THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA: A CENTENNIAL REPORT ON ITS FIRST TWENTY YEARS

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We hang our heads in shame when visitors ask to see our rooms and collections.

President Rev. A. A. Lambing at meeting of Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Lecture Hall, Carnegie Library, Allegheny, September 21, 1893

In April 1879, a group of men who had lived fifty years or longer in Pittsburgh formed a new historical society under the name “Old Residents of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania.”

There was little reason to believe that the new society would last any longer than its short-lived predecessors organized in 1834, 1843, and 1858.¹ The stated objective of the new organization was “to talk over old times, and to form an association whereby an exchange of greetings and reminiscences can occasionally be made.”²

This objective of old-crony gatherings carried within it the very seeds


² Remarks of chairman, the Reverend James Allison, as reported in the Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette, Apr. 11, 1879.
of early death, as certain as the early passing of its members. Yet somehow "Old Residents of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania" survived, grew, changed names, incorporated, broadened its membership, acquired its own quarters, and became the vital, century-old Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania we know today.

As we look back over the past 100 years of our Society, particularly its first two decades of growing pains, we see both the pitfalls and the promise of a functioning historical society.

The pitfalls are that if a society is attuned solely to entertainment and shared experiences of its members, with accent on nostalgia and reminiscence, it will die as its members fulfill their four score and ten years. Or, we might add, it will collapse as they become bored talking to one another about the past. An example is an earlier "Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania" organized in November 1858. It had only four members present at its meetings in September and November of 1859 and four again at its final recorded meeting in April 1860.3

The promise is that a society will prosper if it serves the public as well as its members, if it "carries the torch of history," and if it preserves and disseminates and makes available to scholars and curious alike the records of the past. To which, I might add, also if it has in its membership dedicated historians and patrons of history.

The purpose of this article is to document as well as to conjecture on the "whys" of the continued existence, with its name changed to a more descriptive title, of the "Old Residents Society" of 1879. Fortunately, we have in our archives the exemplary and exhaustive holographic minutes of our Society from its beginnings in 1879 through May 1899,4 and additionally a membership roster for 1881. Also available in our archives, supplemented by other Pittsburgh sources, are newspapers of the period. Unfortunately, minutes are not preserved for the meetings between May 1899 and March 1908.

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4 The minutes exist in two bound volumes. The first volume includes meetings from April 10, 1879, through March 13, 1884. The second volume includes meetings from April 10, 1884, through May 9, 1899. Notes taken at meetings subsequently were transcribed into the minute books. No transcriptions were made between October 16, 1889, and November 11, 1890, although blank pages exist in the minute book for that purpose. The minute books contain such miscellaneous information as lists of former postmasters, mayors, and other public office holders. The books also contain month-to-month recapitulations of events of each previous year.
The "Old Residents" Organise

Our story starts with a meeting held on the evening of April 10, 1879, in the First Methodist Protestant Church on Fifth Avenue near Smithfield Street (where Kaufmann's now stands). The call of the meeting through newspaper announcements was for a gathering of men who had lived in Pittsburgh for fifty years and upwards. A two-and-one-half-column article in the Commercial Gazette the next day (reprinted almost verbatim one week later) reported, "There must have been fully two hundred present who came under this class, while in addition thereto many others, including young and old ladies, were attracted, probably by the novelty of the affair." The meeting was opened with prayer and closed with singing of the doxology.

As noted before, the chairman stated that "he presumed the object of the meeting was to talk over old times, and to form an association whereby an exchange of greetings and reminiscences can occasionally be made." In such a vein the meeting was conducted. Talks were given by William Rinehart, by "the sage of Mt. Washington," T. J. Bigham, and by Reuben Miller, Jr. Then, appropriately, the group approved a motion limiting reminiscences to five minutes for each speaker.

While the talks were proceeding, and on instructions from the chairman, an attempt was made to list old-timers present. It was found to be an impossible task of competition with the speaking program. In its report of the meeting, the Commercial Gazette printed a partial list of 126 old-timers, approximately one-third of them in their seventies.

Letters were read from old residents not able to be present. In one letter, Mrs. Thomas Simmons of 51 Ross Street reported that her eighty-three-year-old husband was still a shut-in. She added that he had walked to Pittsburgh from the Susquehanna wilderness in 1818. The meeting concluded with appointment of a committee on permanent organization.

The Pittsburgh Daily Post of April 11, 1879, also reported the meeting, but under the jocular heading: "Old Timers. The Frosty-Headed Walking Stick Brigade in Council. Fifty-Year Residenters Meet to Talk 'Auld Lang Syne.'" A printed pamphlet history of the first five years of the Society notes of this meeting: "A finer collection of gray heads was never before witnessed." 5

The Society was officially organized one week later, April 17,

5 Cap't. John M. Killen, Rev. A. A. Lambing, Prof. Leonard H. Eaton, Synopsis of the Proceedings of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Late Old Residents Association, During the First Five Years. A copy is in the HSWP archives.
1879, meeting again at the church. The name "Old Residents of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania" was adopted. Officers elected were: president — Thomas J. Bigham; vice-presidents — the Reverend James Allison, Reuben Miller, Jr., Wilson McCandless, William Little, John Harper, and William M. Darlington; secretary — William M. Gormly; and treasurer — William Rinehart. Shortly thereafter dues were set at $1, life membership at $5. In 1882, the organization's name was changed to "Historical Society of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania." Two years later "Pittsburgh" was dropped from the title.

*Why 1879?*

Why did old residents pick 1879 to formalize a historical society? And why was there such a large gathering at the First Methodist Protestant Church on the evening of April 10 of that year? We really do not know. The broad brushes of historians skip details of any given year and speak rather of decades and eras and trends and major upheavals. So let us conjecture as best we can.

The year 1879 was a quiet one, two years removed from the railroad strike and riots of 1877, and thirteen years away from the Homestead Strike of 1892. The nation was just coming out of a financial depression. Industry, spawned by the Civil War, was expanding. Natural gas was replacing manufactured gas. Electric lights and electric power were just around the corner.

Pittsburgh in that year was a challenging rather than a pleasant place in which to live. Cultural, intellectual, and entertainment outlets were practically nonexistent. There were no parks — Schenley Park, the gift of Mrs. Mary E. Schenley, was not to become the city's first park for another ten years. There were no public libraries — Carnegie Library in Allegheny did not open its doors until 1886, and the Pittsburgh Carnegie Library not until 1895. There was no museum, no zoo, no symphony, no art gallery.

In a way, then, the time was ripe for a gathering of those interested in any intellectual pursuit. Like the small boy asking "What is there to do?", it is no wonder that swelling attendance at the first gathering of old-timers were "many others, including young and old ladies... attracted, probably by the novelty of the affair." Another consideration is that the growing number of non-English-speaking immigrants,  

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6 Raised to $2 and $15, respectively, in December 1895.
7 Pittsburgh was a growth city. Its population had increased one-hundred-fold since 1800, from immigration and from annexation of surrounding com-
attracted to job opportunities in the melting pot of Pittsburgh, undoubtedly worried old-time residents. The past rapidly was retreating.

In 1879, Pittsburgh was a city of cobblestone and dirt streets. Growing industrialization, along with coal furnaces in homes, produced the smog that had already given rise to the “Smoky City” title. Bridges, above the Point, led over the rivers. Inclines rose to the top of Mount Washington and Mount Oliver. Street lighting was by gas. Horse-drawn streetcars provided transportation within the city and to some suburban communities. Railroad tracks cluttered Liberty Avenue and the Point. The Highland and Herron Hill reservoirs supplied fresh water, but the scourge of waterborne typhoid was not eliminated until construction of sand filtration facilities early in the next century.

Actually, only events of minor importance are recorded in the newspapers for that year. Nationally, President Rutherford B. Hayes signed an act permitting female attorneys to argue cases before the United States Supreme Court. The first Woolworth “five cent” store was opened in Utica, New York. Congress established the United States Geological Survey as a bureau in the Department of the Interior. A pirated version of H. M. S. Pinafore was performed at the Bowery Theatre, New York City, as the first Gilbert and Sullivan play produced in the United States. Thomas Edison publicly displayed his new incandescent lamp to several thousand spectators at Menlo Park, New Jersey. Stefan Lorant, in his bicentennial book, *Pittsburgh: The Story of an American City*, lists but a handful of events worthy of remembrance. The Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad inaugurated rail traffic between Pittsburgh and Youngstown. The Pittsburgh and West End Railway Company was chartered and ran a line from Fifth
Avenue near the Union Station to West End and the Washington Turnpike. Pennsylvania Female College (now Chatham) opened. A new telephone switchboard provided service to 777 subscribers. The city's water pumping station at Brilliant went into operation.

Growing Pains

We are indebted to the dutiful and fluent pen of William M. Gormly, secretary from 1879 until his death in the summer of 1886, for a legible and complete record of the early years of our Society. And we are especially indebted to the Reverend A. A. Lambing, secretary from 1888 to 1892 and president for the remainder of the century, for carrying the torch of history in this period of the Society's existence.

As the name "Old Residents" would indicate, the accent at early meetings of the Society was one of reminiscence of halcyon days, of "I remember when." Meetings were punctuated by talks from members and by reading of papers prepared by others. Only later, when perhaps everyone had had his say, attention began to be focused on delivery of research papers, on outside speakers, and on accelerated collection of old records and "relics."

The first regular meeting of the Society, after the election of officers, was held in the Select Council Chambers, Municipal Hall (west side of Smithfield Street between Oliver and Fifth avenues) on the evening of May 15, 1879. The meeting was one of confusion. The minutes record several talks and then planning for the next meeting: "The chair said he would appoint Messrs. Josiah King, Josiah Copely, Hon. Wm. Little, Wm. Rinehart and J. P. Fleming, either to speak, or each to provide someone to speak in their place at the coming meeting. It was suggested that John Fullerton and Gen'l Thomas A. Rowley sing songs. Mr. King thought it was supererogatory, for each gentleman named is likely to talk if present, and not prohibited. He thought it would be better to put an estopal on them."

Voluble King expressed himself on another subject at the meeting on May 15 — the exclusion of women from membership.

Mr. King arose to a question of privilege. At the first meeting of the Old Residents when Dr. Allison presided, someone proposed that old women be admitted to the association and the press had said that he was opposed to their admission. Since that meeting he has been assailed on the street by old women of both sexes as being opposed to old women. He wanted to be set right on the record, he was in favor of their being honorary members, thought they would be better in a similar organization. In fact he was not opposed to old women, he was in favor of women old and young.

Soon the pattern emerged of eight or nine regular meetings a
year, skipping the hot and cold months, and with an annual organization meeting in April. And soon the minutes reveal challenges to an ambitious society trying to hold on and even expand. Steps were taken to remedy problems of membership, of attendance at meetings, of program, of adequate quarters, of collection of archival materials. Most important of all, however, the minutes witness the gradual shift in emphasis of the Society from serving its own members to serving the public.

Membership and Meetings

While membership in the Society was reasonably large, attendance at meetings was small, perhaps an average of no more than fifteen to twenty. The minute books, unfortunately, do not record attendance except for those scattered meetings when too few members were present to constitute a quorum.

We can accept without apology the excuses cited for low attendance at two meetings. The April meeting of 1885 was adjourned when only six members appeared. The minutes explain that competition was too great from world-renowned evangelists Moody and Sankey, "who were holding services in the Fifth Avenue Market House, now known as the Music Hall." And besides, there was a sudden snowfall.

An unusual combination of circumstances cancelled the meeting scheduled in January 1889: no papers were ready to be read, Secretary Lambing's church (St. James Roman Catholic) had burned down, and there was a cyclone at Wood and Diamond streets.

An 1891 membership roster (in our archives) lists 121 members of the Old Residents Society. While the final date of entries is not stated, handwriting different from that of the original lists an additional 94 names. Among prominent life members were Andrew Carnegie and his wife Lucy, Henry Clay Frick and his wife Ada, and Henry Phipps. Judge Thomas Mellon was voted a life member in February 1884. He later became a vice-president and presided at several meetings. Death of members caused constant attrition; hardly a meeting went by without appointment of a committee to prepare a suitable memorial or memorials.

The Society quickly recognized the need to broaden its membership base. The first step, taken in May 1880, was to grant eligibility to women "on the same basis as men." It was not until December 1891, however, that the first woman joined as an active member. Minutes for that meeting note: "Miss Jennie Lambing was elected as an annual
member, being the first lady received into the Society, and her dues of $2 was paid." Miss Lambing, a niece of then Secretary Reverend A. A. Lambing, had other firsts. She became secretary in 1892 when her uncle was elevated to the presidency. Also in that year, she was the first woman to deliver a paper at a regular meeting of the Society. Her subject was "The American Turkey."

The second step to broaden membership was taken in April 1882 when the fifty-year prior-residence requirement was dropped and membership was opened to persons of any age interested in the objectives of the Society.

A special meeting of officers to consider reasons for low attendance was held in May 1892. The officers decided to present "musical and elocutionary performances" as well as historical talks at regular meetings. At the subsequent May meeting, Miss Flora Dunlap recited "The Whistling Regiment," and a quartet sang "Star of a Summer Night." For the next six years, talks, supplemented by musical presentations, composed the program for meetings.

Finding speakers or papers to read was a constant problem, and often the scholarly Reverend Lambing had to fill in, speaking on such diverse topics as "Celeron's Expedition" and "Scalping." It appears that the basic purpose of promoting knowledge of history was not forgotten. A minute entry for January 1893 aptly notes: "Dr. George A. Keyser began to read a paper on 'The Strong Points of Shakespeare' but as it was not a historical sketch, he was not permitted to continue."

There were periods of discouragement. Even President Lambing reached a low point in late 1895 when he submitted a letter of resignation. The letter was acted on at the December meeting and was rejected, the vote being "2 for and 7 opposed." Fortunately, President Lambing continued his leadership.

Another interesting entry in the minutes, relating to membership as well as to other concerns of the Society, was action taken in January 1893: "Miss Marie G. Eaton [was] employed to select and receive donations of money, books and manuscripts and also membership applications."

The Problem of Quarters

The securing of suitable quarters for meetings and for housing the growing library and collection of "relics" was a nagging problem for the fledgling society. While the May 15, 1879, meeting was held in the Select Council Chambers at Municipal Hall, the next four re-
corded meetings were held on the third floor of the Union Temperance Headquarters of the Allegheny County Christian Alliance (Penn Avenue and Sixth Street). The last meeting held there was in March 1880. Members rationalized the poor attendance; the three flights of steps, they said, kept many away.

The Common Council then made available its chambers in Municipal Hall. There the Society held its evening monthly meetings for eight years with but few exceptions. One exception was in December 1885, when the chapel of the First Presbyterian Church, on Wood Street, was used to accommodate a large audience for a paper given by Bessie Bramble (Mrs. Charles Wade) on "A Reform Needed in History." Mrs. Wade took historians to task for failing to tell of the accomplishments of women. She noted that "Apart from Pocahontas and Allequippa, no other women from that day to this have been worth mentioning." She added, "We know Pilgrim Fathers but not Pilgrim Mothers." 12

At the election of officers in March 1888, Judge C. S. Fetterman became president. Through his influence a new meeting place and depository for "relics" was secured at the courthouse, and a room was assigned to the Society. The Society continued to meet at the courthouse until October 1891, when permission was obtained to use the Lecture Hall at the new Carnegie Library in Allegheny. 13 It used the Allegheny Carnegie Library quarters until 1896, when new "permanent quarters" were provided in the new Carnegie Library building in Schenley Park.

The move from Carnegie Library in Schenley Park to our present building in Oakland in 1912 is beyond the scope of this article. How-


13 Carnegie first offered a library to Pittsburgh, but was turned down. Allegheny accepted the offer, and later so did Pittsburgh. Minutes indicate that the Society actively sought a home in the new libraries and had considerable correspondence with Carnegie on the subject. In December 1881, members discussed Carnegie's offer to build a library in Pittsburgh. It was decided to "ascertain if the proposed library might include an alcove for books and relics." In May 1886, a letter from Carnegie to the Society read, "If we had in Pittsburgh a fire-proof free library building...[we] could accommodate various societies, art, music, history, etc." In February 1893, a letter from Carnegie expressed the hope that the Society have a permanent home in his new Schenley Park building; he also forwarded $100 for "subscription" and $30 for life memberships for himself and Mrs. Carnegie.
ever, it is important to note that almost from its beginnings the Society recognized a need for its own quarters. No better expression of this need can be cited than in the introduction to the second volume of Society minutes, from the thoughtful pen of Secretary William M. Gormly:

With this volume the society enters the sixth year of its existence. It is true we have acquired some experience and have much to learn in the conduct of a Historical Society.

We have had much pleasure in the past five years in our monthly meetings, as we have provoked one and another to study and search for matters concerning the early history of the Western part of this state. Now that we are emerging from infancy and growing stronger and see more clearly the course of duty we are pursuing, it shall be our aim in the future as it has been in the past to secure facts, and facts only, in the early history of Western Pennsylvania.

With this object, care and diligence, we purpose continuing in the work and here lay the foundations of a society that in long after years when the present members of the association will have passed to the "Great Beyond," a larger society will be continued, and that their facilities for more effective work may be more appreciated by a discerning public in the providing for them of a building of suitable dimensions for library, cabinet of relics of other days and hall for holding meetings, lectures, etc., etc., as have been furnished in other cities throughout the country.

Fortunately, Mr. Gormly's dream did come true, and we do have our own library and hall, and a "cabinet of relics" which we now call archives and museum.

_Growth in Outreach_

The Old Residents Society grew in concept as its leaders gradually envisioned providing for future generations the tools of awareness of history in the rich heritage of Western Pennsylvania. It sought ways to communicate to all the public, young and old, through public meetings and through inviting the several superintendents of schools to participate. It sought to preserve knowledge of the past through accumulation not only of a library but also through gathering of what we today call archives — original records and documents of the past.

Concurrently with eliminating membership restrictions, the Society from time to time redefined its objectives. In its first constitution, adopted in May 1880, the object of the Society was "to perpetuate facts relating to our local history, by securing the legendary and traditional before they pass into the region of mythology."

Objectives were further expanded in the court petition for incorporation in 1888. The second paragraph of the petition reads: "Said Corporation is formed for the purpose of collecting, elucidating and preserving natural civil, religious, literary and antiquarian data
and information concerning or relating to Western Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Northwest Territory and the States embraced therein and generally all data and information relative to the early settlement, history and growth of the above mentioned States and Territory."

Our present by-laws, adopted in October 1969, still further amplify this concept. Section 3 reads:

The objects of the Society are to increase and diffuse knowledge of the history of Western Pennsylvania. To this end the Society shall collect and preserve original historical materials, maintain a research library, publish a magazine and other treatises, hold public lectures, provide speakers, arrange tours, exhibit historical materials and engage in other appropriate activities for the benefit of the public. The Society welcomes gifts of books, manuscripts and exhibit materials which will be received at the discretion of the Board of Trustees; however, because of space limitations, only materials having a direct and substantial relationship to Western Pennsylvania history will be received.

The Society took an early interest in events outside its own meeting hall. In April 1883, it appointed a delegation to attend the Marietta Centennial. It became active in urging the preservation of the Bouquet Blockhouse. It corresponded with Mrs. Mary E. Schenley, owner of the Blockhouse, and at its September 1885 meeting the "relic" committee was instructed to visit Mrs. Schenley's agent (Mr. Torrence) regarding the Blockhouse, the minutes declaring "Historic ground . . . should be preserved as a relic of the past." Attention also was paid at this meeting to the opening of the Indian Mound at McKees Rocks. In 1894, the Society participated in Pittsburgh's centennial celebration of incorporation as a borough.

". . . To Take Possession of Any Relics or Documents . . ."

The broadened outlook of the Society gave backing to the constant plea at meetings for acquiring books, manuscripts, and memorabilia of the past. In January 1880, a committee on archives was appointed "to take possession of any relics or documents that might be donated to the association and to purchase any desireable ones."

At almost every meeting a "relic" was presented — a book, a deed, a manuscript, a treatise, a letter. In February 1880, copies of the Pittsburgh Gazette for 1796 and 1813 were presented. In April 1884, the Society resolved to ask all religious societies to furnish histories; in October of that year, the committee on "Relics, Rooms, etc." was instructed to "prosecute" its work "until the Society at some future day may have a permanent home where a historical library can be maintained, relics of the past arranged and securely preserved for
generations yet to come." In March 1886, the minute book of the
almost forgotten 1858 Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania
was given to the new Society.

A classic example of the lack of security and accountability in-
volved eleven oil paintings presented to the Society in January 1885
by Russell Smith of Philadelphia. The paintings were of "ancient
landmarks," made from earlier-day sketches by Smith, such as the
Blockhouse and Smoky Island. Minutes for that date report that
the paintings would be placed in Gillespie's windows on Wood Street
for display. This was the last minute notation regarding the paintings
until October 1897, when a committee was appointed to trace their
whereabouts. In December, the committee reported that it was making
progress. What happened to the paintings is not known: they may have
been sold or may have been retained by members. Only one now hangs
in our auditorium, "Pittsburgh from Saw Mill Run." Stefan Lorant,
in Pittsburgh: The Story of an American City, reproduces seven
Russell Smith paintings, including the one in the Society's possession.14
The other six are in private or institutional hands.

When meetings were moved to the Allegheny Carnegie Library
in 1891, storage facilities were provided for the Society's relics. In
February of that year, the minutes report that all properties had been
transferred to the Lecture Hall. The Lecture Hall facilities, however,
did not adequately solve the problem of security. Minutes for Septem-
ber 1893 note that Boyd Crumrine proposed to give the Society his
historical library "as soon as it has a permanent place to meet and
security for the donation." At this same September 1893 meeting,
President Lambing spoke at length on the need to accumulate books
and relics and to give a periodical report of proceedings. He noted
that "We hang our heads in shame when visitors ask to see our rooms
and collections."

This has been a report of the roots of our Society, of our first
twenty years of existence. Of course there is more to our history.15
Successive generations of devoted leaders have solved many of the
problems that were so frustrating to the Society in its early years.
Today we need not "hang our heads in shame when visitors ask to
see our rooms and collections." We have an attractive meeting place,
a growing library and archives, a growing membership with a sub-
stantial body of younger members, a professional staff. And in keeping with our first century of growth, we expectantly look to the future in serving the public and in keeping alive the rich heritage of Western Pennsylvania history. May we have the same persistence of our early members!