HISTORICAL SOCIETY NOTES  
PRESIDENT'S PAGE

To our Membership—Greetings:

This means has been instituted with this issue for the purpose of keeping our membership better informed on matters pertinent to the affairs of the Historical Society.

As the date approaches (November 25, 1958) for the opening of the celebration of Pittsburgh’s Bicentennial, we have been most desirous of renovating our building and placing it in tip-top condition for the reception of visitors. We have just finished a thorough cleaning of the walls of the foyer, stairways, library, records room and third floor, and new paint has been applied to the reading room and gun room.

The monetary response to the President’s letter of December last was so gratifying that we are taking immediate steps to make much needed physical improvements. One special gift has made it possible for the installation of modern lighting in our auditorium and for the replacement of the entrance doors on both the upper and lower levels facing Bigelow Boulevard.

A special grant was made by the City of Pittsburgh for the installation of protective gratings over our casement windows. These will afford more adequate protection for our valuable collections.

Under the expert direction of Mr. Charles M. Stotz, Trustee, plans are being prepared for the creation of a memorial room to the late Harry K. Siebeneck, a loyal member, trustee and vice president of our Society, who left us a legacy for that purpose. Mr. Siebeneck was a collector of antique furniture, paintings, and other objets d'arts, and from his collection a handsome Pittsburgh living-room of the period of about 1836 will be created and located in the central portion of the basement.

The editorial staff of our magazine is planning to publish an outstanding issue as a contribution to the Bicentennial celebration. It will feature a comprehensive brief history of the district and will be embellished with many interesting cuts, prints, and illustrations pertinent to the subject body.

Our winter lectures have been interesting and well received; it is hoped that many more of our members will avail themselves of this mental stimulation as well as enjoyment.

Charles A. McClintock, President
PITTSBURGH'S MOST DISASTROUS SUNDAY

The U. S. Weather Bureau would seem to be an unlikely place to look for reports of the railroad riots of 1877, but in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, log of that Bureau, in the New Federal Building, some interesting reports, which were sent as telegrams to the Chief Signal Officer, Washington, D. C., are recorded.

The telegrams report, tersely and concisely, the occurrences of one of the most disastrous days of the riots, that is Sunday, July 22, 1877; and by the exact time that appears on the telegrams as to when they were sent one is able to form a good mental picture of how quickly and recklessly the rioters acted on that Sabbath morning.

The first telegram bearing on the riots reported: "No attempt has been made to take the Arsenal."

The next telegram of July 22, 1877, was sent at 2 A.M. and reported:

MOB MOUNTS TO BETWEEN 12 AND 15,000 ORGANIZED IN CONSEQUENCE OF ATTACK OF PHILA SOLDIERS ON THOSE ASSEMBLED AT R HOUSE OF P R R CO IN THE AFTERNOON, SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THE HOME MILITIA HAVING BEEN KILLED. MOB TONIGHT RAIDED GUN STORES IN CITY AND CLEANED THEM OUT AND ARMED WITH EVERY CONCEIVABLE WEAPON MARCHED TO R HOUSE—SET FIRE TO OIL TRAIN AND IT IS RELIABLY REPORTED WILL BLOW UP THE R HOUSE IN WHICH THE SOLDIERS FROM PHILA HAVE BEEN CONFINED FOR SAFETY DURING THE NIGHT WITH CANNON WHICH THEY CAPTURED FROM THE MILITIA. IT IS RUMORED THAT SHERIFF FIFE HAS BEEN KILLED. THE CITY HAS BEEN IN THE HANDS OF THE MOB DURING THE NIGHT.

At 12:47 P.M. of that day another telegram reported:

ARSENAL IS NOT NOW NOR HAS IT BEEN IN HANDS OF MOB. PHILADELPHIA SOLDIERS ESCAPED IN STEADY MARCHING ORDER FROM ROUND HOUSE AT 7 A.M. LEAVING (5) FIVE WOUNDED—ONE LIEUT.—AT ARSENAL AND PASSED TOWARD SHARPSBURGH.

Those three telegrams to the Chief Signal Officer were signed "Hay Sgt".

At 2:35 P.M. of that same date the following report was made:

FOUR-FIFTHS OF THE PENNA R R CO'S PROPERTY IN THIS CITY ALREADY BURNED BALANCE IS GOING. THE MOB HAS ANTIPATHY ONLY TO THE PENNA R R CO AND PHILA SOLDIERS. ALL PITTSBURGH SYMPATHIZES WITH THE STRIKERS AND HATE THE PENNA R R CO.
FIRE DEPARTMENT ALLOWED AND ASSISTED TO PROTECT SURROUNDING PROPERTY ONLY. NOT THE SLIGHTEST HINDERANCE TO THE DETERMINED WILL OF THE MOB TO BURN EVERYTHING BELONGING TO PENNA R R CO. THERE SEEMS TO BE NO THOUGHT OF DISTURBING ARSENAL OR CITY PROPERTY.

The next telegram was sent at 4 P.M. of that date and it reported:

THE FIRE HAS FINALLY REACHED THE UNION DEPOT WHICH IS BURNING FIERCELY. FIRE DEPARTMENT STILL HARD AT WORK ON SURROUNDING PROPERTY WITH GENERAL SUCCESS.

Those two telegrams were signed "Chapman Pvt".

At 6:10 P.M. of that same date a telegram as follows was sent:

THE FIRE IS EXTENDING TO PRIVATE PROPERTY. THE MAYOR IS ORGANIZING A PATROL OF CITIZENS ARMED WITH PICK HANDLES AS THERE ARE NO ARMS TO BE HAD. MOB GETTING DRUNK ON WHISKEY OBTAINED FROM FREIGHT CARS.

The next telegram of that date was sent at 9:00 P.M. and reported:

THE SITUATION IS IMPROVING. THE FIRE NOW UNDER CONTROL AND THE MOB IS BECOMING MORE QUIET. ALL PROPERTY BELONGING TO PENNA R R CO HAS BEEN BURNED EXCEPT FREIGHT DEPOT WHICH IS NOW GUARDED BY DUQUESNE GRAYS.

Sergeant Hay had sent those two telegrams. Chapman sent the last one of that day at midnight and it reported:

FIRE PUT OUT AFFAIRS COMPARATIVELY QUIET.

A report was made on July 23, 1877, at 8 A.M. by Sergeant Hay that all was quiet. There were some other telegrams of similar vein in the log and then, on July 24, 1877, at "12 M" it was reported:

CONDITION OF AFFAIRS CONTINUES TO IMPROVE. BUSINESS HAS BEEN RESUMED AND THE STREETS PRESENT THEIR USUAL QUIET APPEARANCE. THE TROOPS ARE STILL AT THEIR RESPECTIVE ARMORIES.

On July 25, 1877, a telegram reported that the Mayor was "organizing a force of mounted police." A later telegram stated that "the city was patrolled by mounted men."

On July 26, 1877, at 3:40 P.M. a telegraphic report stated:

ROADS ARE RUNNING MAIL AND PASSENGER TRAINS AS USUAL. RUNNING OF FREIGHT TRAINS ENTIRELY STOPPED BY STRIKERS.

It was reported on July 28, 1877, that the strikers had "surrendered railroad property to the companies but still firm in their demands."

There have been many printed accounts of the railroad riots of 1877, and one of the best is contained in Sketches of the Great Riots by J. T. Headley, but the telegraphic reports just quoted give a fine account of the hour-to-hour developments of July 22, 1877, and of the subsequent developments.

The United States was interested in seeing that its property in Pittsburgh was properly protected and, as a result, required that official, first-hand reports be sent it. The log omits mention, until July 28, 1877, of the reason for sending the telegrams just quoted and then, on that date, G. W. Hay, "Segt SC U S A" addressed the following letter to the Chief Signal Officer of the Army:

Sir: In explanation of the omission of the word to indicate depth of river in the regular P.M. telegraphic report from this station on the 22d inst. I have the honor to state that in order to comply with the Chief Signal Officer's telegraphic order of that date "to report conditions of affairs at the Allegheny Arsenal and abandon all other duties until this was executed" it was found impossible to take the river observation—with this exception all duties of the station were performed in the usual manner.

Pittsburghers were interested in the riots and not in the rivers on July 22, 1877!

MARGARET PEARSON BOTHWELL

Miss Prudence B. Trimble, Editor of The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, told me of the existence of the reports quoted herein, and Miss Luella Maxwell of the U.S. Weather Bureau's offices in Pittsburgh made them available to me.