BOOK, INITIATIVE, COLLECTIONS AIM FOR MORE WOMEN’S HISTORY

by John A. Herbst, Executive Director

This fall, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania brought out a new book, Keeping House: Women’s Lives in Western Pennsylvania 1790-1850. Copublished with the University of Pittsburgh Press and written by Virginia Bartlett, the book has been in preparation for four years, supported by a grant from the H. J. Heinz Company Foundation. It is our first publishing effort since our 1988 reprint of the 1876 Atlas of Allegheny and the first original effort since publishing The Jewish Experience in Western Pennsylvania in 1986.

The book paints a picture of the lives of ordinary women in Western Pennsylvania during the time of European settlement and before the age of industrialization drastically changes life in the region. It has been virtually an untold story and we are quite proud to make it our latest offering of titles on the history of Pittsburgh and its region. Filling in the gaps in Western Pennsylvania history has become part of our institutional goals and is apparent in our various programs and services.

For instance, the Historical Society is taking part in a statewide effort called “Raising our Sites,” sponsored by the Pennsylvania Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The goal is to make it possible for educators at both the kindergarten-high school and college levels to maximize the use of women’s history resources and materials. The Historical Society has begun a women’s history archives and asked a significant number of women’s organizations and businesses to contribute archival and museum materials which document the lives of women at all socio-economic levels in Western Pennsylvania. Our archives staff has been analyzing the Historical Society’s collections to identify primary resource materials we already have and to make sure index and catalog references point to women’s history material contained in our collections under other main subject headings. Until recently, our collections were catalogued by the name and donor, or name of family, with little information about the contents of the collection.

Recently processed collections include those on the League of Women Voters, the Women’s Club of Pittsburgh, the Women’s Press Club, the Young Women’s Christian Association of Pittsburgh, the South Hills College Club, the Zonta Club and a new acquisition, the records of The Links, donated by the African-American women’s club of the same name.

“Raising our Sites” is just one part of the efforts mounted by our professional staff to round out collections in our archives and museum. Documents, photographs, and other materials relating to immigrants, ethnicity, entrepreneurs, neighborhoods and community groups are also being gathered. By the end of the century, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania should have filled many gaps in our collection by letting people know we place an historical value on everyone’s experience.