

Sewickley Valley Historical Society Signals

XXXIII, Number 5

February 2006

Architect J. W. Kerr Leaves His Mark: Western Pennsylvania's Prolific Architect

Saturday, February 25

10:30 a.m.

Old Sewickley Post Office

a presentation by W. Brewster Cockrell



*The Presbyterian Church of Sewickley
from a drawing by Neville C. Davison*

Joseph W. Kerr (1815-1888) was described as “the leading ecclesiastical architect in Pittsburgh” when, in 1859, the congregation of the Presbyterian Church in Sewickley hired him to design their new sanctuary. He was also the architect of the Thomas Leet Shields Homestead, Edgeworth (1854, demolished 2002); Reed Hall/Administration Building at the Western Pennsylvania State Hospital, later Dixmont State Hospital (1859-1862, demolished 2006); and the Shields Presbyterian Church, Edgeworth, formerly the Leetsdale Presbyterian Church, now the home of Grace Episcopal Church (1868-1869). While Kerr was a prolific designer in mid-nineteenth century Pittsburgh, little is known about his life and training as an architect. This presentation on Kerr is the result of research conducted by Brewster Cockrell on behalf of the History Committee of The Presbyterian Church of Sewickley.

W. Brewster Cockrell, a graduate of Washington and Lee University and the University of Virginia School of Law, is a practicing attorney with PNC Bank. He has served as a member of the Sewickley Zoning Hearing Board, the Sewickley Borough Council and the board of the Friends of the Sewickley Public Library. Currently, he is a member of the board of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society.



At 6:00 on a recent Saturday morning, intrepid travelers Mim Bizic, Susan Holton and Harton Semple were on the road to visit B.G. Shields at her new home in Lemont, Pennsylvania. After a delicious breakfast *chez* Shields and some consultation with B.G. on the postcard history of Sewickley the Historical Society is preparing, we made a delightful walking circuit of the Victorian town. After lunch in historic Boalsburg at the foot of Mt. Nittany (“The Birthplace of Memorial Day” See <http://www.boalsburg.com>), we were treated to a tour of State College — both the Penn State campus and the new public library B.G. visits almost every day. Unfortunately, the lines were so long at the Creamery that we had to pass on dessert! We are happy to report that the former Executive Director is thriving in her new haunts.

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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.

SVHS Architectural Preservation Awards, 2005/06

In 1987, the Sewickley Valley Historical Society established an award for historic preservation within the Sewickley Valley. Edgeworth Preservation merged with SVHS in 2000, designating its assets "to encourage the protection of the historic architectural heritage in Edgeworth and the Sewickley Valley through research, documentation and education," strengthening SVHS's dedication to the preservation of the Valley's significant architecture.

Over the years, the Architectural Preservation Award has recognized a wide variety of structures: a Victorian storefront, Newington, the Old Sewickley Post Office, a log cabin on Audubon Road, Lark Inn, Way Tavern, Muottas, the Shields Schoolhouse, Elmridge and Hillside, among others. The award was not, however, given to the buildings themselves, but rather to their owners—individuals who took special pains to preserve their properties for posterity, thus maintaining the special ambience of the Sewickley community.

The SVHS Architecture Committee voted to award the 2005/06 Preservation Award to the owners of two recently restored houses, one in Sewickley and one in Edgeworth: Mr. and Mrs. Edward Hughes for the Captain James Porter House on Peebles Street, and Mr. and Mrs. Thomas L. McLeod for the Frank Dravo House on East Drive.

These two recent restorations provide outstanding examples of sensitive architectural preservation. Mr. and Mrs. Hughes received their award at the SVHS Annual Meeting in May 2005; Mr. and Mrs. McLeod will receive theirs at the next Historical Society meeting at 10:30 a.m. on Saturday, February 25, 2006. We congratulate both couples and thank them for their dedication to the preservation of the architectural heritage of the Sewickley Valley.



The Porter House, built in 1866 for a riverboat captain, is a major example of the Second Empire or Mansard Style. At its height in the decade of economic prosperity following the Civil War, this style was considered the most fashionable for domestic as well as institutional structures.



The Dravo House was constructed about 1912 for Frank Dravo, a founder of the Dravo Corporation, on what had once been the golf course of the Edgeworth Club. It is an example of Georgian Revival, a style characterized by formal symmetry relieved by classical details.

Sponsors, Patrons, Benefactors

The Colado Family, in memory of Jeannette Watts Dickson Colado (1907-2005);
Mr. & Mrs. Richard B. Elste; Bernard & Rita Lefkowitz;
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Joe Zemba; Mrs. Mary M. Zemba

New Members

(All from Sewickley)

Frank A. Cortazzo, III; Richard Fedosick; Mr. & Mrs. Peter K. Sour; Rev. Edwin Wichman

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You can now communicate directly with us on line at sewickleyhistory@verizon.net

Signals is designed and edited by
Susan C. Holton

“Cottonmouths and Cotton” reprinted in S&D Reflector

Without a doubt, there’s a bit of Huck Finn in most Americans. In the late Captain Frederick Way, there was more than a little of Huck. There was whole lot.

Proof positive is “Cottonmouths and Cotton,” a series of four articles about a 1946 river journey in recent issues of the *S&D Reflector*, a quarterly published by Sons and Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen.

Now, if Capt. Way plays Huckleberry Finn on this epic journey, his Tom Sawyer is none other than J. W. (Woody) Rutter, also of Sewickley. The idea to set out for New Orleans was in fact Woody’s idea. Woody, recently back from duty with the U. S. Air Corps and pursuing his education at Marietta College, was dreaming of adventure on the river. No matter that when he broached the idea of a journey to New Orleans to the captain, there was no boat in their possession. Nor did the pair own an outboard motor. Outboard motors were almost impossible to secure in the post-World War II era, and fuel was scarce.

It was Woody who found the 18-foot Ohio River yawl to be christened *Lady Grace II*, after Grace Morrison Way, the captain’s wife. The boat replaced the original that was battered on the rocks of the Allegheny River in an excursion the previous year.

In “Cottonmouths and Cotton,” the reader rides along after the pair shoves off from



Fred Way and Woody Rutter taking the *Lady Grace II* on a trial run, the day before they set out for New Orleans. In the background is Sewickley Bridge I.

Sewickley on June 4, 1946, bound down the Ohio for, as the captain puts it, “maybe to Louisville, maybe up [the] Kentucky River, maybe to Cairo.” New Orleans was a far off glimmer, at least in the captain’s expectations.

From Sewickley, the reader travels along at a slow pace, running the river by day, camping along the bank at night, or stopping as guests of river people who knew the captain from his days on the *Betsy Ann*. The captain shares river history and points out landmarks at almost every bend of the river.

Fortunately, there was a camera along that allows the reader to really travel vicariously.

The trip went along at its slow but steady pace all the way to Cincinnati, still a trip with destination undefined. There, the two travelers found the *Gordon C. Greene* in port, fresh in from the Tennessee River. From Capt. Tom Greene, there was an invitation to load their boat and travel to Chattanooga.

There and then, the balance of the trip’s itinerary was defined when Woody Rutter asked, “Why couldn’t we hop from the Tennessee River over into the Warrior and go in to New Orleans by way of Mobile?”

The account of that journey down the Black Warrior and the Tombigbee Rivers, past Tuscaloosa to Mobile, and on to New Orleans, is climaxed when the *Lady Grace II* capsizes in the Mississippi Sound.

“Cottonmouths and Cotton” is a tale that, as the captain remarked, was an experience to be remembered but never duplicated. This is not to say, there aren’t some Toms and Hucks still out there on the Mississippi, or even on the Tombigbee, with a story to be told. Let us hope so. This one is written in Capt. Way’s inimitable style. It will be of special interest to those fortunate enough to have boarded the *Lady Grace (VII)* when the captain offered local excursions off Sewickley’s shore during the 1960s.

B. G. Shields

Copies of the four 2005 issues of *S&D Reflector* in which “Cottonmouths and Cotton” appeared are available for \$5 each, postpaid, from *S&D Reflector*, J. W. Rutter, Editor, 126 Seneca Drive, Marietta, OH 45750.



SVHS has a copy of Woody Rutter’s recent book in the Texas A&M University Military History series entitled *Wreaking Havoc: A Year in an A-20* (2004).

Fred Way’s books include *The Log of the Betsy Ann* (1933); *Pilotin’ Comes Natural* (1943); *The Saga of the Delta Queen* (1951); *Way’s Packet Directory, 1848-1983* (1983); *Way’s Steam Towboat Directory*, with contributions by Joseph W. Rutter (1990); *Way’s*

Packet Directory, 1848-1994, rev. ed., with contributions by Joseph W. Rutter (1995).

SVHS owns copies of *The Saga of the Delta Queen* and the 1983 edition of *Way’s Packet Directory*. If you have a copy of any of the other publications that you would be willing to donate to the Historical Society’s collection, we would be most appreciative.

The Historical Society staff is working with Arcadia Publishing in Dover, NH, on a postcard history of Sewickley, which should be available for sale at the end of the summer. At this stage, we are organizing the postcards in our collection as well as scanning cards borrowed from private collectors. If you own Sewickley postcards that we might include in the book, please let us know as soon as possible at 412-741-5315 or at sewickleyhistory@verizon.net.

Now that winter seems finally to have come to Sewickley, perhaps we could all use some of the remedies in the following to ward off colds, flu and other maladies. This list appeared in one of Franklin T. Nevin's scrapbooks from the first thirty years of the twentieth century; its source is unknown.

What to Try

Try popcorn for nausea

Try cranberries for malaria.

Try a sunbath for rheumatism.

Try ginger for stomach cramps.

Try clam broth for a weak stomach.

Try swallowing saliva when troubled with sour stomach.

Try a wet towel to the back of the neck when sleepless.

Try buttermilk for removal of freckles.

Try to cultivate an equable temper, and don't borrow trouble ahead.

Try a hot dry flannel over the seat of neuralgic pain and renew it frequently.

Try snuffing powdered borax up the nostrils for catarrhal "cold in the head."

Try taking your cod-liver oil in tomato catsup if you want to make it palatable.

Try breathing the fumes of turpentine or carbolic acid to relieve the whooping cough.

Try a cloth wrung out from cold water put about the neck at night for the sore throat.

Try an extra pair of stockings outside of your shoes when traveling in cold weather.

Try walking with your hands behind you if you find yourself becoming bent forward.

Try a silk handkerchief over your face when obliged to go against a cold, piercing wind.

Try planting sunflowers in your garden if compelled to live in a malarial neighborhood.

Try a newspaper over the chest, beneath your coat, as a chest protector in extremely cold weather.



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