The cornerstone for the Society's headquarters on Bigelow Blvd. was laid October 30, 1912, and the building was dedicated the following September. Today, a Holiday Inn dominates the center of this view which looks east on Bigelow.

The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania Through the Years

by Margaret A. Spratt

The establishment of local historical societies was a common practice in America by the mid-nineteenth century. The first to be organized in this country was the Massachusetts Historical Society, founded in 1794. Others followed, including New York state in 1804 and Pennsylvania in 1824. Although they had regional names, their membership was drawn from narrow, local populations. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania was originally part of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, but a maverick group of members broke away and joined with other wealthy Philadelphians to repair “the injuries which the early history of Pennsylvania ... sustained by reason of the inattention” of their predecessors.

Thus, when a distinguished group of businessmen, politicians, doctors, and attorneys met in “Mr. George Beale’s long room” in the city of Pittsburgh in order to establish a historical society in the late winter of 1834, it was in the midst of a national movement. These “bastions of

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localism” were springing up across the country. The early historical society had two primary purposes — to collect and preserve local history, but just as importantly, to promote the growth of the community. Acting much like a chamber of commerce, the society viewed history as a means to emphasize not only past events but the importance of the locale, thereby attracting new businesses and residents.

In Pittsburgh, a committee was formed to draw up a constitution and on March 4, 1834, the Historical Society of Pittsburgh held its first public meeting in the hall of the Young Men’s Society. Although the committee admitted that its members were “young and inexperienced” and that the society was “a novel undertaking in this place,” it nonetheless recommended that monthly meetings be held where members would be treated to two lectures on American history, and that the society establish a general library, since the city had “as yet no extensive public library — no Schools of Philosophy — no Hall where the arts and sciences are cultivated.” The committee also stipulated that the society’s members should be from both the educated class and from “the respectable although less informed industrious classes of our city.” Recommended by the local newspaper as a healthy outlet for youthful energy that would “divert many from pursuits of a frivolous ... and pernicious character,” the Historical Society was not meant to be so much a repository for local history but rather a society which would provide “advancement of knowledge in ancient and modern history” for its young male members, the next generation of Pittsburgh leaders. No evidence exists to suggest that this early society had a major impact or following in the city. Presumably, it gradually died out, but a desire to preserve and learn about America’s past among the elite of Pittsburgh did not.¹

A second attempt to organize a historical society was made in 1843 when, once again, a number of Pittsburgh’s most distinguished citizens gathered to establish the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. Many of the same men attended who belonged to the earlier organization, but perhaps they had learned from past error when the group determined to refine their mission. Instead of investigating the full scope of history, this group wisely chose to focus on the collection and preservation of historical “materials relating to the early settlement of the Western country.” The society survived for about four years, but was no doubt hampered severely by a local disaster: the Great Fire of 1845 destroyed the society’s collection. Its demise was predicted the following year when one of the founders, the Rev. Dr. George Upfold, rector of Trinity Church, wrote to the corresponding secretary of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, which had been established in 1824. Explaining that Pittsburghers “are a working population, with little leisure for literary pursuits of any kind,” Rev. Upfold doubted that the organization would succeed. Even though this early Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania had a short lifespan, it made one lasting contribution to the historical record. Neville Craig, editor of the Daily Pittsburgh Gazette, published a monthly column, “The Olden Time,” which included papers presented to the society on the early history of Western Pennsylvania.²

The great majority of historical societies founded in the South and West also had difficulty in maintaining support over a period of time. One historian, David Van Tassel, has blamed this inability on the transient nature of the population and the fact that “few citizens [had] either the time or the inclination for activities that did not directly relate to the material prosperity of the town and the family business ...”. Certainly, Rev. Upfold’s observation that Pittsburgh was a city composed of a working population with little time for cultural pursuits helps to explain the failure of the city’s early attempts to found a historical society.³

It appears that community pride surrounding a momentous anniversary celebration was often the inspiration for founding a historical society. Certainly, Pittsburgh’s next attempt can be traced to the city’s centennial celebration of the taking of Fort Duquesne. On November 25, 1858, Pittsburgh celebrated with great pomp and circumstance, speeches were delivered in the railroad yard (site of the old fort), artillery was fired from the Point all day long, and a procession “ten miles long” marched through the city. So great an occasion was this that the governor issued a proclamation changing the date of Thanksgiving so as not to conflict with Pittsburgh’s big event. The following day, a group of leading citizens, no doubt still flushed from the recent display of civic pride, met at the Merchants’ Exchange to form a historical society. Former governor William F. Johnston was there, as well as Robert McKnight, who would be elected to Congress the following year, and Sidney von Bomhorst, who would serve as postmaster in the Lincoln administration.

Left: Solon Buck and Harold A. Phelps examine newly-bound local newspapers, a product of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey, in 1931. Above: The Society’s headquarters from 1913 until 1996 were in Pittsburgh’s Oakland district at 4338 Bigelow Boulevard, pictured here in the late 1930s.
A number of the men who had been involved in the earlier societies took leading roles in the establishment of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. Wilson McCandless, soon to be appointed a federal district judge, was elected president, and among others, Henry M. Brackenridge and Neville Craig were made vice presidents. Felix Brunot of Singer, Nimick & Co., a steel manufacturer, was elected treasurer, but when he refused the honor, merchant Robert Palmer was named in his place. That first meeting attracted a number of the city’s visitors, including John Roebling and his son, Washington, who were in town supervising the erection of a bridge over the Allegheny. In a letter to a friend back home in Trenton, N.J., Washington wrote that "I am perfectly at home in this place and have ten times as many acquaintances as in Trenton." No doubt, his presence at such a momentous event contributed to his fondness for Pittsburgh and its citizens.  

The new Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania met 20 times over the next 17 months, always in borrowed rooms. The organization’s constitution, published in a December 1858 issue of the Pittsburgh Gazette, provided for the election of new members, and set the annual dues at $3. (A life membership could be had for a single payment of $20.) The constitution stated that the purpose of the group was to collect and disseminate "information connected with our early history." The members organized into three committees — Lecture, Publications, and a "committee to make arrangements for the safe keeping of all papers and documents given or contributed to the Society." At least one "essayist" was appointed to present a program at each meeting, and the men gave papers on such subjects as European exploration of the upper Ohio Valley, early Pittsburgh steamboats, and Henry Bouquet.

The Publications Committee discussed plans for publications, but apparently never carried through any projects. However, the "Archives" committee succeeded in collecting a number of documents, including 18th century newspapers and historical volumes. The last meeting of the society was in April 1860, and no reason for disbanding the group is apparent. Although only a handful of members faithfully attended, meetings were held on a regular basis, and the collection of historical materials continued to be significant. Earlier institutional historians have blamed the dissolution of the society on the approaching election and subsequent outbreak of the Civil War. Certainly, the core group of active supporters were men of great standing and responsibility in the community. The preparation of the essays and committee work was time-consuming, and for the politicians and businessmen involved, not as important as this coming election. Once again, it appears that Pittsburgh had not reached the point where cultural pursuits outweighed the exigencies of material gain.

No known attempts to found another society were made until almost 20 years later, but this one would endure. On April 10, 1879, "a gathering of men who had resided in Pittsburgh for fifty years and upwards" was held at the First Methodist Church on Fifth Avenue. William Rinehart, one of the organizers of the meeting, explained that their purpose was "to meet together and revive old associations, and refresh each others (sic) memories of
the past, and early history of this place.” He also warned that “the
day is not far distant, when those present, and whose heads are
already whitened with the frosts of many winters will be called
hence, and the places that now know them, will know them no
more.” Over 125 citizens attended the first gathering, and they
resoundingly determined to call their new organization, Old
Residents of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania. As quaint as
the name may sound to modern ears, we cannot credit this group
of Pittsburghers with originality. A number of other locales had
already formed similar organizations, beginning with the Old
Residents’ Historical Association in Lowell, Mass., in 1869. By
1879, Old Residents, Settlers, or Pioneer Societies existed from
Cleveland to Astoria, Ore.6

The new organization elected officers a week after its initial
meeting, and named Thomas Bingham president. Wilson
McCandless, John Harper, and William Darlington, among others,
were elected to vice presidencies. All four men had been members
of earlier Pittsburgh historical societies. Given the criteria for
membership and the original purpose of the society, some obvious
problems surfaced immediately. The members passed a motion to
limit the length of the reminiscences of the “old timers” at the first
meeting. They also made their first sojourn into the countryside
when they held an open-air meeting at Camp Arlington near
Castle Shannon in 1879.

William Rinehart, one of the founders and the first treasurer
of the organization, died within a year of the society’s founding. In
fact, death among the membership happened at a frequent rate.
Realizing that the association would not last long with a dwindling
membership, the group’s constitution, adopted in 1880, provided
for the admission of women. In fact, by April 1881, the male
members were to be fined $1 if they failed to bring a woman to a
meeting. Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing how much
the treasury was increased by this motion.

In December 1881, the organization changed its name to the
Historical Society of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania. A year
later, the association eliminated the requirement of 50 years
residency for membership, throwing open the doors to anyone
interested in “local history, by securing the legendary and tradi-
tional before they pass into the region of mythology.” However
populist the new rules of membership might have appeared, there
was still the air of an old men’s club surrounding the society. A
letter, dated March 15, 1882, from Gen. James Ekin, out of town
on Army business, to the society’s secretary confirms this belief.
Gen. Ekin wrote, “I look forward with joyful hope to the ap-
proaching re-union of the Old Residents’ Association. Let us have
an old-fashioned love-feast.” He enclosed a $1,000 Confederate
Bond, not, as he specified, for the association’s treasury, but rather
as an object of interest. Gen. Ekin then closed by sending “bushels
of love” to the membership.7

These changes in membership requirements may have been
caused by competition precipitated by the establishment of a rival
organization. In March of 1882, 11 men met at Library Hall to
organize a historical society not limited to 50-year residents which
they named the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society. For three
years, the two organizations co-existed, but on May 15, 1885, after the death of the Rev. Dr. S.J. Wilson of the Western Theological Seminary, president of the newer society, the two consolidated. The majority of the membership had conceded that "two societies of this character cannot successfully prosper in the same community."8

This reconfigured Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania held monthly meetings, except in the summer when the "stay-at-homes" had "little inclination to delve after ancient literature" because of the warm temperatures. On average, 20 or so members usually attended these meetings held in borrowed rooms to listen to the personal reminiscences of the "old folks," and as the years passed, formal papers prepared by about a half-dozen members, most of whom were officers of the society. In September 1885, they enjoyed their second outing — a picnic and game of "town ball" at the president's farm in Evergreen.9

The first woman to be accepted as a full-fledged member of the society was Jennie Lambing, who joined in December 1891. She was the niece of a Roman Catholic priest and society officer, Father Andrew A. Lambing. When he was named president the following year, Miss Lambing was made secretary. One institutional historian has also credited her with being the first woman to present a paper ("The American Turkey" in 1892) at a regular meeting of the society, but we know that two other women preceded her in the previous decade. Mrs. M.E. Thropp Cone's paper of 1883, "A Plea for Valley Forge," was well-received but was overshadowed by an 1885 address delivered by Mrs. Charles Wade, better known by her pen name, Bessie Bramble. Bramble's paper, "A Reform Needed in History," chastised historians for ignoring the historical accomplishments of women. She observed that "Apart from Pocahontas and Allequippa, no other women from that day to this have been worth mentioning. We know Pilgrim Fathers but not Pilgrim Mothers." Bramble drew such a large audience that the society had to borrow the First Presbyterian Church on Wood Street for the evening.10

Although such special programs drew a good audience, the regular monthly meetings were often sparsely attended, and the preparation for the talk just as often fell on the shoulder of the president. In 1891, the society began to meet in the lecture hall of the new Carnegie Free Library of Allegheny, and the officers, in an attempt to attract a larger audience, voted to include "musical and elocutionary performances" at each meeting. These performances varied from poetry readings to vocal arrangements, and luckily for the president, were spread among the membership.

Activities of the historical society of the 1880s and '90s extended beyond its monthly meetings. The officers corresponded with Mary Schenley, owner of the Bouquet Blockhouse, urging that "Historic ground...should be preserved as a relic of the past." They declared the Indian mound at McKees Rocks to be a historic site, and in 1894 arranged the city's centennial celebration of incorporation as a borough. However, the society's most ambitious and continuous activity was the collection of "relics." Beginning with the establishment of a committee on archives in 1880, rarely a meeting was held when a member did not present an old newspaper, journal, or book.

The Allegheny Carnegie Library provided storage when the society began to meet there in 1891, but security for the items continued to be a problem. Donors were hesitant to relinquish control; Boyd Crumrine, a long-time member from Washington County, agreed to give the society his collection of historical materials in 1893 "as soon as it has a permanent place to meet and security for the donation." The society's president, Andrew Lambing, lamented: "We hang our heads in shame when visitors ask to see our rooms and collections."11

Some members of the society had entertained the hope that the group would have permanent meeting and collection space as early as 1881, when Andrew Carnegie first proposed a gift of a library to Pittsburgh. The society heartily endorsed his proposal and asked that it be provided with its own alcove. After some intense lobbying, Carnegie vaguely promised his cooperation to the society in 1886. The society's officers were further encouraged in 1893, when Carnegie paid $30 for life memberships for Mrs.

Left: Miss Rachel McClelland and Mrs. M. Graham Netting pause for a photo during the Society's 1960 annual tour. Two hundred fifty one guests took an excursion down the Ohio River on the Chaperon, a stern-wheeler converted to a pleasure craft and moved about by a tow boat. Thousands of Miss McClelland's slides are now part of the Society's collections.

Above: Regular lectures have always been a part of the Society's programs. Rolio Turner, a historian of African Americans in Pittsburgh, spoke in September 1983.
Carnegie and himself and “expressed the hope that the society would have its permanent home in the new building at Schenley Park.” However, it took numerous negotiations and a public newspaper campaign for the organization to obtain space in the new building. Finally, in the spring of 1896, the society, along with its growing archival collection, moved into the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.12

The history of the organization is a bit sketchy for the next decade or so, because no minutes were preserved from 1899 to 1908. However, by piecing together correspondence and other records, it appears that a faithful cadre of members held regular meetings at various locations around town and even proposed the regular publication of a journal to be called either the Historical Magazine of Western Pennsylvania or the Fort Pitt Magazine. Failing to convince anyone to take on the editorial responsibilities of the journal and the realization of the tremendous costs involved, the society abandoned its publication plans. Meanwhile, membership was stagnant, and the society’s archival collection not only ceased to expand, but somehow was absorbed by the Carnegie Library. Once again, it took a community celebration to revive interest in local history. The sesquicentennial in 1908 of the capture of Fort Duquesne resuscitated the society, and the involvement of the chief organizer of the celebration, Burd S. Patterson, brought new energy to the organization.13

The remaining members of the historical society called a reorganization meeting to be held at the Chamber of Commerce building on April 13, 1909. Following the lead of two new energetic members, Patterson and William H. Stevenson, a wholesale grocer, the society embarked on a new program of public awareness and membership recruitment. Quickly increasing their numbers, they took trips to Ligonier and the Bushy Run Battlefield, held a banquet at the Monongahela House celebrating the 156th anniversary of the “first attempt to fortify the Ohio,” and celebrated the 152nd anniversary of the taking of Fort Duquesne. The society planned and organized Pittsburgh’s centennial celebration of steamboat navigation on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in 1911. A replica of the steamboat New Orleans had been financed by the Pittsburgh City Council and was christened on October 31st by Alice Roosevelt in the presence of President William Howard Taft and approximately 300,000 onlookers. Members of the historical society, the city council, representatives of the state, and the Lake Erie and Ohio River Canal Association then left on a month-long voyage to New Orleans. Burd Patterson observed a few years later that the voyage “advocated the study of history, the advantages of Pittsburgh and the desirability of improving and extending our waterways.” The event also netted the society’s treasury $3,000.14

Hoping to solve the perennial problem of borrowed rooms, the rejuvenated society embarked on a three-year building fund campaign, culminating in 1911 when Pennsylvania’s governor, John Tener, approved a state appropriation for $25,000. These funds were added to $10,000 left over from the 1908 sesquicentennial celebration, and the society bought a site on Bigelow Boulevard in Pittsburgh’s Oakland district. The building committee offered a prize of $500 for the best building design and chose Ingham and Boyd of Pittsburgh as the architectural firm. Gov. Tener laid the cornerstone on October 30, 1912, and the students of Bellefield Public School sang. The doors were opened on February 17, 1914 to the new building which was considered by members of the society to be the first phase of a larger structure. They began immediately to lobby for funds, and after a number of disappointments, received another appropriation from the state for $40,000 in 1929. The state required, however, that the society raise another $20,000 from the community. By tapping the resources of the Buhl and Carnegie foundations and over 100 individuals, including banking scion Andrew W. Mellon, the historical society was able to fulfill the state’s requirement and finish the building project ahead of schedule. On October 6, 1931, after numerous speeches by local, state, and national political figures, the completed building was dedicated.15

To one historian, this was the “Golden Age” of the society. In 1918, the organization began to publish historical research and writing in its own quarterly journal. With the opening of the new building, Burd Patterson acted as director and in 1915 Emma

Above: Even after additions to the building, exhibit space was limited. “Roots and Branches: Pittsburgh Jewish History” occupied the main floor’s atrium in 1982.

Right: After a reinvigoration of the Society in 1986, exhibits became larger and more comprehensive. These women attended the opening in 1987 of the Homewood Brushton exhibit, which used the two side galleries of the Bigelow building’s main floor.
Poole was employed as office secretary. In 1923, Poole was made librarian, a post she relinquished shortly after the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey was begun in 1931, at which time she was appointed custodian of the collection, the position which she held at the time of her death in 1936. Most significant for the society was the launching of that survey in 1931, a joint project with the history department of the University of Pittsburgh and the Buhl Foundation. Advised by a board of control, composed of five members of the society and four representatives of the university, the survey was directed by Dr. Solon J. Buck, formerly of the Minnesota Historical Society, who also served as director of the society. In addition, the plan provided for the employment of two assistants, three fellows, and a secretary. Franklin Holbrook was appointed as one of the assistants charged with “the historical society work including the installation and development of the museum, the reorganization and development of the library, the promotion of interest in the society, and the development of its membership.” In 1935, with the departure of Buck for a position with the National Archives, Holbrook was appointed director of the society.16

The Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey employed researchers and writers to identify and compile historical materials relevant to the development of the region and to prepare a series of popular but creditable historical studies. The survey resulted in “an outstanding and unique portfolio of regional history” which included such important books as Pittsburgh: The Story of a City by Leland D. Baldwin (1937) and Solon J. and Elizabeth Hawthorn Buck’s The Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania (1939). With the aid of a grant from the Mellon Foundation the series was published by the newly established University of Pittsburgh Press.17

The remaining years of the Great Depression and the following decade were difficult ones for the society. With the departure of the majority of the survey team in 1936, the budget reverted to a pre-survey level, but the services and physical demands of the building did not. Membership began to drop, and the director received a half-time salary for full-time work. In his 1938 institutional history, Franklin Holbrook expressed his concern over the society’s constant financial woes: “It is a fact hard to explain, that in all the sixty-odd years of the present society’s existence, no one, with the exception of Mr. [William] Stevenson, who left a bequest of a thousand dollars, has thought to contribute substantially and specifically to a permanent fund in support of the society’s basic activities.” In 1944, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania had 663 members who paid annual dues of $5. Its income amounted to $8,250 that year, $2,000 of which came from the city and county treasuries. Obviously, the society was heavily dependent upon volunteer labor during these decades. In 1949, a Women’s Auxiliary of 25 was organized to provide help with “the proposed Heritage Caravan, the library, exhibits, and hostess service in the museum.” The secretary explained that “there was some question of the desirability of using the name ‘Women’s Auxiliary,’ but a more suitable appellation did not occur to any of those present.”18

Over the next decade, under the leadership of Charles McClintock as president and Robert Christie as director, the historical society received several important grants which enabled it to expand its staff, services, and collections. A sizable bequest received in 1952 allowed the society to build an endowment fund which would help to ensure against financial insecurities that had plagued its history. In 1953 and again in 1955, the society helped to plan the city’s historical anniversary celebrations. The bicentennial observance of 1955 granted the society the opportunity to publish its first book, Drums in the Forest by Alfred P. James and Charles M. Stotz, made possible by grants from the Pittsburgh Foundation and the Pittsburgh Bicentennial Association.19

A number of truly remarkable individuals, including Stanton Belfour and C.V. Starrett, encouraged additional publication projects in the 1960s and built solid working relationships with Pittsburgh’s charitable foundations. In 1971, the society received a major three-year grant from the Buhl Foundation to develop a community services program. In its application, the society’s board recognized that the organization had primarily existed for the use of its own membership, but that it was time “to go outside our four walls to carry an educational program to the community.” The society employed Joseph G. Smith, a member of the

The storage areas of the Bigelow building were cramped and crowded in 1987. Shelves would soon be constructed in these hallways and in the building’s Siebeneck Room (named for a former vice president and trustee), both on the bottom floor. The crowding only got worse, reinforcing the need for a new facility.
board, to direct the project and promised that "through the spoken word — at the historical societies, at schools, at service clubs, churches, and wherever talks are welcomed — the Society will at once attempt to take the story of our heritage, and of the importance of that heritage, into the uncertain and troubled world of today."  

In 1974, Niles Anderson, a vice-president of the society, wrote: "The challenge...for the Society is to make all citizens, young and old, aware of our historical heritage and to participate in sharing the knowledge and lessons and pride of the past." Indeed, the next two decades of the society’s history were filled with attempts to reach out into the community, but it took until 1986 for the staff, budget, and scope to be significantly increased. With the establishment of the Local History Resource Service financed by the Starrett Memorial Fund, the society began to support staff to aid the development and interpretation made by small regional historical societies and museums. Major exhibits, such as "Home- stead: The Story of a Steel Town," not only brought people to the society’s building who most likely would not otherwise have visited, but it involved an entire community in the collection of memories and artifacts. Aggressive collection policies and the attainment of major grants also helped the society’s archives to expand and catalogue its holdings as well as to involve both professional and amateur historians in advisory groups. The journal changed both its name and format to become more popularly accessible, and in 1992 the society branched out to include two additional sites: Meadowcroft Museum of Rural Life, located in rural southwestern Pennsylvania, and the Kins House in Lawrenceville represent two very different lifestyles, both vanishing quickly from the landscape. Meadowcroft preserves the rural past, and the Kins House, still in planning stages as a historic house, provides a glimpse into the lives of Pittsburgh’s Eastern European working class families.  

Most ambitious of all the society’s undertakings was the creation of the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center. Launched after a year-long study made with the Committee on Pittsburgh Archaeology and History in 1986-87, the opening of the society’s new headquarters involved the labor and support of thousands of people, from the expert to the volunteer. It reflects the lives of the people who built the region and whose voices have largely been silent in the annals of the past. In 1988, Franklin Holbrook wrote that the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania is "in effect a public institution" and it "may fairly be said to symbolize and will continue to symbolize what the community as a whole thinks of its past...." As David McCullough, author and honorary chairman of the capital campaign for the history center, observed, the new generations of Pittsburghers will look back at this period of the society’s history and say "Look what a job they did."  

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**Notes**

I would like to thank the staff of the Historical Society’s Library and Archives, especially Corey Seeman, for their assistance.


2. Holbrook, 6-7; Gerencser, 4-6


6. Old Residents’ Association Files, HSWP; Holbrook, 10-11; Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette, April 11, 1879; Van Tassel, 186-188.

7. Holbrook, 10-11; Gerencser, 10-12; Letter from General James A. Ekin to William Gornlie, March 15, 1882. Old Residents’ Association Files, HSWP.


13. Patterson, 4; Holbrook, 20, 21.

14. Holbrook, 22-23; Minute Book, Feb. 1, 1914, HSWP.


22. Herbst, "History of Stewardship," 63; Holbrook, 30; David McCullough, "And they built this city, Pittsburgh —," Pittsburgh History 75 (Fall 1992), 127.