He was a great person and a great friend of the Society. He bore one of Pittsburgh’s oldest and most aristocratic names, but was the most egalitarian of its citizens. When James O’Hara Denny III died on May 29, 1993, at age 73, he left a gap not only for his wonderful family and many, many friends, but for the Historical Society which he had enthusiastically supported.

Jim Denny’s two direct ancestors were early Pittsburgh’s most prominent leaders. General James O’Hara was a revolutionary war veteran who founded the city’s earliest industries. These included a foundry and a glass house, not to mention a brewery, all of which paved the way for the later industrial prominence of the region. Ebenezer Denny, Jim’s other famous ancestor, was the first mayor of Pittsburgh in 1816, the year the city was incorporated.

Jim Denny’s young adulthood saw the liquidation of the family’s vast real estate holdings known as the Denny Estate, sold due to financial problems during the Depression. Jim attended Shadyside Academy, St. Paul’s School, and Trinity College, and received a master’s degree from the University of Pittsburgh. He worked for J.S. McCormick Co. in Pittsburgh and taught for 13 years at West Virginia University. He was active with the Presbyterian Church, St. Margaret’s Memorial Hospital and the Pittsburgh Oratorio Society.

Jim was a member of the Historical Society’s Board of Trustees from January 1977 to January 1991. It was a term of office which straddled years of great change in our organization. When Jim’s term began, the Society had a staff of five and a budget of under $150,000.

In 1986 when the Society began to chart a more proactive course in its programs and services, Jim, who might have had every reason to be cautious about the changes being proposed, boldly advocated a new course for the organization. He strongly supported a vigorous presence in the community and an extension of the Society’s role to serve new constituencies.

Jim was among the first trustees to join our then-president William C. King in pushing for a new facility for the Society, which had outgrown its small headquarters in Oakland. He had the idea that Pittsburgh native son David McCullough, the noted historian and author, would be an excellent trustee. This idea led to David’s great involvement with the Society as honorary chairman of the History Center Campaign.

This brings to mind one of Jim’s many kindnesses. He felt the staff would benefit greatly from meeting and talking with David McCullough, whose research and historical writing has taken him to numerous libraries, archives, museums, and historical sites. Jim invited all staff members to breakfast with David at the Pittsburgh Athletic Association, although our numbers had grown with our new programs to well over 20. It was an
extraordinary meeting where David’s experience became the context for his appreciation of a young staff carrying out the Society’s mission through a remarkable diversity of tasks, an enriching exchange made possible by Jim Denny’s insight and thoughtfulness.

Jim believed in the Society and its work. About a year before his death, he was featured in a video presentation about the History Center called “A Place in History,” in which he commented on an understanding and appreciation of history that had deepened over the years. He noted how important the new History Center would be as the community’s memory. Modest, thoughtful, and dedicated to the welfare of others, James O’Hara Denny III certainly represented well the tradition of the great family names he bore, and added, in his quiet way, quite a bit of luster of his own.

Jim Denny and his family were woven deeply, in diverse ways, into the fabric of Western Pennsylvania history. In December 1941, he (far right) and his sister, Anne (center), were on hand in Tacoma, Wash., to christen the U.S.S. General James O’Hara, a troop transport ship named for their great-great-great grandfather.