

# Sewickley Valley Historical Society *Signals*

XXXIII, Number 7

April 2006

On Tuesday, April 25, at 7:30 p.m., Whitney Snyder will be our host at the Sewickley Heights History Center for a viewing of

## *"The History of Sewickley Heights"* a film narrated by Dave Crawley, KDKA



A view of "Franklin Farm," the estate of B. F. Jones, Sr.  
From a postcard in the collection of Melissa Wisen

The Sewickley Heights History Center is located at 1901 Glen Mitchell Road.

### *Report of the Nominating Committee*

The following have been nominated as officers and directors of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society for the year 2006-2007.  
The election will be held at the Annual Meeting on Tuesday, May 23, 2006, at 6:30 p.m., at "Newington."

President:	Joseph Zemba	Directors:	Milana Bizic	John Kroeck
Vice President:	Cynthia Giles		Brewster Cockrell	Marian Miller
Secretary:	Charlotte Bober		George Craig	Steven Ratcliffe
Treasurer:	Joseph Goff		Annie Freitag	Betsy Stein
			Susan Kretzler-Falcone	Daniel Telep

Respectfully submitted, The Nominating Committee:  
Charlotte Bober, Sadie Kroeck, Judy Semple, Marvin Wedeen, Mary Jane Williams

*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.

## Meet me at the corner of Broad & Beaver...

All over America, the street that intersects the main drag brings forth the prevailing image of that town. In Sewickley, no doubt about it, Broad & Beaver is the local equivalent of Hollywood & Vine.

Certainly, Fortune was smiling on Sewickley Village when, in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, businessman Earl W. Myers hired architect Herman A. Lord to spruce up his premises on the southwest corner of Broad and Beaver. The plan brought forth by Lord found immediate favor with the *Sewickley Herald*, which declared on the front page of its July 1, 1916, issue that “Ye Olde English Shoppe on Main Corner Makes Town Look Better.”



The newly remodeled corner of Broad & Beaver, from the 1916 *Herald*

A photo of the refurbished prominent corner accompanies the article, which declares that the project “has made a wonderful difference in the appearance of the town of Sewickley.” As described by the *Herald* in 1916, the façade presents the appearance “of a handsome, timbered-plaster shop in imitation of the picturesque ancient English style, neat and clean in the extreme, and it sets off to advantage the whole row of adjoining business buildings



A “before” photo, from a postcard in the SVHS collection. S. C. Ritchey grocery store, at the corner of Broad & Beaver, advertises boldly on the building that would be redesigned in 1916.

along both streets.” Now, nearly 90 years later, one concludes that architect Lord’s design has stood the test of time. It still brings that little hint of the English country town to Sewickley.

Herman A. Lord told the *Herald* that he got his ideas for the corner building from a building on Old Compton Street in London, although he did not follow the design exactly. Lord was an architect well-equipped to bring an artistic touch to the drawing board. He had formerly worked in the offices of Rutan & Russell, a Pittsburgh firm known for outstanding domestic architecture, and later with Charles Barton Keene, a Philadelphia architect who also designed for Sewickley’s well-to-do. The Lord office was in Ambridge, where he designed a number of houses and commercial buildings. He was the architect of Ambridge High School.

In its 1916 article, the *Herald* praised the go-ahead spirit of Earl W. Myers and suggested that other property owners in Sewickley might do well to follow suit with future renovations in the English style. It was not to be, but was an interesting suggestion nonetheless.

B. G. Shields

## Whatever happened to Merz's clock?

It has oft been said that everybody loves a mystery. Everyone, that is except historians. Nothing weighs on the mind of those who study and record the events of the past more than the question that begins: Whatever happened to ???

This fact is brought to mind by this month’s story about the Myers Building on the corner of Broad and Beaver streets in Sewickley. An early tenant of the building, refurbished in 1916, was jeweler Adelbert Merz.

After he moved in, Merz installed a street clock on Broad Street of the kind that once graced the streets of small towns all over America.

Often these timepieces were put in by banking institutions, but, in Sewickley, everybody set his watch by **MERZ**’s clock.

One of the mysteries that has plagued the staff of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society is coming up blank when somebody asks, “Whatever happened to Merz’s clock?”

We have to add this to the list of missing artifacts, such as the statue that once graced the foot of the stairs of Sewickley’s yellow brick elementary school, or the horse-watering trough along Little Sewickley Creek. Mysteries all!

## Why We Still Have a Sewickley Heights

The Heights above Sewickley remain underdeveloped—even wild in some places—partially because the lands there were far from the river and not readily accessible, and because the initial owners were absentee and did not exploit their holdings, leaving them to squatters and wildlife.

More than 1600 acres in Braden's Depreciation District had been purchased by Thomas McKean (a signer of the Declaration of Independence, Chief Justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and Pennsylvania's first Governor) and Francis Johnson. McKean bought out Johnson's interest to the land on the Heights in 1803, then gave the land to his daughter, who had married the Spanish ambassador to the United States. She left the property to her

sold to carefully chosen men of wealth, who found the rolling hills and spectacular views perfectly suited for summer estates.

This was a time when most of Pittsburgh's industrial elite made their homes in the East End of Pittsburgh or on Ridge Avenue in Allegheny City, today's North Side. They spent their summers at Cresson Springs and Bedford Springs and, before 1889, at South Fork Club near Johnstown, but were looking for new diversions. Allegheny was becoming crowded, and there was talk that Pittsburgh was going to annex Allegheny City (which subsequently happened in 1906).

Henry W. Oliver was one of the first of this group to spend summers in Sewickley, and he recruited others. People had been spending summers in the Sewickley Valley ever since the coming of the railroad in 1851, but now came high society.



daughter, but both women remained in Spain. This is the origin of the name "Spanish Tract," remembered today in a road off Persimmon Road on the Heights.

A McKean Shooting Club was organized in the 1880s, with hunting rights to several thousand acres. Quail and rabbits were stocked. Deer were rare then, having been over-hunted.

The Spanish Tract and adjoining land was purchased in the 1890s by Cochran Fleming, who intended to develop it into a dairy operation called the Sewickley Dairy Company, which he hoped would supply all the milk and butter Pittsburgh could consume. Hilltop sites were cleared, fences and barns built, but the operation went bankrupt before livestock was even purchased.

Then followed a foreclosure sale at which four Pittsburgh businessmen who had organized themselves into the Tuxedo Land Company (so named after a similar venture in New York State) purchased Fleming's 2200 acres for \$38 an acre. The new owners retained acreage for themselves, and some of the land was then

In 1898, Oliver purchased 65 acres, from the valley above the YMCA to the crest of Blackburn Road. He remodeled a small farmhouse there and built a barn for his carriages and driving horses. Before long his son-in-law Henry Robinson Rea erected a large house on the hilltop above, called "Farmhill." Soon magnificent estates covered the hilltops, among them: James Stuart Brown's "Uplands," W. W. Willock's "Gladmore," and William Penn Snyder's "Wilpen Hall." Benjamin Franklin Jones built a house for himself called "Franklin Farm" and ultimately a house for each of his three daughters. These were some of America's wealthiest men, and they gave Sewickley a far grander image than it had enjoyed before 1900.

Numerous people were employed on the estates, many of which were farming operations, and a whole service industry developed in the town, geared to the new neighbors' needs.

The Heights became even more attractive when Allegheny Country Club was moved there in 1902 from its original location in Allegheny, where it had been founded in 1895. As roads were improved and the automobile made access more convenient, some of the great houses were converted for year-round use, and a permanent community grew with the Allegheny Country Club as its focus. In 1935, Sewickley Heights Borough was formed to organize the community and preserve its unique character. Most of the great estates have now been razed, but Allegheny Country Club remains.

The acreage of the Tuxedo Land Company that was not developed became Sewickley Heights Trust. In 1995 these hundreds of acres, comprising the watershed of the pristine Little Sewickley Creek, were given to the public as Sewickley Heights Park, making the community on the hill as sylvan as any in the country.

## Sponsors, Patrons, Benefactors

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

The Hon. & Mrs. William L. Standish  
in memory of John G. Alexander

Milana Bizic  
in memory of John G. Alexander

Jean Homitsky  
in memory of Joseph H. Reiser

Melissa Wisen  
in memory of Joseph H. Reiser

## In Memoriam

The Sewickley Valley Historical Society mourns the loss of

Anthony M. Cicco  
Member of the Board of Directors since 2001

and the following members:

William H. Edel

Mrs. Paul A. Gorman

Mrs. George F. Henkel

Joseph H. Reiser



A reprint edition of *Lights and Shadows of Sewickley Life; or, Memories of Sweet Valley* by Agnes L. Ellis will soon be available from the Sewickley Valley Historical Society. The cost is \$30, plus \$5 shipping and handling if ordered by mail.

Please make checks payable to SVHS and mail to  
Sewickley Valley Historical Society, 200 Broad Street, Sewickley, PA 15143.

Visit our website at [www.sewickleyhistory.org](http://www.sewickleyhistory.org). A new addition, under the EDUCATION & OUTREACH link, is *Civil War Experiences: The Stories of John I. Nevin and John Dickson Tracy during the Civil War*, by Alex Bob, a 10th grade student at Quaker Valley High School. Alex used primary and secondary sources in the SVHS collection in the preparation of this International Baccalaureate project.

*Signals* is designed and edited by  
Susan C. Holton



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