overtake the regiment in its slow march over the mountain. After a little resistance I complied, and going to the house, I asked the woman who was within if I might lie down for a while. She pointed to a miserably dirty and squalid bed and said ‘that’s the only one we have, you’re welcome to it.’

I took one look out the window and saw my loved regiment winding in a long blue line, the head of it lost in the dull wintry forest, as the winding path leads up the mountainside. I turned away and lay me down. I thought I should be with them in an hour or so! I soon fell asleep: how long I slept I know not.... Giving the woman all my spare change for her hospitality, I resumed the march. I continued to ascend the mountain and upon reaching the summit, I sought in vain for our little army. I now felt certain that I had lost my way. Yet I felt but little concern. We had met none of the enemy since we crossed the Potomac.

I heard rustling of leaves on one side- on another- all around me. I saw men in coarse gray overcoats with short barreled carbines in their hands approach me. I looked in vain for an outlet, but there was no escape. They closed upon me on all sides and pointing forty guns at my breast called upon me to surrender. I looked around for their captain and as he stepped forward, I told him, ‘I am your prisoner.’ Instead of immediately answering me, he deliberately drew his pistol and slowly and impressively raising it to my head, he said, ‘I’m in the habit of treating my prisoners kindly and I wish to do the same to you, but as sure as there is a God in heaven, if you don’t tell me the truth about your Army I’ll blow your damned Yankee brains out this moment!’

It isn’t a pleasant sensation that one feels, with a muzzle of a cocked revolver within six inches of your eyes. I experienced a curious feeling in my forehead... Of course I was frightened, but Thank God I did not let the rebels know it. I may have turned pale, but I know I had a smile on my face as I replied, ‘I am an officer of the Federal Army and of course I am not at liberty to tell you anything in regard to its numbers and movements, and if you are carrying on war according to civilized customs you can’t expect



William Irwin Nevin, captured 1862

it. I don’t believe you will shoot me. I think there is too much discipline among you to allow any of you to shoot a prisoner.’ Still, although I did talk so confidently, I felt very doubtful of that discipline, as I was in the hands of a Guerrilla Chief and they are seldom known to take prisoners.... Being a little nervous at the thought that there must be quite a body of Yankees not far away when a straggler is captured, he ordered a soldier to take me up behind him [on his horse] and ordered his company forward at a rapid trot.... He said no more about the shooting business, asked for no more information and in fact, from that moment treated me with the utmost kindness.... Observing that I looked weak and sick and was considerably jaded by our long ride in that most uncomfortable of positions, i. e., sitting behind a cavalryman’s saddle, he ordered one of his men to dismount and give me his horse, and when I was mounted, he fell in beside me and entered into a long discourse about himself and his exploits.... He began asking me questions, new to me then but very soon stereotyped in the brain of every prisoner by constant repetition in every dialect that is heard from Virginia to Texas: ‘What d’ye come down here for? Do you’uns expect to subjugate we’uns?’ He was honest in his hatred to the North and in his mistaken zeal for Southern rights. According to him, the South had for many years borne with Christian meekness the continued insults, wrongs and encroachments of the overbearing North until forbearance ceased to be a virtue, when under a final protest, they at length resorted to force of arms.

The Confederates are as brave and strong, as well-fed and managed, and, as regards the great mass of them, as well persuaded in the justice of their cause as we ourselves are, and as the contest will be still be as equal in all respects, as might naturally be foretold of a strife where brothers of the same Saxon race should be locked in the death grip, God defend the Right!

[Under parole promising not to escape, while always looking for an opportunity to do so, Nevin traveled under guard through Leesburg and Centreville past the Manassas/Bull Run battlefield and on to Richmond, the last part of the journey on a train.]

Shortly after arriving I was hurried away to General Winder's office- name taken down and data of capture, then in charge of a young clerk, proceeded down street to the military prison. Being somewhat curious I asked my conductor whether I should meet any other Federal prisoners there. 'Oh yes, some fifty officers and four hundred men.' 'Why: I thought the last body of prisoners had been sent to Fortress Monroe?' 'No, the negotiations were broken off by your government, and the exchange was stopped, and it won't go on. So you will have lots of company, mostly all the old Manassas captives.'

I can't describe what a chill this announcement had on my spirits. I was exceedingly curious to see these Manassas prisoners, to see what sort of stuff McDowell's army at Bull Run had been made of. I acknowledge that I expected but little.... It must be confessed that it was no pleasant picture of my future companions that I had formed to myself as we walked down the slippery streets and finally stopped in front of a long dark building, which I was told had formerly been a tobacco factory. A sentinel presented arms to my conductor as we stepped up to the door. Open it swung- a glare of gas light from within revealed a long room filled with human beings engaged in various ways, some eating supper, some playing games, some walking rapidly from end to end of the apartment for exercise, some stretched out on cots, that, in two or three parallel rows stretched the length of the room. Pointing his finger toward this scene, my guide abruptly turned away and left me to enter unannounced and unIntroduced into prison.

How little did I imagine such a fate, when last year I first became a soldier: death in battle, grievous wounds, fevers, hair breadth escapes. Every other contingency frequently crossed my mind, but that I should be taken, that had never occurred to me.

I was quite a hero the night I came. Poor fellows! They hadn't seen a fresh face from the North for many a long month, for I was the first officer captured since last fall. How they looked round, stared, then forsook their occupations and crowded up to me, when I stepped over the threshold lugging my blanket and my haversack. How they pressed me down to the supper table and offered me the choicest of prison fare! And after restraining their curiosity by strenuous efforts while I was eating, how they hurried me off to one of the beds- thrust a pipe into my mouth- and formed a kind of internal police guard to keep the crowd back and to prevent numberless irrelevant questions. And there I sat and dispensed with a bounteous hand untold quantities of news. News of the armies, of regiments, of government, of the people- nothing came amiss to that hungry crowd, that had aught of the flavor of Northern opinion and life in it. And then they told me in excited tones their story, the wrongs, their suffering, their hopes and fears. And still they pressed around me, as if loath to leave me.... My bed was my only refuge and this I was at length forced to seek.

I have said before that I had expected but little from the prisoners taken at Manassas...yet after actual sight and acquaintance with these unfortunates, I was entirely taken aback by the result. I had seldom seen a finer looking body of men than those, so closely grouped together within the walls of that old tobacco factory. I think now the best and the bravest answered the call first and that notwithstanding its blunders and its rout, the army that McDowell marched onto the field of Manassas was officered by the finest and best men that have yet taken the field.

The first thing that strikes a newcomer in prison, as distinguishing prisoners of war from other men, and therefore as being a natural consequence of long confinement, is a general restlessness of mind and want of tenacity of purpose. What a glorious opportunity, some will say, to make a virtue of necessity and apply oneself to some study- to learn a language or an accomplishment- to make up one's deficiencies in education! Come out of prison with more knowledge. I wondered why these ideas were not more generally acted upon. But I looked about me, and I saw only the debris of such good resolution.... I have been whirled into the current of tumultuous and harrowing feelings that wear away our lives and energies, all traceable to the rise and fall of our hopes and fears of exchange. And how they do rise and fall! How slight the rumor that sets us dancing with joy at anticipated release or slinking around with long faces and subdued voices at the prospect of staying until the war is over. How can we apply ourselves to anything? Can we do anything useful? Can we continue constant- even to our games or are we reduced to the life of the Bengal tiger in the menagerie, who spends his waking hours walking from end to end of his cage, poking his muzzle between each particular bar, seeking for that freedom, that he has daily sought there before? I used to wonder when I was a boy, why the beast tried each particular opening so many times when one trial ought to have satisfied it- that it can not get through. I don't wonder now!

I heard a tremendous story today of the doings of the Confederate steamer Merrimac- the ironclad. The Confederate officer of the day came in very jubilant over its exploits- said it had already sunk half a dozen of our largest vessels, and it was going to steam into New York harbor and destroy everything there. We had nothing therewith to oppose it. We set three fourths of this down as braggadocio, but even then enough remained to cast a gloom over us. In about two weeks, older prisoners tell me, we'll get near the truth; it takes just about that time to sift and arrange together the dribblets of truth, conjecture and rumor.

March 21st: Arose and dressed, ate, slept, ate, slept, ate slept- that's a day well spent for a prisoner. I have cheated Father Time. Sleep is the best pass time. Oh, for a Rip van Winkle sleep, until our release!

A prisoner exhibits the greatest interest and curiosity toward the commonest scenes of life outside. How many an hour have I myself, wearied of everything within, secured early in the afternoon one of the windows and gazed out on anything that might suggest ideas of the great world without, from which we were so completely separated.

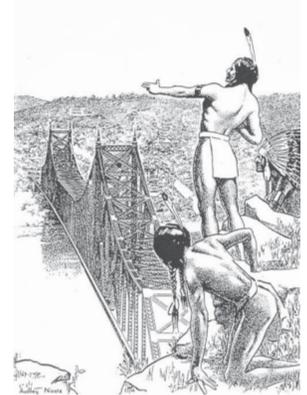
Sometimes it would seem to us that we had always lived in this chrysalis state and that our former life was a dream. With what different eyes and with what new ideas did I look on the most stale incidents of wharf and river life.

Listlessness triumphed over energy and discipline and finally every man was free to go his own way. Is it not Tennyson who represents King Arthur as a great organizer and reformer, who spent his life trying to systemize and direct to a useful end the rough and isolated sentiments of truth and justice and knightly honor that were scattered around him. Alas, his efforts were rendered vain by Lancelot's falsehood, Guinevere's frailty, Mordred's treachery, and he was spirited away to Faerie. So with us here."

[On May12, 1862, the Confederates relocated the Union prisoners to Salisbury Prison in North Carolina. Nevin spend another three months of captivity there before being exchanged in August 1862 to return home.]

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January 2016

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These members and guests enjoyed an October 24th tour of The Stan Hywet Hall and Gardens in Akron, Ohio, the former country estate of F.A. Sieberling, co-founder of the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co. Rain threatened the day, but it turned into a wonderful fall afternoon.

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Thanks to the following, who have supported SVHS with gifts in addition to membership dues:

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