Annals of Old Wilkinsburg and Vicinity: The Village, 1788-1888
Compiled by the Group for Historical Research, Wilkinsburg. Edited by ELIZABETH M. DAVISON and ELLEN B. McKee. (Wilkinsburg, Pa., Group for Historical Research, 1940. xxiii, 549 p. Illustrated.)

This volume, written chiefly by a group of women prominent in the social and civic life of Wilkinsburg, many of whom are lineal descendants of the borough’s pioneers, is a compilation of family records, historical papers, and legends relating to “The Village” from the time of its settlement until it was incorporated as a borough in 1887. The volume had its inception in a group of women who met with Miss Davison in 1933 and organized for historical research on old Wilkinsburg and vicinity. The women were aided by a few men, among whom were S. H. Jackson, Major Robert M. Ewing, James Balph, Samuel H. McKee, and William G. Stewart, who supplemented the women’s papers with copies of deeds, wills inventories, and court proceedings. Many pictures of early settlers and old buildings illustrate the book. Instead of the usual running narrative and the customary sections into which most histories are divided this book has been divided into varied periods of time, usually decades, such as 1743–1788 (the settlement of western Pennsylvania), 1788–1814 (the founding of the village), 1814–1830, etc., in which the records of families prominent in the village are set down.

The volume might well be divided into a history of Old Beulah and of Wilkinsburg itself. When Dunning McNair laid out the village as McNairs-town in 1790, the Beulah community was then six years old and its growth was at first faster than that of the village lying about two miles farther west on the Great Road, as Penn Avenue was then called. Intimately associated with Beulah (at first designated as the Bullock Pens Church, and later, in 1786, as the Pitt Township Church) were several supply preachers sent by the Redstone Presbytery, until the Rev. James Graham became the first ordained and installed preacher (1804–1845). Long known as the “Mother Church,” Beulah was the only Presbyterian church, besides the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, in this region.

From it was developed the East Liberty church in 1826. From the Rev. Mr. Graham’s family have descended many prominent families of the Wilkinsburg district, such as the Blacks, the Chalfants, and the Hustons. The Beulah community included among its most prominent citizens members of the McCrea, Johnson, Morrow, Duff, Horner, McDowell, Wilson, Carothers, and many other families. Many of them are buried in the little cemetery where the first preacher, as well as several Revolutionary War soldiers lie.
Andrew Levy, on April 20, 1769, made application to the Land Company of Pennsylvania for a tract of land (266 acres), named by him "Africa," situated in the present Brushton district. His speculation proving unprofitable, he transferred his patent to General William Thompson on June 10, 1788, for 45 pounds and 5 shillings, or about $107.33. The general died within a year, and by his will the tract passed to his heirs, who conveyed it to Dunning McNair on May 1, 1789, for 322 pounds and 10 shillings. On this tract McNair founded the village that later became Wilkinsburg. Through it ran the Great Road as Main Street, now Penn Avenue and it was bounded on the north and south by the present avenues of those names, on the west by Hornor's Lane, now Wood Street, and on the east by an Indian trail since become Swissvale Avenue. McNair's original log house, "Crow's Nest," was situated on a bluff north of Main Street between the present Coal and Mill Streets.

McNair also acquired other tracts of land, parts of which adjoined "Africa." Some of his lots were sold to such prominent families as the Reeses, Turners, McCreas, Rippeys, Fosters, and McNalls. A heavy mortgage held by McNair forced foreclosure proceedings in 1824, and the land passed to William Griffith. An easy-going nature, the panic following the War of 1812, and the scarcity of money are reasons given for McNair's failure; but his successors also failed and his land in Wilkinsburg was bought by James Kelly for twelve thousand dollars. The founder survived the loss only a short time and was buried in Beulah Cemetery. Kelly sold many lots and donated much property to such organizations as the local school for the deaf, the home for the aged, and various churches. The rest of the property was sold by the sheriff in 1879 and was later divided into lots comprising much of the present Wilkinsburg, Edgewood, Brushton, Belmar, and Lang Avenue districts. Kelly died in 1882 in "Dumpling Hall," Dunning McNair's second home built about 1795 near Hay and Rebecca Streets.

Dunning McNair was also prominent as a member of the state legislature (1799), where he presented the bill to abolish slavery and a bill for the use of lotteries to furnish schoolhouses. He was also the chairman of the committee that proposed the division of Allegheny County, which then included all of northwestern Pennsylvania, into seven other counties.

The name "Wilkinsburgh" (note the final "h") supplanted the name McNairstown in deeds issued in 1812. The appellation was adopted in honor of William Wilkins, judge, congressman, and minister to Russia. Legend says that McNairstown was also called Rippeyville for a short time in the early part of the nineteenth century, though apparently this designation did not appear on legal proceedings.
The volume appropriately ends with a chapter devoted to the struggle of Wilkinsburg for borough incorporation which was finally attained after much litigation late in 1887, and the first election for borough offices was held in February, 1888.

In reviewing this volume the purpose of the book must be kept in mind: to compile from various sources legends as well as facts about the early settlement of Wilkinsburg; to record family genealogies; to recount the activities of such characters as James Graham, Dunning McNair, and Jane Grey Swiss-helm; to picture such old landmarks as Rippey's Tavern and the Wilkinsburg Academy, as well as to portray numerous old residences and early settlers. With such a purpose in mind the defects of the book may easily be forgiven, such as the absence of an index, the failure to more than mention Judge Wilkins and his place in local history, the unavoidable overlapping of descriptive matter caused by the peculiar arrangement of material and by the numerous contributors. These defects should be corrected in future editions. A few errors, such as the location of Allegheny College on Sandusky Street (p. 273) and of Logstown at Sewickley (p. 3), are noted, but with so many and varied types of writers one should not expect more. It is very readable, in good print, and neatly bound in green cloth with gold lettering. The editors and their associates deserve much commendation for work quite creditably performed.

Pittsburgh

C. W. W. Elkin


This biography is the first of a series of contemplated volumes to be published under the designation, Pennsylvania Lives. Apparently these works are to have the very laudable purpose of portraying simply the lives of various Pennsylvanians who have contributed in some way to the development and progress of their state and country. Among such men were many who were very significant in local and even national affairs, but who failed to achieve the stature or to fit the pattern ordinarily demanded by the usual biographers. The author of this first volume of the series has revealed simply and interestingly the life of one such man, Geary, a western Pennsylvanian, whose career spanned the years from 1819 to 1873.

Geary was born near Mount Pleasant in Westmoreland County in 1819, of good, industrious, but not affluent, parentage. From that beginning he entered