In 1988, a crate arrived at the Historical Society. Inside were six objects—five of them portraits and one a sterling silver tray. The items had gone unseen for years, stored in the attic and book room of Elizabeth Wray Firuski's Salisbury, Connecticut, home. But Mrs. Firuski sensed that the objects had more than just sentimental value—they had a story, a Pittsburgh story, to tell. It was her wish that they come to the Historical Society upon her death, to serve as a legacy to her family and the lives they built in Western Pennsylvania.

Except for names, little biographical information accompanied the objects. While researching the museum collection for the Points In Time exhibit a few years ago, I was captivated by the inscription on the sterling silver tray. It reads:

Presented to Michael Allen, Esq. of Pittsburg, U.S.,
formerly of Letterkenny, Ireland, by his creditors as a testimonial
of their high opinion on his upright and honorable conduct by paying, in full,
the balances of their respective accounts
although previously discharged from all legal obligations.
Signed on behalf of the creditors at large,
Thomas Hughes, Langtry & Herdman, James McCleery,
Belfast, April, 1839.

The tray is large and quite beautifully executed. Produced by Grays of Dublin in 1838, it blends both American and Irish iconography. The presentation front is inscribed under an eagle shield and surrounded by a wreath of flowers, leaves, and shamrocks. The tray has three feet, indicating it was probably designed for tabletop display.

Two of the portraits seemed directly related to the tray. One was of Michael Allen, the recipient of the silver tray; the other of a woman, Sarah Allen, that I later found to be his wife. Painted about 1820, Michael's
portrait shows him to be a dashing Irishman with dark curly hair and blazing eyes. Sarah’s painting is more refined; she sits in stately fashion in an Empire style dress accented by a large lacy collar. Their story together remained to be discovered.

The Allens appear in no history books written about Pittsburgh. The threads of their lives were instead woven through primary source accounts in Pittsburgh’s early history — city directories, census records, journals, and newspapers. The Allens arrived in Pittsburgh sometime between 1810 and 1815. The first notice of their presence is a city directory entry for 1815: “Allen and Grant merchants, E. side jail alley between Diamond Alley and 4th Street.”

The couple, whom the tray indicates had failed in business in Ireland, quickly prospered in Pittsburgh. In 1816, John McCleary of Pittsburgh sponsored Michael Allen for citizenship and in 1819, he became a naturalized citizen. By that time, he and Sarah were operating a lottery and exchange office (selling lottery tickets much like today and exchanging money). In partnership with George Grant, Michael also operated a commission and forwarding business in the Monongahela Wharf area between Market and Wood streets. The couple lived nearby on Water Street.

Allen’s mercantile business must have been successful. He began to invest in other enterprises, often taking on a leadership role. In 1822, Allen and Grant purchased a cotton mill in the Northern Liberties (now Lawrenceville) and, in conjunction with John Adams and James Craft, formed the Phoenix Steam Cotton Factory. They brought skilled workmen from England, bought and built the first steam-powered textile equipment in Pittsburgh and, by example, proved that cotton textile mills could at the time be successful in Pittsburgh. By 1826, their 200 workers generated about $100,000 in revenue. That same year, they also provided spindles, dressing and warping machines, and looms to Mr. F. Rapp of Economy, allowing the religious community there to begin their textile production. Allen also involved himself in philanthropy, serving as President of the Erin Benevolent Association, a voluntary association formed for the relief of “distressed Irishmen.”

Within a decade, Allen became director and president of the Branch Bank of the U.S. of Pennsylvania, and president of the Pittsburgh Navigation Fire Insurance Co. He and Grant were also investors in 20 steamboats — 12 that transported the U.S. mail and eight that moved goods. By 1840, the Allens were involved in important aspects of the city’s commercial, economic, and cultural life. They had come a long way from their failed business in Ireland.

As the tray reminds us, at some point in the 1830s Allen paid back the debt he had incurred in the old country. In fact, a journal entry in The American Diaries of Richard Cobden provides an interesting aside on that event. While traveling in the United States in 1834, Cobden came to Pittsburgh and remarked about seeing “a cotton factory belonging to Allen who told us he had come to this continent from Ireland after failing in business and had returned thither to satisfy his creditors.” The sterling silver tray is the material evidence of that trip and Allen’s business transactions.

Michael Allen passed away on January 12, 1852. His paper trail and personal history ends there. But his story, of seeking and finding success in a new homeland, lives on at the History Center. It is a legacy preserved in sterling.