By Arthur B. Fox

Most Pittburghers know of Mary Croghan Schenley by Schenley Park, the land she donated in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh. However, her family estate — the Croghan-Schenley mansion — remains a footnote in local history. "Picnic House" stood on Black Horse Hill, now the Stanton Heights neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Nothing remains of the house but a partial reconstruction at the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning. The story of this historic home, dubbed in a 1945 Life magazine article as "A Haunted House," is a strange tale of a Victorian love affair, a lonely mansion on a wind-swept hill, and an attempt at historic preservation.

The Croghan-Schenley Family

Mary Elizabeth Croghan Schenley was the daughter of Mary O'Hara and William Croghan, Jr. Their 1823 marriage linked two prominent Ohio Valley families: Mary O'Hara's father, James O'Hara, was a well-known Pittsburgh industrialist and co-owner of the first glass factory in Pittsburgh. William Croghan was an attorney, as was his father, who also served in the Revolution.  

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William and Mary settled on a small estate outside of Louisville, Ky., called "Locust Grove." Their daughter, Mary Elizabeth, was born April 27, 1827; when her mother passed away six months later, William Croghan and his infant daughter returned to Pittsburgh.\(^2\)

Croghan acquired a 109-acre parcel of land named "Good Intent" on Black Horse Hill for $5,080 in 1832.\(^3\) A house was started, though details remain sketchy — unknown are the exact dates of erection of its two parts, the designer or architect, and the intentions of the owner. It's suspected that the early stone portion of the house was built in the late 1830s.\(^4\) The origin of its "Picnic House" name is also a mystery, though one authority theorizes that the "character and arrangement of the rooms in the stone building indicates they were intended for entertainment."\(^5\)

When Mary Croghan turned 14, her father enrolled her in a boarding school on Staten Island, N.Y., run by a Mrs. McLeod. In 1842, McLeod's twice-widowed brother-in-law, Captain Edward Schenley, visited.\(^6\) While there, the 43-year-old captain met 16-year-old Mary; they fell in love, secretly married aboard a sailing ship, and slipped away for England. William Croghan apparently hired John W. Taylor to build part of the mansion, for Taylor later recorded that Croghan one day told him, "John, you need not do any more work on the house; I have just received word that my daughter has run away with that English officer. My heart is broken!"\(^7\)

After a short stay in England, the couple sailed for Para, Brazil, and later Dutch Guiana, where Capt. Schenley served as commissioner overseeing suppression of illegal slave trading. When Edward completed his South American duties, the Schenleys returned to England. William Croghan had already begun enlarging Picnic House to a 29-room mansion with conservatories and stables in hopes of luring his daughter and family back to Pittsburgh.\(^8\) In 1848, 21-year-old Mary Schenley, expecting her first baby, came to Pittsburgh with her husband and lived at Picnic House. She received part of her inheritance then, but returned to England after her father's death in 1850.\(^9\)

The original plain stone exterior was dominated by a larger undistinguished three-story brick addition, but at least an encircling porch with an ingenious fret ornament in its frieze was continued around the addition. One source documented that Croghan patterned the large brick addition after Mary Schenley's home in England. The house was near completion when Croghan died: construction of the brick addition spanned at least 1842 to 1850, from Mary's elopement to Croghan's death.\(^10\)

After their return to England in 1850, the house was closed, although the Schenleys returned for brief visits — Mary's last visit to America was reportedly in 1853.\(^11\) Mrs. Eliza Koehler and her husband lived in the cottage on the grounds acting as caretakers of the estate. Mrs. Koehler had served as Mary Schenley's maid since age 17, making five trans-Atlantic voyages with her. The couple availed themselves of the mansion's basement to operate a dairy business, but the remainder of the house was kept in order...
so that with a 10-day notice it could be ready for occupancy by the Schenley family.

After the Koehlers died in 1912, their daughters, Charlotte Koehler and Mrs. M.E. Davison, became caretakers of the mansion, living in the basement. The Schenleys raised three sons and six daughters, none of whom ever lived in America. Capt. Schenley died in London in 1878, when he was 78. When Mary died in 1903, her Pittsburgh real estate holdings amounted to some $50 million, the last of which was liquidated in 1954.

Picnic House passed to Schenley heirs, but in 1909 it was leased to the Stanton Heights Golf Club. The golf course covered approximately 156 acres and included the Schenley and Allerton (the southeast corner) estates — nine holes on each tract. Though the Schenley mansion was considered for the club house, a new one was built.

The Mansion

The earliest description of Picnic House was published by the *Pittsburg Bulletin* in December 1900. Edith N. Benney “toured” the desolate mansion, empty for 35 years except for the caretakers.

It stands proudly upon its commanding hilltop — the foundations rising nearly a full story above the ground, and being surrounded by a brick paved piazza around the outer edge of which a stately row of Doric columns supports the wide porches which run about three sides of the main floor of the house. The roof of the porch is in its turn held up by a similar row of [Corinthian] columns, making a fine effect of double galleries. For the rest of the house is severely unornate. The walls are gray and somber, and the windows are closed shuttered.... Behind the house, the conservatories, once of vast extent, and the pride of the place, have fallen completely into ruin, only one tottering wall remaining.... Only at the foot of the hill, where the low, picturesque, whitewashed cottage of the caretaker stands in its garden-patch is there sign of movement and activity.

Benney also vividly described the interior of the mansion:

The wide entrance hall is silent and empty, save for a few wicker chairs that remain. At the far end a stately staircase rises, with an enormous engraved glass window at the landing...in the drawing-room was found an elaborately carved rose-wood and mahogany furniture. The grand piano [the first brought across the Allegheny Mountains], the curved legged claw-footed tables, with their marble statuary; the old secretary, the long narrow divans with their rolling ends; the cut glass candle-sticks that flank the mantel piece.... Over the white marble mantel, with its gold-framed mirror, hangs a beautiful portrait of Mrs. Croghan, Mrs. Schenley’s mother... many other family portraits fill the room. The long French windows reach to the floor, opening out upon the airy piazzas.... In the dining-room is a large glass cabinet containing a rare collection of fine old China.... The ballroom is the largest and handsomest room in the house. The windows reaching to the floor are inset in alcoves with luxurious but faded silk curtains... while corresponding alcoves and curtains on the other side, conceal...
Much of the original ballroom, left, has been re-created at the Cathedral of Learning, above. The main difference — ceilings in the re-created rooms had to be cut 18 inches.
the entrances to three small bed-chambers opening out of this larger room. From the central section of the ceiling hangs an enormous chandelier of cut glass prisms.

The still-life setting must have been forbidding—she regretted the absence of an attic that would have completed the estate’s mysterious charm. 19

The house was surveyed in 1936 as part of the Architectural Survey of Western Pennsylvania and the Historic American Building Survey (HABS). 20 Charles Stotz wrote in the Early Architecture of Western Pennsylvania (as part of the survey) that the wooden Corinthian capitals in the ballroom were exquisitely carved, with each wall presenting a pleasing composition, particularly the entrance elevation with carved doorway, free-standing columns, and mirrored walls. Stotz felt the presence of an oval room, with niches and curved doorways, seemed unusual in plans of the district. This room led on one side into an anteroom with a painted groined vault leading to the porch, and on another side to the original entrance vestibule with a lead-dome skylight. He believed the plan to be reminiscent of Classic Revival schemes of Jefferson and Latrobe. 21

Surviving photos show that the Croghan-Schenley mansion reflects the Greek Revival style, although the main floor of the mansion raised above a high masonry basement story contemplates a design borrowed from earlier French Colonial houses of the rural South. 22 As insignificant as the exterior architecture of Picnic House appeared, the interior architecture of the oval room and ballroom revealed a dramatic contrast and one of the most distinguished interiors of the Greek Revival style to be found in the United States. 23

A visit by reporters in October 1941 is testimony to the neglect suffered by this once stately house: “[S]oft drinks were served in the basement floor of the mansion to golfers arriving at the eighth hole of the Stanton Heights Golf Club located in front of Picnic House.” 24 Life magazine profiled the place in 1945 and found the only inhabitant was an old caretaker, who, hermit-like, dwelt squally in one cold room. The piece was titled “Life Visits A Haunted House.” 25

Demolition and Rebirth

In 1945, contractor William S. Miller bought the mansion for demolition to prepare for a housing development on the estate. The mansion was documented by the Library of Congress as an historic building possessing exceptional historic and architectural interest worthy of preservation. The U.S. Department of the Interior noted that the house appeared worthy of careful preservation, a result of the 1936 surveys. 26 Complete preservation was apparently not possible, so preservationists strove to at least save the ballroom, one of the last surviving examples of Greek Revival architecture in Pittsburgh.

In 1945, several interested Pittsburghers, including Pittsburgh Press writers Gilbert Love and George Swetnam, brought the ballroom to the attention of Dr. John G. Bowman, chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh. 27 When it was learned that the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art considered purchasing the building for restoration of the oval room and ballroom, the University of Pittsburgh contacted Miller (the contractor), who granted permission to remove structural details of the original rooms that remained. The two rooms were reconstructed on the first floor of the university’s Cathedral of Learning; Miller dedicated them his father, Hirschel Miller, a Pittsburgh builder. 28

Original materials that were part of the reconstruction include the Corinthian columns, gold-plated mirrors, marble fireplace, hand-carved fluted columns supporting detailed carved cornices and beams, and gold-plated crystal chandeliers. 29

George Hubbard Clapp, former chairman of Pitt’s board of trustees, donated $50,000 to the reconstruction project. To reassemble the ballroom and oval room, the university’s architect, A.A. Klimcheck, made careful studies of the original house in an attempt at faithful restoration. The most critical difference in restoration was that the Cathedral’s ceilings were not high enough and the relocated rooms had to be cut down by approximately 18 inches.

The narrow ivory and lavender colored ballroom (approximately 40 feet long and 18 feet wide) was dedicated in 1955. Furnishing the room appeared an insoluble problem until 1954, when the university received, among other items, the gift of two elegant Empire swan chairs. Many of the original materials from the mansion remained in storage in the Cathedral of Learning basement for 30 years until funding became available for restoration. The ballroom was referred to as the “Pittsburgh room,” “Western Pennsylvania room,” or “American room.” Plans were made to use the room as a classroom, but instead it became a private conference room for past chancellors due to its location across from the first floor kitchen. In 1982, a grant of $59,204 from the A.W. Mellon Education and Charitable Trust in honor of Andrew W. Mellon and John Bowman enabled the purchase of fine period draperies, mahogany furniture, and improved lighting. The columns and pilasters were restored, and the original white oak floor laid by William Croghan was placed in the ballroom. 30

Chester LeMaistre, past president of the American Institute of Interior Designers, designed and supervised the furnishing and re-creation of the ballroom and oval room from the early-1950s until their rededication in 1982. LeMaistre believed the scale of the room was never right, but still a magnificent space: with the ceiling lowered 18 inches, the frieze looked too bold and the oversized chandelier too large. Highlights of the ballroom included the frieze of anthemions stylized from honeysuckle flowers and utilization of several strong patterns in ceiling plaster details.

The original Greek-style fireplace was probably carved from Italian Carrara marble, off-white with charcoal veining. A door on the opposite wall bears a restrained crested pediment and trapezoidal lintel. LeMaistre recovered a pair of 1830 chaises longues—also called lits de repos—in Scalamandre champagne-colored cut velvet with a modified fish scale pattern. These excellent pieces have carved swans as cresets and dolphins for legs. 31 Two sofas were donated by Harmar D. Denny, great grandson of Harmar Denny, a relative of William Croghan. Although dating to the
The original stone portion of the Croghan house.
1830s, the sofas are not from Picnic House.

The ballroom in Pitt’s Cathedral is profusely ornamented with wood and plaster executed by Mordecai van Horn of Philadelphia, c. 1835. The coupled Corinthian columns and pilasters are carved and enhanced by mirrored walls and a carved plaster frieze. Originally, the exterior windows of the room were repeated on the opposite wall by false windows, and three rooms behind. In the installation at Pitt, the lower sashes of the false windows slide into a wall to provide access to the rooms. The mantle and fireplace ornaments are gifts of Chester LeMaistre.32

The Croghan-Schenley ballroom, constructed over 150 years ago for young Mary Schenley, is safely preserved on the first floor of the Cathedral of Learning. The ballroom and oval room that stood silent for nearly a century are now utilized for special occasions and meetings by university staff, and visited by appointment only. And on Black Horse Hill, some 400 houses have stood since 1948 on the mansion’s site.33

Notes
3 Shetler, 52, and Allegheny County Deed Book 44: 276. The parcel was purchased Jan. 23, 1832.
5 Ibid.
6 Capt. Schenley served under the Duke of Wellington in the Peninsular campaign during the Napoleonic Wars, and fought under General Pakenham in 1815 at the Battle of New Orleans when he was about 17 years old. He was wounded in the hand at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 by a Polish lancer while serving as an ensign in the Royal Rifles — his Waterloo medal is preserved at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. See S. Kussart, “One Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of Mrs. Schenley,” Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine 9:4, 214.
7 James A. Beck, “The Old Fifth Ward of Pittsburgh—Recollections,” Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine 28:3-4, 122, relates the “broken heart” story concerning John Taylor. Another source documents that Croghan built the large brick addition patterned after Mary Schenley’s home in England. Croghan died Sept. 22, 1850, with the house near completion, but without any floors laid. Also see Kussart, 215. Samuel Jones, Pittsburgh in the Year 1826 (Pittsburgh: 1826), 148; and The Croghan-Schenley Ballroom, a pamphlet published by the Nationality Room Committee and available at the Cathedral of Learning, Univ. of Pittsburgh.
8 Stefan Lorant, Pittsburgh: The Story of an American City (Lentox, Mass.: 1988), 104.
9 Ibid.
10 George Swinmurn, “History’s Unweeded Garden: Common Errors in Western Pennsylvania History,” Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine 61:2, 108. Other Mary Schenley facts and fallacies are also discussed.
11 Kussart, 215. All furniture had been removed to a storage house in 1926.
13 Lorant, 104.
15 The Bulletin Index, April 16, 1910.
16 On Dec. 21, 1865, the Pittsburgh Bulletin published a full page of nine interior and exterior photographs of Picnic, possibly the first published photographs of the Croghan-Schenley mansion.
18 The Pittsburgh Bulletin, Dec. 1, 1900, Mary Schenley’s portrait was taken to the Carnegie Institute during the 1920s. Anne Clark Miller, “Old Houses and Estates in Pittsburgh,” Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine 9:2, 136. The University Times, Jan. 20, 1972, notes that the chandelier, “thought by some as the most beautiful ever hung in America,” weighed approximately 2 tons. The Pittsburgh Post Gazette, Feb. 9, 1982, reported the chandelier was co-designed by William Peter Eichbaum, a glass-cutter to Louis XVI who later came to Pittsburgh, and William Price, who made the frame.
19 Interior and exterior views of the house from then on are on file in the Wadsworth Room, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (black and white prints) and the Historic American Building Survey in Washington, D.C. (negatives). These views are significant because only a few were ever published in an architectural history of Pittsburgh.
20 Stotz, 110. The profusely ornamented woodland and plaster in the ballroom was reportedly executed by Mordecai van Horn of Philadelphia in the 1830s, as per The Croghan-Schenley Ballroom pamphlet.
21 See for example Virginia & Lee McClester, A Field Guide to American Houses (New York: 1989), 190-191. Picnic House, probably designed partly by William Croghan (a Kentuckian), may have reflected a sense of rural southern architecture.
22 Stotz, 110.
23 Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph, Sept. 15, 1941. The tour was conducted by Charlotte Koehler, caretaker of the mansion, whose mother Elizabeth had been the caretaker until 1912. This article also mentions the existence of Mary Schenley’s only surviving child — 88-year-old Lady Ellenborough of Sunningdale, Surrey, England. The house was redesigned in 1910, leading to the somewhat odd circumstance of a rest at the 8th hole.
27 The Pitt News, Oct. 18, 1961. The Georgian furniture and paintings from the original rooms were sold at auction and the university could not recover them.
28 The Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph, Dec. 22, 1954. The Pittsburgh Press, Jan. 4, 1982, wrote that many crystals of the chandelier were missing, paint was peeling on the ornate columns, and the wood floor was covered with sections of carpet.
31 Other sources have placed the mansion at the location of the former Stanton Heights Shopping Center (opened 1960) at Azure Street, Mossfield Street, and Schenley Manor Drive. The Kingdom Hall of Jehovah’s Witnesses church presently occupies this site. The mansion actually sat approximately 0.5 miles northwest, near the intersection of McCabe Street and Stanton Terrace, now covered with private residential housing constructed in the late-1940s. Photographs and descriptions of the mansion document a hilltop location with a panoramic view of Pittsburgh and surrounding county, an impressive view even today from the top of Stanton Terrace. In contrast, a site survey conducted by the author in March 1997 confirmed that the former shopping center location is bordered by a hillside on the north and Garfield Heights to the height, with no vista of the surrounding country. See also “Decline of Shopping Center Hurt Stanton Heights,” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Oct. 4, 1977, “Stanton Heights group is fighting proposal for developing blighted shopping center,” Pittsburgh Press, Feb. 18, 1985; and “Signs of Revival Plans Drafted to remodel plaza in Stanton Heights,” Pittsburgh Press, Sept. 9, 1989.