A History of Stewardship

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Executive Director

It remains for the leaders in the community to see and respond to the need for more adequate and permanent support of those day by day, undramatic labors that must be carried on unremittingly, for the most part behind the scenes, and by other than volunteers or mere caretakers. — Franklin F. Holbrook, 1938

The current challenges facing the Society are not unlike those that motivated the organization's founders and sustainers during the first half of the twentieth century. Institutional histories by Franklin F. Holbrook and Niles Anderson, written in 1938 and 1974 respectively, profile three early attempts in 1834, 1843 and 1858 to establish an "Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania." These efforts met with little lasting success, however, with Pittsburgh in the throes of an economic transition from a frontier outpost.

In 1834, the call went out to leading citizens "interested in collecting and preserving materials relating to the early settlement of the western country." Commenting on the city's mentality, early founders noted in the Society's minute book (still in our collection) that "we appear to the stranger who visits us to be absorbed in the pursuit of wealth, totally forgetful that knowledge is necessary to happiness." The last of these predecessor organizations, begun in 1858, floundered with the onset of the Civil War. Nineteen years later, the Pittsburgh community once again attempted, this time successfully, to establish the "Old Resident Association of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania Historical Society." The organization limited membership to men who had lived in Pittsburgh or the region for 50 years or more; in 1880, it extended membership to women who met residency requirements. Two years later, membership was opened to all, regardless of length of residency in the area. The adoption of the Society's current name also occurred in this period.

For several decades, the Society continued its regular meetings in various buildings in Pittsburgh such as the courthouse and the Carnegie Library. It sponsored one-day "pilgrimages" to places of historical interest, such as Bushy Run and Ligonier. In 1908, it sponsored the sesquicentennial of the capture of Ft. Duquesne; the celebration was a huge affair. In 1913, the Society also took the lead in celebrating Allegheny County's 125th anniversary.

At the turn of the century, the Society focused on a major concern, namely how to collect historical materials without having a building to house them. As early as 1880, a committee on archives was charged "to take possession of any relics or documents that might be donated to the association and to purchase any desirable ones," but in 1893, the Society's president, Rev. Andrew A. Lambing, reflected the organization's frustration when he stated: "We hang our heads in shame when visitors ask to see our rooms and collection." At the time, the institution had no space of its own but had stored its "relics" in space provided by Carnegie Library in Allegheny. The Society continues to have a close cooperative relationship with the Carnegie Museum.

In 1909, Burd S. Patterson and William H. Stevenson headed a
three year campaign for a building fund. In 1911, with the support of Governor John K. Tener, the state appropriated $25,000. These funds, along with $10,000 left from the city's sesquicentennial celebration in 1908, made possible the purchase of land on Bigelow Boulevard in Oakland and the erection of the core of the present building. Ceremonies were held for the laying of the cornerstone on October 30, 1912, and for the opening of the building on February 17, 1914. Interestingly enough, the building was regarded as insufficient even then, and plans were made to make additions as soon as possible. In 1929, Gov. John S. Fisher supported a measure in the state assembly to provide $40,000 for the completion of the building, with a stipulation that a 50 percent match come from the community. The Buhl Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, Andrew W. Mellon and over 100 individuals raised the required sum.

The period after the completion of the Society's headquarters can truly be regarded as a golden age. The organization launched a quarterly journal in 1918 to serve as a vehicle for scholarly historical writing and research. Even more important, 1931 marked the beginning of a five year, $95,000 project known as the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey, to document regional history. The Society, the History Department of the University of Pittsburgh and the Buhl Foundation jointly sponsored this survey; Dr. Solon J. Buck, former head of the Minnesota Historical Society, was appointed Society Director and project director for the survey.

The project supported a team of historians to research and publish the history of the region. It brought about the publication of a dozen books considered seminal works, including Leland D. Baldwin's *Pittsburgh: The Story of a City* (1937) and Solon J. and

The survey's results had a positive impact on public perception and commitment to history. Although the Society received an annual appropriation from city and county governments to further its work, the period around World War II was a difficult one in which the Society found limited support from individual members to underwrite its greatly expanded facilities and service. Dr. Franklin F. Holbrook, a member of the survey staff, stayed on during the war years as director, being paid as a part time employee for what was more than a full time position.

During the next 30 years, the Society made some notable advances. Its glass collection became one of the most significant of its kind anywhere. An endowment fund, now totalling $3 million, was raised, thus enabling the Society to have a permanent staff. New publications such as Robert C. Alberts' *The Good Provider*, Char-les Stotz’s *Outposts of the War of Empire* and Jacob Feldman's *The Jewish Experience in Western Pennsylvania* continued to bring Western Pennsylvania history to the public.

It is difficult to single out individuals for recognition of their contributions during this period, but the leadership of Charles A. McClintock, Stanton Belfour, Dr. C.V. Starrett, Carlton Ketchum, J. Paul Scheetz, Charles Stotz, Katherine McCune Edwards, Mrs. Charles Campbell and Mrs. Elizabeth Titzel could hardly go unrecognized. Joseph G. Smith's direction from 1973 to 1977 brought a vitality and openness to the community, which paved the way for the Society's current successes.

Drawing upon this tradition of stewardship, education and service to the public, the Society has entered a new phase. With the largest and most professional staff in its history, the Society is carefully examining its role in the region, and detailing its future plans for dealing comprehensively with area history.

Today we face many of the same challenges our institutional forbears did. The changing face of Pittsburgh, the regional economic upheaval, the endangerment of large amounts of historical materials and the lack of space to serve as an adequate repository are the same motivating factors as those faced by our predecessors in the nineteenth century.

In addition, we are motivated by "new" trends in public history. Along with the "great man, great event" approach to history, we also recognize that the lives and culture of ordinary people, immigrants, workers, and community builders need to be recorded and interpreted. In exhibits such as our current "Homestead: The Story of A Steel Town," the Society highlights the region's industrial past, not a particular feature of the Society's previous activities. The recent emphasis on our function as
A History of Stewardship

a city, county and regional museum, despite our space limitations, is a recognition that this social history, as presented through the museum, fills a gap which exists among the various cultural institutions of the area.

In 1986-87, we launched a year-long study with the Committee on Pittsburgh Archaeology and History to plan a new facility to deal comprehensively with area history. The proposed 150,000 square foot Pittsburgh History Center, with a network of historic sites, would permit adequate and quality treatment of our region's heritage. Three buildings with adaptive potential for re-use are being reviewed by the Board of Trustees as possible sites for the Pittsburgh History Center, which would also serve as our new headquarters.

The Society is working with the Steel Industry Heritage Task Force to create the first facility in the network — an historic steel site at the Homestead Works.

These projects will total approximately $50 million, a figure well below the goal of other campaigns, such as The Carnegie's $120 million drive.

We must ask ourselves if, in the future, a sense of area history will be found only in nostalgically decorated fern bars or from objects sprinkled through shopping mall projects. In 1938, Director Holbrook stated that "on the score of local pride alone, every Pittsburgher or other Western Pennsylvanian may bear in mind...that this Society may fairly be said to symbolize and will continue to symbolize what the community as a whole thinks of its past; and...that fitting sustenance of the Society in this inescapable role is...the opportunity of all."

We hope the Society's current thoughtful and comprehensive efforts to protect our region's heritage will at last attract the level of support our history deserves, the kind of support often tragically missing in the past, and so lamented by our founders. Whether the reader is a Society member, a community activist, a person with roots in the area, or a transplant like myself, I hope you will help us insure that some of this region's resources be applied to these important endeavors.

Above: U.S. Sen. H.J. Heinz, left, talks with Robert C. Alberts at a Society reception in October 1973 honoring Alberts for his The Good Provider, which chronicled the Heinz family and the prepared food company's history. Alberts is author of numerous books about the region's history and has been active in Society affairs for more than two decades. Right: Recently, the Society has offered programming that appeals to a broader audience. On February 25 of this year, nearly 600 people attended the Society's Museum opening of "Homestead: The Story of a Steel Town." Photograph by Catherine Singstad