

Sewickley Valley Historical Society Signals

XLI, Number 5

March 2014

Wednesday, March 19, 2014, 7:30 p.m.

Sewickley Heights History Center

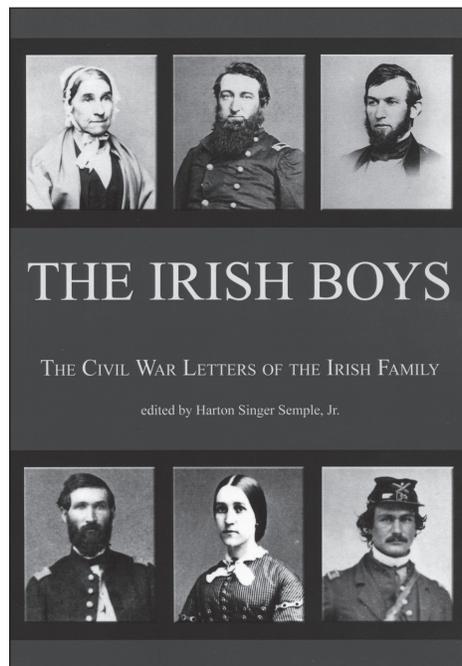
1901 Glen Mitchell Road — 412-741-4487

The Irish Boys The Civil War Letters of the Irish Family

A Presentation by Harton S. Semple, Jr.

Harton Semple, Executive Director of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society, recently published a new book about the Civil War, entitled *The Irish Boys: The Civil War Letters of the Irish Family*.

Members of the Irish family lived in the Western Pennsylvania area from 1785, when Nathaniel Irish, grandson of William Irish, a sugar planter on the island of Montserrat, crossed the mountains from Philadelphia with his wife and family to settle near Pittsburgh. The focus of Mr. Semple's book is letters generated by the family of William Beckford Irish, William Irish's great-grandson, during the Civil War. Three brothers—Frank, Dallas and Nathaniel—corresponded with their mother, sister, brother Elias and other relatives in 136 letters that give a remarkably complete representation of the War, 1861-1865. Through these letters, which comprise both missives from the soldiers in the field and the relatives at home, the reader is afforded an insight into what it was like to live through those pivotal years in our nation's history.



Alberta Harper Irish. Lydia and her husband, Edward, both died in 1993, but they are survived by their daughter, Charlotte Dallas O'Neil (Oliver).

A number of battles are covered. Frank Irish served as a surgeon with the 77th Pennsylvania and speaks about Shiloh, Liberty Gap, Chickamauga and Chattanooga. Dallas Irish was a captain in the 13th U. S. Regulars and fought at Arkansas Post, Vicksburg and Chattanooga. Nathaniel Irish served with Hampton's Battery F, Pennsylvania Light Artillery, and saw action primarily at Second Bull Run, Antietam, Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. A cousin, Tom Cadwallader, Cooper's Battery C, also corresponds before his death in 1862 at the battle of New Market Crossroads. Stay-at-home brother Elias Irish, a lawyer and state legislator, insisted that the letters be retained.

There is a Sewickley connection. Mrs. Edward O'Neil II, who lived on East Drive in Edgeworth, was Lydia Irish, the daughter of Franklin Cadwallader and

Refreshments will be served following the presentation, and signed copies of *The Irish Boys* will be available for purchase for \$30.00, plus tax. The book can also be bought through the website www.theirishboys.org.

**PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS MEETING WILL BE HELD AT THE
SEWICKLEY HEIGHTS HISTORY CENTER**

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.

An 1817 Visit to Pittsburgh

The following is taken from an article in The Pittsburgh Gazette Times, Sunday, April 29, 1923: "Century Old Tales of Pittsburgh," by George T. Fleming, who excerpted the text from a book by John Palmer, an English tourist, with the formidable title Journal of Travels in the United States of North America and in Lower Canada, Performed in the Year 1817; Containing Particulars Relating to the Prices of Land and Provisions, Remarks on the Country and People, Interesting Anecdotes, and an Account of Commerce, Trade, and Present State of Washington, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Albany, Cincinnati, Pittsburg [sic], Lexington, Quebec, Montreal &c. to Which Are Added a Description of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, and a Variety of Other Useful Information, with a New Coloured Map Delineating All the States and Territories (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1818). The book is available as a free EBook from Google.

June 13, 1817. Today we crossed the Laurel and Chestnut Ridges, so named from respective growth of trees. The scenery of these mountains is wild and deer are yet plentiful... The country, in spite of its uneven surface, is, however, improving and many new farms are cleared yearly. We saw some very picturesquely situated, some hundreds of feet above the vales, on the sides of hills, and even tops of mountains, surrounded every way by the primeval forests.

June 14. Today the country is not so mountainous, but still hilly; it is nearly all under cultivation. Many fine farms, orchards and good brick farm houses. Oxen are much used for draught by the farmers.

The inhabitants of this part of Pennsylvania are many of them German descendants.... They are a hardy, well-made and industrious people. The features of both men and women are pretty well bronzed by the sun. They appear healthy and the wives and daughters of the farmers, when about their work, often go without shoes and stockings, In this country such an appearance does not indicate poverty; it is choice. Some of these naked-legged fair ones often having forty or fifty pairs of stockings by them, of their own knitting.

Our charges on the road amounted to 37½ to 50 cents per meal. Bed, 12½ cents.

We arrived at Pittsburgh, by 2 in the afternoon, and put up at Pittsburgh Hotel; board and lodging \$1 per day.

In traveling this route, by stage coaches, great care is requisite in packing your baggage close. We found our clothes considerably injured... The heavy baggage is strapped to the back of the stage, on a rack, distinct from the springs.

The city of Pittsburgh, the capital and emporium of the Western country, is finely situated on a small plain, surrounded by lofty hills, at the juncture of the rivers Alleghany [sic] and Monongahela, and commencement of the Ohio, 1,180 miles from the confluence with the Mississippi, and continuing the course down the Mississippi, 2,188 miles from Orleans.

It is laid out in strait [sic] streets, 40 and 50 feet wide, having foot-walks on each side. Watch-boxes are placed at convenient distances, and the police of the city (except in lighting) is well regulated. From the number of manufactures, and the inhabitants

burning coal, the buildings have not that clean appearance so conspicuous in most American towns. The houses are frame and brick, in the principal street three stories high.

Although Pittsburgh, a few years since, was surrounded by Indians, it is now a curiosity to see any there; a few traders sometimes come down the Allegheny, with seneca oil, etc.

There are many good stores in Pittsburgh, and a great trade is carried on with Philadelphia, Baltimore, and the states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, etc., exclusive of the carrying trade, and the number of boats that are always proceeding down the Ohio, with vast quantities of foreign merchandise.... The

inhabitants send up the Alleghany [sic], Monongahela, and their forks, whisky, cyder [sic], bacon, apples, iron and castings, glass and foreign merchandise; in return they receive many thousand bushels of salt from Onondago [sic] and immense rafts [of timber] from Alleghany and French Creeks....

The articles sent down the Ohio and Mississippi are flour, whisky, cyder [sic], peaches and apples, bar iron and castings, tin and copper wares, glass, cabinet works, mill-stones, grind-stones, nails, etc., for which they receive by the return of the keel and steamboats, cotton, lead, furs and peltry, hemp, leaf tobacco, salt, etc.

Numbers of manufactures, of almost all kinds, are carried on in Pittsburgh and the vicinity. The country is admirably adapted to the purpose, having plenty of waterfalls, mountains of coals, and the majestic Ohio and its tributaries, to convey their wares to all parts of the Western country....

The inhabitants of Pittsburgh are fond of music; in our evening walks, we were sure to hear performers on the violin, clarionet [sic], flute and occasionally the piano-forte. Concerts are not unusual. The houses of the principal streets have benches in front, on which the family and neighbors sit and enjoy the placidity of their summer evenings....

Fort du Quesne [sic], built by the French, formerly stood here; its site has almost disappeared into the Ohio. The remains of Fort Pitt are very faint, we can yet perceive part of the ditch, its salient angles, bastions, etc., but several houses, stores and a brew house are built on the ground....



Pittsburgh and its vicinity is [sic] fast improving; a stone bridge is building across the Monongahela, and there is no doubt but on account of its situation it will ultimately be a large commercial city.

The following table will illustrate the steady price of provisions....

[The table, which has been abbreviated from what appeared in Fleming's article, shows average prices in 1817 dollars. A dollar in 1817 was worth approximately \$17.50 in 2013 dollars.]

Beef, pound.....	5 cts
Flour, per cwt [hundredweight].....	5 cts
Indian corn, bushel.....	40 cts
Potatoes, bushel.....	40 cts
Turnips, bushel.....	40 cts
Cabbages, each.....	5 cts
Butter, pound.....	20 cts
Ducks, pair.....	20 cts
Geese, pair.....	20 cts
Turkies [sic], pair.....	20 cts
Pullets, pair.....	25 cts
Venison, pound.....	3 cts
Pork, pound.....	5 cts
Hogs' lard, pound.....	5 cts
Mutton, pound.....	4 cts
Veal, pound.....	5 cts
Cheese, pound.....	12 cts
Eggs, dozen.....	12 cts
Onions, bushel.....	10 cts
Indian corn meal, bu.....	50 cts
Soup beans, bushel.....	50 cts
Bacon, pound.....	50 cts
Whisky, gallon.....	50 cts
Cider, barrel.....	3 dols
Peach brandy, gallon.....	1 dol
Beer, table, barrel.....	5 dols
Dried apples, bushel.....	1 dol 25 cts
Dried peaches, bushel.....	1 dol 25 cts
Green peaches, bushel.....	1 dol 25 cts
Salt, bushel.....	1 dol
River fish.....	6½ cts
Maple Sugar.....	12½ cts

To which I may add:

Hams per lb.....	10 cts
Hams, venison.....	50 cts each if fine
Cord of wood, 8 ft. long, 4 ft. by 4 ft.	
.....	2 dols 50 cts
Coals.....	8 cts per bushel

West India sugar, tea, coffee and cotton and woolen goods are rather dearer in England. Vegetables dear; taxes slight; farms within a few miles, if improved, \$10 to \$30 per acre; labor \$20 per month or \$1 a day. Orchards do well here, except peach trees, which have lately been much cut by hard winters.

June 19. ...We this day embarked for Cincinnati, in the state of Ohio, 522 miles below Pittsburgh, as the river runs. Our conveyance was one of the long Kentucky boats, in common use here for transporting produce and manufactures down the Ohio; they are shaped something like a box, 40 to 50 feet long, having a flat bottom, with upright sides and end. Three-fourths of the boat nearest the stern is roofed in; two oars are occasionally worked at the bows, and a large sweep on a pivot serves as a rudder. We paid \$5 each for our passage. After pulling out into the stream, our captain, as they styled him, let the boat drift with the current at the rate of three miles an hour. The banks are covered with oak, walnut, mulberry, ash, poplar, dogwood, etc. The left bank is much the highest. Here and there we caught sight of an opening with cultivated fields and farm houses. Came to mooring near Legionsville [sic], the encampment ground of Gen. Wayne, in the Indian campaign of 1792; distance about 20 miles from Pittsburgh. These boats are brought up by pulling in past a point, by the assistance of the two oars and immense sweep; as soon as the boats ground, a man, who stands ready, jumps on the shore with a rope and winds it round the nearest tree.

June 20. Early this morning we passed the town of Beaver, a poor looking place of about 50 houses....



If you find the above description interesting, you may want to go to the following website: <http://www.carnegielibrary.org/research/pittsburgh/history/pgh1816.html#Imp>.

Here you will find *Pittsburgh in 1816*, compiled by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Granting of the City Charter (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Library, 1916).

The preface reads as follows: "This little book will interest the Pittsburgher of 1916 chiefly because the parts and pieces of which it is made were written by men who were living here or who passed this way in 1816.

"The three newspapers of the day—the *Gazette*, the *Mercury*, and the *Commonwealth*—have furnished...the items of local news. They have also furnished advertisements....

"The men who were the tourists of the day in America, traveling by stage, wagon, boat, or on horseback, often made Pittsburgh a stopping place in their journey. Many of them wrote books, in which may be found two or three pages, or a chapter, on the city as it appeared at that time. It is from these books that the section 'Impressions of early travelers' has been gathered. The date given with these extracts is the date of publication, but the period referred to in every case is between 1815 and 1817....

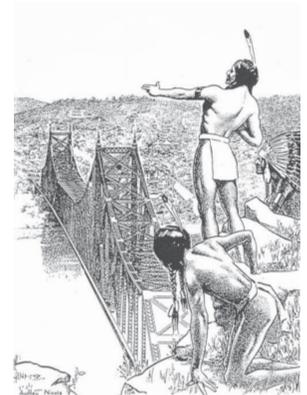
"The sketches that have thus been brought together do not form a systematic or well proportioned description of the city; yet they may help, through their vivid pictures and first-hand impressions, to give some idea of life in Pittsburgh a century ago."

After nearly **two** centuries, the descriptions still fascinate us!

Sewickley Valley Historical Society
200 Broad Street
Sewickley, PA 15143

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March 2014



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

Linda X. Benson; Kathy & Rich Brandt; Mr. & Mrs. Robert C. Burnham; Mrs. Clinton Childs, Jr.;
Laura & Dave Doty; Mr. & Mrs. Richard Elste; Carroll Ferguson; Susan Jones;
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In Memoriam

Furman South III

Nominating Committee

The following have been named to the SVHS Nominating Committee for 2014-15. The offices to be filled are Secretary and four Directors. You are encouraged to contact any member of the Committee with your ideas as to who will best fill these positions. The slate will be announced in April, and the election will be held at the Annual Meeting, Wednesday, May 14, 2014.

Jay Brooks
Brewster Cockrell
Peggy Dury
George Gaadt
Maleet Gordon