THE H. WINSLOW FEGLEY COLLECTION AT THE SCHWENKFELDER LIBRARY AND HERITAGE CENTER

Candace Kintzer Perry

Abstract: In 1952 ninety-year-old Daisy Gery of Upper Hanover Township, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, donated photographer Harry Winslow Fegley's glass plate negatives and photographic prints to the Schwenkfelder Historical Library in Pennsburg, Montgomery County. Over the intervening sixty-plus years, this collection has become one of the most significant at the Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center (SLHC), as the institution is now known. The author provides a brief history of the photographer, journalist, and business owner H. Winslow Fegley that describes his activities beyond what he is most recognized for—photographs of rural Pennsylvania landscape and the lives of its inhabitants at the turn of the twentieth century. The article concludes with a discussion of current cataloging and digitization efforts of the collection at the SLHC.
Keywords: H. Winslow Fegley, historic photography, Pennsylvania German culture, Pennsylvania German architecture, Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center

*I*n 1952 ninety-year-old Daisy Gery of Upper Hanover Township, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, donated photographer Harry Winslow Fegley's glass plate negatives and photographic prints to the collection of the then–Schwenkfelder Historical Library in

Pennsburg, Montgomery County. Miss Gery was Fegley's sister-in-law; her sister Mary was Fegley's wife.

By this time both H. Winslow—as he chose to identify himself—and Mary were deceased. H. Winslow had died in 1944; his wife Mary had preceded him in 1929. Their surviving daughter, Beulah, had no children, and it is not too difficult to imagine that the surviving family members were casting about for a good repository for his collection. The Schwenkfelder Library, given its long association with Fegley through publications and personal relationships with the library staff and leadership, was a logical choice, and it was probably further reinforced by the fact that the library had just built a substantial new fireproof building on Seminary Street in Pennsburg. Over the intervening sixty-plus years from the time of the donation, this collection has become one of the most significant at the Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center, as the institution is now known, but is probably not as well understood as those who use it perceive it to be.

H. Winslow Fegley (1871–1944) was born in Hereford Township in eastern Berks County, Pennsylvania. Fegley was a fourth-generation Pennsylvanian whose grandfather George had established a store at Hereford that was succeeded in its operation by H. Winslow's father, Edward. H. Winslow, however, would follow a different path than his forebears. He attended Ursinus College in Collegeville, Montgomery County, and apparently received a master of arts degree from Eastman Business College in Poughkeepsie, New York. Though he stayed on at the Hereford store with his father until Edward's death in 1905, Fegley had a much different course charted for himself beyond the borders of the rural village of his birth.

At some point H. Winslow Fegley became actively interested in photography, but it is unknown exactly when this occurred. An *Allentown Leader* article from May 1, 1903, reported that Fegley "was awarded first prize in the photographic contest conducted by Leslie's Weekly, New York."[1] Some of his subjects that have been identified in his existing prints, including the Northkill Church at Bernville, Berks County, were torn down in the early years of the twentieth century. Since Fegley did not strike out as a professional photographer and journalist and eventually owner of the H. Winslow Fegley News Bureau operating out of his home at 952 N. Fifth Street in Reading until 1905, he was obviously cultivating his interest in photography for some time, at least as a hobby.

In 1908 a brief biography of Fegley was published in *Who's Who in Pennsylvania* that provides essential clues as to how he wished to be perceived. The entry notes that after his father's death Fegley

then entered newspaper work as journalist becoming writer of illustrated feature articles for the metropolitan papers and magazines from all parts of the Union. . . . Mr. Fegley is a special photographer whose pictures bring prices with stories. His photos of Valley Forge were used by the leading illustrated and magazines of the world. He has a collection of news photographs embracing practically every imaginable subject and the demand for them comes the leading papers in the world.[2]

Fegley's legacy of photographs of the rural Pennsylvania landscape and the people in it was only a portion of what he was actually doing, but it is far and away the best-known aspect of his work. The 1987 Pennsylvania German Society book *Farming, Always Farming*: *A Photographic Essay of Rural Pennsylvania German Land and Life* ensured that his images of the hard-working people, their farms, churches, schools, and animals that he grew up with were known to new generations of researchers.[3] His motivation to create this extraordinary body of work is not known, however, but understanding that he was assembling a library of photographs for dissemination through news agencies, magazines, and other media outlets—and to ultimately to make income from them—casts Fegley in a different light, one of ambitious businessman rather than an amateur photographer and historian.

Fegley's role as journalist, however, is not well known and probably never will be, in part due to the fact that for much of his newspaper work he may not have received a byline, and his other articles are not easy to find. Additionally, sketches instead of actual photographs were more commonly used in local newspapers prior to the 1920s, if illustrations were used at all. It appears that Fegley may have provided his images to the *Reading Eagle* from Reading, Berks County, as sketches can be frequently found in articles about the buildings or people that he documented appear to be based on his photographs. An *Eagle* article from July 17, 1904, on Frank Selak's goldfish farm in Cumru Township, Berks County—"Breeding Thousands of Gold Fish in Cumru"—features several sketches that may have been taken from Fegley's photographs (see fig. 1).[4]

Among his articles is a human-interest piece for the May 1915 issue of the journal *American Blacksmith* titled "A Unique Blacksmith Doing Unique Things," a title that provides little insight into the content of the article.[5] Fegley reported on the Bethel, Berks County, blacksmith George Schnoke
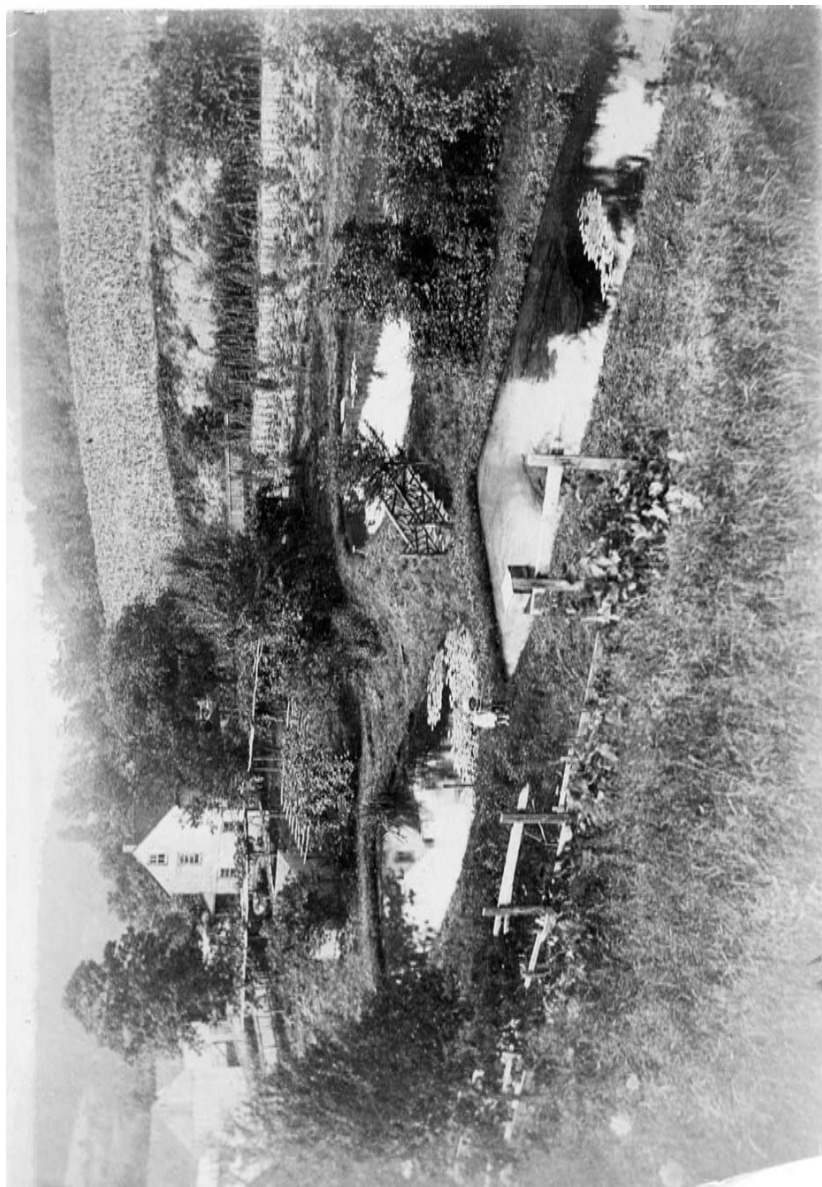
FIGURE 1: Selak's goldfish farm.

who had been in the business of making barrel locks—a cylindrical, nearly impenetrable lock—for forty years. Fegley photographed Schnoke holding a sample lock and his hammer as an illustration for the article (see fig. 2). The Schnoke portrait and other images of his shop are in the Schwenkfelder collection.

In March, 1915 Fegley had a short piece published in *House Beautiful* titled "Historic Stove Plates." More a brief photo essay than an article, Fegley used his photos of the Oley Valley home and mill of General Daniel Udree, and his important image of the Moravian meeting house at Oley, a colonial half-timbered building. Fegley did modern architectural historians a great service by photographing it, as his may be one of the few surviving images of the structure. The stove plates (plates that made up the five-plate stoves) that Fegley discussed were attributed at that time to the Udrees' forge at Oley.[6]

Fegley also supplied articles with photographs to trade publications such as *Brick and Clay Record* and others. His February 2, 1915, article with photographs was titled "How Reading Is Solving its Housing Problem: Building in Brick 'for Beauty and Economy' Pennsylvania's Mountain City Demonstrates a New Residence Construction." This article is one of several that show Fegley's range and ability to write on contemporary issues, beyond the work for which he is best known.[7]

Also in the 1910s, Fegley acquired copyrights for his postcard photography. Many of his cards depicted well-known landmarks in southeastern Pennsylvania such as views of buildings at Valley Forge, while others were curiosities that he viewed as saleable. Copies of these postcards can be found today for sale on the secondary market. In 1917 Fegley applied for copyright on twenty-seven photographs, including the "Lily Chamber in Crystal Cave," "The Old Mill in the Pennsylvania Settlement," and "The Old Oaken Bucket," in addition to several Pennsylvania landmarks.[8] His image of the tallest sycamore tree in Berks County (on the Rothermel property in Maiden Creek Township, Berks County) received a copyright; photographic prints in the Schwenkfelder collection show the copyright prominently displayed on the front of the print (see fig. 3). A July 14, 1985, *Reading Eagle* article titled "Post cards of Berks date back to 1902" reported that the "biggest entrepreneur into the 1940s was Winslow Fegley, who had a studio in the area of Fifth and Spring Streets."[9]

By this time Fegley had established the "H. Winslow Fegley News Bureau" at his Fifth Street address in Reading. A letter dated September 7, 1922, and addressed to the author and journalist Ida Tarbell in response for her request

FIGURE 2: Blacksmith George Schnoke holding his barrel lock.

for prices on Fegley's Mordecai Lincoln homestead photograph (to be had, incidentally, for $5.00 per reprint) was written on News Bureau letterhead. The letterhead proclaims "No News Matter of a Libelous and Sensational Character Solicited" and "Immediate answers to all requests absolutely necessary to insure prompt news to the press in general."[10]

COPYRIG T BY
H WINSLOW FEGLEY

FIGURE 3: Tallest sycamore in Berks County.

After several decades during which the Fegley collection has gained an almost iconic status at the Schwenkfelder, and images from the collection have been the subject of books, articles, and even art installations, it is time for the institution to revisit the collection with the aim of better cataloging and public accessibility. Though Fegley himself was not a descendant of a Schwenkfelder

family, the mission of the Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center has always been to collect and preserve the history of the area traditionally defined as the Perkiomen Region, of which Fegley's birthplace, Hereford Township, is a part.

Cataloging the collection is a challenge. In some cases, Fegley misidentified his subject; for example, on a print of a photograph of the George de Benneville farm in Oley Township, Berks County, Fegley identified it as the "Bennethum Home" but thankfully (for today's cataloger) clarified it by adding "where the first service was held by the Universalists." Furthermore, many of buildings he recorded are no longer standing, and in some cases, Fegley may have been the lone photographer of the structure—that is, the aforementioned Northkill Church in Bernville or the Oley Moravian meeting house.

Among the most significant of the lost buildings are the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Pennsylvania churches that Fegley assiduously documented at the turn of the twentieth century. He photographed numerous churches—many of them from the early period of church building by Lutheran congregations in Berks County in the late eighteenth century—and he probably had no idea at the time that his would be some of the last images of these edifices. The lack of photographic documentation of these churches, and the numerous names they were often known by, poses a special difficulty when working to identify the images. For example, Fegley photographed Christ Lutheran Church in Dryville, Rockland Township, Berks County, sometime before 1910 (see fig. 4). The arresting image of the church and cemetery overlooking the little village of Dryville is among the photographer's most powerful. Within just a few years of the photograph, however, the congregation would replace its magnificent eighteenth-century church with a modern building that was better suited to their needs. The church is also known as Mertz, or Mertz's church, which further complicates research and confirmation that the image is, indeed, of the Dryville church. It seems that Fegley may have either developed an article or series of articles about these early Lutheran churches—or at least believed them to be newsworthy—as he noted on the reverse of his photograph of "Fort" Zeller (actually a colonial house in Newmanstown, Berks County): "Zeller's Fort, where Reed's Church was organized" (see figs. 5 and 6). Reed's Church was a very early colonial Lutheran church in Stouchsburg, Berks County.

Another difficulty that Fegley presents to the modern researcher is his occasional use of the name of the owner of a property in his day. Fegley was an important early twentieth-century recorder of the historic landscape and architecture of Oley Township, Berks County. In most cases he used the

FIGURE 4: George de Benneville House and farm.
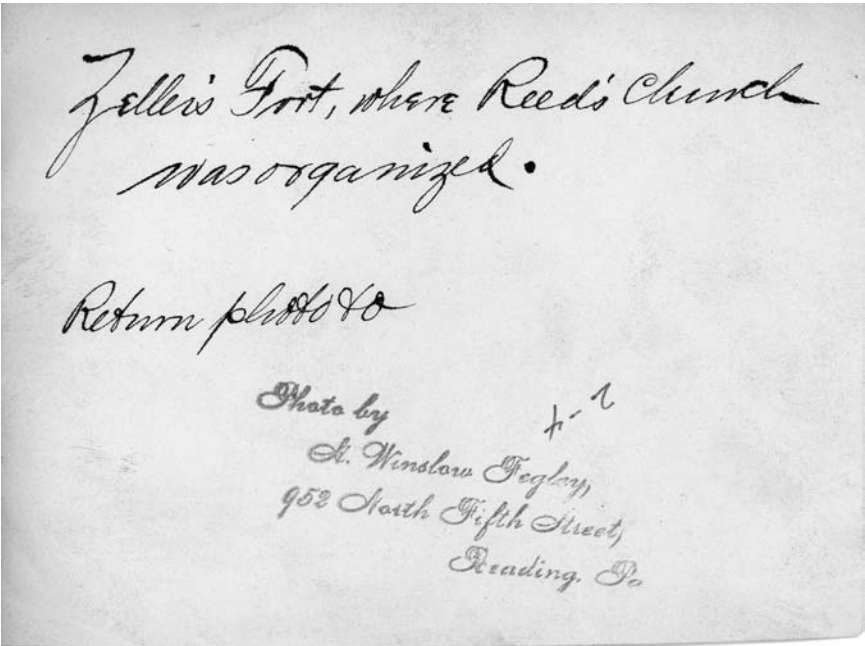
FIGURES 5 AND 6: "Zeller's Fort," Newmanstown, Berks County, front and reverse.

names that are still associated with these properties—for example, the Keim house, the Kaufman house, and the Fisher house—but in other cases, such as that of the farm where Susanna Cox was accused of murdering her infant, Fegley used the name of the owner he encountered—Cleaver (see fig. 7). Today, Fegley's photographic record of this property is critical, especially because this farmhouse recently burned.

A significant step forward has been made in 2014 toward improving the accessibility of the Fegley collection. The Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia is currently scanning approximately 150 of Fegley's five-by-seven glass plate negatives and creating high resolution digital files that will be added to the Schwenkfelder's digital library, with the hope of moving toward a complete catalog of the collection—which also consists of prints from negatives that are now lost, in addition to the 150 glass plates—in the near future. Increased public access to the collection will encourage more research possibilities and foster a new understanding of H. Winslow Fegley's roles as early twentieth-century journalist, photojournalist, and business owner.

FIGURE 7: Cleaver House, Oley Township, Berks County.

NOTES

1. *Allentown Leader*, May 1, 1903, http://www.newspapers.com/newspage/68313818/ (accessed June 28, 2014).

2. John W. Leonard, *Who's Who in Pennsylvania: A Biographical Dictionary of Contemporaries* (New York: L. R. Hamersly and Company, 1908), 251.

3. Fegley's photographs of rural Pennsylvania German life were also discussed by S. M. Schürer in "H. Winslow Fegley and the FSA in Pennsylvania: Agenda and Context," *Pennsylvania History* 70, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 269–86.

4. "Breeding Thousands of Gold Fish in Cumru," *Reading Eagle*, July 17, 1904, 6, http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1955&dat=19040716&id=_IUtAAAAIBAJ&sjid=UJwFAAAAIBAJ&pg=5003,1193556 (accessed June 28, 2014).

5. H. Winslow Fegley, "A Unique Blacksmith Doing Unique Things," *American Blacksmith*, May 1915, 199–200.

6. H. Winslow Fegley, "Historic Stove Plates," *House Beautiful* 37 (March 1915): 128–29.

7. H. Winslow Fegley, "How Reading Is Solving Its Housing Problem: Building in Brick 'for Beauty and Economy' Pennsylvania's Mountain City Demonstrates a New Residence Construction," *Brick and Clay Record* 46 (February 2, 1915): 242–47.

8. Library Of Congress, *Catalogue of Copyright Entries Published by the Authority of Acts of Congress of March 2, 1891, of June 30, 1906 and of March 4, 1909 Part 4: Works of Art; Reproductions of Work of Art; Drawings or Plastic Works of A Scientific or Technical Character; Photographs; Prints and Pictorial Illustrations* (Washington, DC, 1917), https://archive.org/stream/catalogofcopyrig124libr#page/n5/mode/2up (accessed June 30, 2014).

9. "Post Cards of Berks Date Back to 1902," *Reading Eagle*, July 14, 1985.

10. H. Winslow Fegley to Ida Tarbell, September 7, 1922, Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890–1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library.