

Sewickley Valley Historical Society Signals

XXXIII, Number 2

October 2005



Pittsburgh from the South Side, two days after the Great Fire, from a painting in the Carnegie Museum by William Coventry Wall (1810-1877)

The Burnt District

by Gary Link

7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, October 25, 2005

Old Sewickley Post Office

Our lecture this month is by a gentleman who has immersed himself in the history of Pittsburgh at the time of the Great Fire of 1845 to enliven an historical novel featuring a city constable named John Parker. Author Gary Link holds a Masters in History from Indiana University of Pennsylvania and is currently Corporate Records Manager for Astorino, a Pittsburgh architectural firm. His work, *The Burnt District* (Publish America, Inc., 2003), recreates the

geographical, social, commercial and governmental features of the growing city so catastrophically impacted by the fire that destroyed one third of it and left 12,000 people homeless. Mr. Link has spoken to groups throughout the area. He plans two sequels to *The Burnt District*, one set in the Mexican War period (*The Spectrum*) and the other at the time of the coming of the railroad in the 1850s (*The Throughway*).



Ninety SVHS members and their guests enjoyed a delicious dinner at the Allegheny Country Club on Saturday, September 17, in celebration of the unveiling of the A. F. King portrait of Robert Peebles Nevin, donated to the Historical Society by Susan Nevin Cockrell and restored by Ann Guip Quillen. Biographical information on Nevin by Baird Standish, Nevin's great-great grandson, and a

slide lecture on King by Barbara L. Jones, Curator, Westmoreland Museum of American Art, Greensburg, capped off the evening. Pictured above left, in front of the portrait, are Mrs. Jones, Mr. Standish and Mrs. Cockrell; at right are John Kroeck, Joe Zemba, Susan Holton and Agnes Pangburn, members of the committee in charge of the festivities.

The following is excerpted from *The Sewickley Herald*, February 5, 1969.

The Great Fire

by Beth Riegel

Quaker Valley Senior High School
Winner of First Prize in
Edgar W. Woods Memorial Fund Contest

The morning of April 10, 1845, dawned clear and bright. There had been no rain for the previous two weeks. Even this day promised nothing except a high, dry wind from the west.

On the corner of Ferry Street and Second Avenue an Irish washerwoman lit a fire to boil some water. Carelessly, she left it as she turned to search for more kettles. Meanwhile, a sudden wind sprang up, carrying the fire's embers to a nearby wood shed. Before the water had started to boil, the shed and an icehouse, belonging to Col. William Diehl, were aflame. The houses close by were like timber for the burning, since the high winds had carried off their moisture. In a few minutes the fire leaped to the frame houses on Second Avenue.

Shortly after noon a man struck the bell in the belfry of the Third Presbyterian Church a block away. Alerted by the alarm, the people first regarded the fire merely as an exciting interlude. They were assured that there was little danger of the fire's spreading. Soon the firemen of the Eagle Fire Engine Co. arrived on the scene. Since the wind was in a lull, many believed that the fire could easily have been extinguished. These optimistic beliefs were quickly disproved.

At this time, the water level in the city's reservoir was very low because of the dry weather. As a result, the efforts of the engines' pumping yielded only a thin stream of mud. Then the men applied their energy to the bucket service. Though they worked diligently, the water supply was shortly exhausted.

About half an hour later the lateral winds suddenly increased. Soon the fire was being carried to the northeast faster than the firemen could have put it out even with an abundance of water. All efforts made to subdue it were ineffectual. With its good start, the fire was shortly beyond their control. The gusty winds soon whipped it

into a roaring demon and started it on its destructive course.

Swiftly the fire jumped to the opposite square, fanning out rapidly in all directions. It attacked and devoured the Globe Cotton Factory of James Woods. Then it moved on, destroying a neighboring brick building and threatening the Third Presbyterian Church. By the strong-willed exertions of the people, the church was saved. It was intact except for part of the wooden cornice, which was cut away by the Eagle Fire Co. In saving the church, the people prevented twelve squares to the northeast from being consumed.



N. Currier lithograph

As the fire licked its way northward and eastward to Market Street, it also spread to Water Street and the banks of the Monongahela. Cinders fell on the wharves of the Monongahela and on the steamboats, which hastily pulled out to the river. Household goods and merchandise carried to the docks for safety were soon caught in the onslaught of flames. But even the river did not stop the fire's advance. At Smithfield Street, the fire consumed the wooden Smithfield Street covered bridge....

In addition, Pittsburgh's industry also suffered from the fire's heavy blows. On Water Street, site of the many iron and glassware houses, the fire molded great masses of melted iron into all possible shapes, reduced kegs of nails to useless heaps, and mixed lumps of glass with nails and other rubbish. Yet, miraculously, on the corner of Ross and Fourth, the enraged fire left a combustible warehouse standing untouched.

Furiously the fire moved eastward toward Grant's Hill and the canal separating Pittsburgh from its nearby suburb of Kensington or Pipetown. The last building

destroyed on the Pittsburgh side of the canal was the new steel works of Jones and Quigg. Then the fire dipped down from the steep bank into the canal. It rose and burned many of the frame buildings which confronted it on the opposite side. As the fire swept between Grant's Hill and the Monongahela through Kensington, every house and building was destroyed without exception. Finally, when nothing remained to be consumed, the fire died on the slopes of Pittsburgh's surrounding hills....

Thousands were forced to seek shelter in the courthouse, public buildings, warehouses and with personal friends. Even those who managed to remove their furniture to the streets found that it had been looted or stolen by thieves. There were no tents nor provisions for the homeless.

About 982 buildings were destroyed, including large business houses and the most valuable factories in the city.

Over \$250,000 was sent to Pittsburgh as relief aid from all over the country. After Mr. Cornelius Darragh and Mr. Wilson McCandless presented the case before the Pennsylvania Legislature, Gov. Shunk appropriated \$50,000 for relief and exempted Pittsburgh from taxes during the years of 1846-1848.

Since Pittsburgh's insurance companies had not expanded their investments to include industries other than those in the city, they went bankrupt. Merchants soon circulated reports throughout the country that Pittsburgh's industry was not crippled and that they were still prepared for business and prompt fulfillment of orders. Through the press, eastern banking men were encouraged to invest their capital to rebuild the city. Everyone replenished his stocks quickly and resumed business as usual....

This disaster contributed much to the emergence of Pittsburgh as a metropolis. Previously, Grant's Hill had marked the extent of the city, with business confined to the triangle. With the help of new capital and the advantages of new buildings, business was attracted to this busy center and spread its boundaries.

From the ashes of defeat and despair rose a flourishing, young city full of confidence and hope for its future—Pittsburgh.

Lights and Shadows

TO BE REPRINTED

The Sewickley Valley Historical Society is planning to reprint *Lights and Shadows of Sewickley Life; or, Memories of Sweet Valley*, by Agnes L. Ellis, originally published in 1891. The book is filled with charming anecdotes of Valley life, such as the following:

“The first [steam] boat built for the western waters [was] the ‘New Orleans,’ built at Pittsburg [sic] in 1811....

“The first boat with a [steam] whistle passed Sewickley in 1837. It was called the ‘Uncle Sam,’ and there are still some of the early residents left who remember the excitement in Sewickley and vicinity when its shrill tones were first heard.

“Mr. Cadwallader Evans, father of the late George Evans, who lived in Mr. Dickson’s house on Hill Street, had worked for years, and at last received a patent for the steam-whistle. It was arranged above the boiler, so that the engineer could control it.

“The boat ran aground in ‘White’s Riffle,’ near the old Tracy landing, and the whistle was blown again and again. Through the valley and over the hill-top it echoed and re-echoed, causing a feeling of terror and alarm. Mr. Jacob Fry announced to his family and neighbors that the end of the world had come, and Gabriel was blowing his trumpet, telling them to fall on their knees and improve the short time left in prayer. A general belief was that it was the cry of a wildcat; so some of the men left their sugar-making and ran here and there with pitchforks, while Moses Hendricks, accompanied by a friend, took his gun and went as far as ‘Crow’s Run’ to shoot the animal. At last word was brought from the neighbors near the river what was the cause of the outcry, and quiet and peace were restored.”

Signals is designed and edited by Susan C. Holton



Harton Singer Semple, Jr.

The Historical Society’s new Executive Director was born in Tonopah, Nevada, but has resided in Sewickley since 1946. He is definitely a western Pennsylvania person, as his forebears were in coal (the Keisters) and in steel (the Singers).

He was educated at Sewickley Academy, Saint George’s School in Newport, Rhode Island, Yale University class of 1967, and took a masters at Duquesne University. After military service in Vietnam with the First Infantry Division artillery, he was a high school English teacher for 33 years, from 1972 until retirement in 2005.

Harton resides on the part of Rockledge Farm in Bell Acres. He has been married to the former Judy Shoener since 1978 and has two sons, Harton III and Ian Laird, who are respectively at Wake Forest and Syracuse Universities.

His hobbies include Civil War reenacting as a Surgeon for the 63rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Regiment, and he is a life member of the Society of Civil War Surgeons. He also collects antique medical equipment and obsolete American currency and is a life member of the Society of Paper Money Collectors. Currently in the works is a book of Civil War letters entitled *The Irish Boys*, due for publication in 2006.

Harton is involved in the community. He is a board member of the Old Sewickley Post Office Corporation, Sewickley Cemetery, Allegheny Cemetery and Treasurer of both the Little Sewickley Creek Watershed Association and Citizens for Soldiers, which is replacing the Civil War monument “Fame” in Sewickley Cemetery. Of these duties he says, “My grandmother Keister and my mother and father through their example

taught the responsibility one has to improve the community and preserve the advantages obtained through the initiative and sacrifice of those who came before. Sewickley is a special place because for generations citizens have quietly served and given to innumerable noble causes.”



B.G.

Lest she leave without a Roast
The least we can do is give a Toast.

Although a native she is not
Who ever would give it a thought.

Beyond the carpet-bagger stage
Outnumbering the newcomer gage

An honorary native we declare
Her local knowledge, beyond compare.

For the Shields Estate, a charming host
Our special historian we can boast.

Instead of having a common Roast
Let us fondly give a Toast.

—Anonymus



Several of you have asked for B. G.’s new address and phone number. Here they are:

Mrs. D. Leet Shields
P. O. Box 406
Lemont, PA 16851-0406
814-238-0709

Sponsors, Patrons & Benefactors

Thanks to the following members who have generously supported the Sewickley Valley Historical Society with gifts in addition to membership dues:

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Mr. & Mrs. Edward Sherry, in honor of B. G. Shields

Mrs. D. Leet Shields, in memory of Georgena Glancy

Ellen & Jay Brooks, Thomas & Mary Beth Pastorius, Peter & Elizabeth Stein, toward the conservation of the R. P. Nevin portrait

New Members

The Sewickley Valley Historical Society welcomes the following new members:

Mr. Robert E. Batina, Leetsdale; Mrs. Marjorie Johnson, Moon Township; Bob & Fran Kluz, Rick & Christy Semple, Sewickley

In Memoriam

Mrs. Byron J. Korb



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.



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