BOOK REVIEWS

Those interested in reviewing books should contact Thomas White at tewhite@hswp.org or (412) 454-6362. Publishers and authors can send review copies to the Editor, Western Pennsylvania History, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1212 Smallman Street, Pittsburgh, PA, 15222.

Community of the Cross:
Moravian Piety in Colonial Bethlehem
By Craig D. Atwood
(University Park: Penn State University Press, 2004)
Part of the Max Kade German-American Research Institute Series
7 illustrations, 240 pp., $37.50 hardcover
An insightful and thorough examination of the spirituality of Pennsylvania's most determined missionaries, the Moravians. Socially and personally subordinate to their community, the Moravians in Bethlehem developed an intense devotion to the crucified Jesus and the theology of Nicholas von Zinzendorf. Atwood, a professor and theologian at the Moravian theological Seminary, skillfully illuminates the inspirations and intricacies of belief that guided this early religious community.

Shedding Light on the Shadows of the Past:
A Wattsburg Area History Covering Amity Township, Venango Township, and Wattsburg Borough
By Tina L. Curtis
(self-published, 2000)
Illustrations, maps, appendices, bibliography, index, 734 pp., $45 hardcover
Available from the author, P.O. Box 88, Wattsburg, PA 16442.
Most local histories are a joint effort, a handful of residents chiming in on one topic each. Curtis tackled this daunting project alone and produced a thorough and encompassing local history of the Wattsburg region of Erie County. The well-indexed and appended volume covers a multitude of topics from early settlers to Y2K, placing it several notches above most community histories.

Devastation and Renewal: An Environmental History of Pittsburgh and Its Region
Edited by Joel A. Tarr
(Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003)
35 photos, 312 pp., $32 hardcover
A collection of nine essays by prominent scholars of urban environmental history that analyze the impact of industrialization, pollution, and environmental renewal programs on the Pittsburgh area. By examining the use and misuse of political and economic power, the essays provide useful insight into the successes and failures of the region's environmental policies.

To The Latest Posterity: Pennsylvania German Family Registers in the Fraktur Tradition
By Corinne and Russell Earnest
(University Park: Penn State University Press, 2004)
Photos, appendices, 153 pp., $45 hardcover
The first major study of the social, cultural, and religious significance of Pennsylvania-German family registers. The Earnests, both leading authorities on fraktur, examine how the registers represented separation from the Old World as families started new lives in Pennsylvania. The popularity of the registers spread as Germans resisted Americanization. The volume includes many images of registers that have never before been published.

Pennsylvania: A History of the Commonwealth
Edited by Randall M. Miller and William Pencak
(University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 2002)
Illustrations, photos, maps, 654 pp., $49.95 hardcover
Most states are defined not by discreet physical borders or a common culture, but by artificial political boundaries. For most of us, that's just fine, but for historians, that can be tricky. While patterns of human behavior and identity often attach to localities and even regions, they rarely heed state boundaries. We know what it means to be a South Sider and a Pittsburgher and even a Western Pennsylvanian. But a Pennsylvanian is harder to define.

At the same time, there's no denying the power of state history. At its most basic level, Pennsylvania's is defined by the people, places, and events that have appeared on its stage over the past 300 years, from the days of Penn Woods to the present. And while we may have fallen from our perch a bit since the turn of the last century - when we could rightfully claim to be the workshop of the nation and the second most populous state in the union - Pennsylvania still has its admirers. Just ask George Bush and John Kerry.

To Randall Miller and William Pencak, the two intrepid editors who oversaw this much anticipated update on Pennsylvania history, the Commonwealth's sprawling and often divergent past would have been daunting enough. It was made all the more challenging when one considers the kind of history that trends in historical scholarship required they publish.
The last standard text on Pennsylvania history, originally published by Penn State Press more than 30 years ago, anchored its narrative on the certitude of consensus history. Back then, a state history could still plausibly be fashioned around the deeds and sometimes misdeeds of its movers and shakers: colonial-era luminaries such as William Penn and Benjamin Franklin, 19th century political bosses such as Matthew Quay, captains of industry such as Andrew Carnegie and H.C. Frick, latter-day reformers such as Gifford Pinchot and Wild Bill Scranton. Pennsylvania was what Great White Men did, and for all of its one dimensionality, there was little doubt about what or who was important.

The advent of the new social history changed all that. Any synthetic history written today, if it has any scholarly aspirations at all, must include not just Great White Men but the silent majority; workers as well as industrialists; women as well as men; social movements as well as political parties; mine patches and mill towns as well as modern cities and colonial villages; and our recent past – in Pennsylvania’s case, less flattering moments such as deindustrialization and the near meltdown at Three Mile Island – as well as distant glories such as the Declaration of Independence and the Battle of Gettysburg. Perhaps most importantly, any new history of Pennsylvania must ask new questions – not just about the movers and shakers, but, as editor Randall Miller put it, the moved and the shaken. The trick comes in integrating the new approach with the old.

The solution, as conceived by the editors and publishers of this handsomely illustrated volume, was a two-prong approach. The first half of the book takes a traditional, narrative approach to Pennsylvania history and is divided into seven familiar, chronologically organized chapters. The second half of the book is devoted to “ways to Pennsylvania’s past,” a strategy that allows readers to look at Pennsylvania through source material and disciplines they may not have considered before.

It’s a smart strategy. The first half of the book satisfies the “text book” requirements of any book on Pennsylvania history. While not comprehensive, each chapter falls into recognizable historical chunks and is sufficiently broad enough to take in the highlight reels of Pennsylvania history. At the same time, each chapter – assigned to different authors with expertise in that period – offers readers some interesting side trips and perspectives offered by the new social history.

Take as an example the chapter covering Pennsylvania history during the second half of the 18th century. Readers travel through some familiar terrain – the French and Indian Wars, the Whiskey Rebellion – but also learn about class relations in colonial Philadelphia and the social tensions that very early on threatened to undermine Penn’s Holy Experiment. Walter Licht’s chapter on Pennsylvania during the second half of the 19th century brings a similar twist to a familiar theme; appropriately titled “Civil Wars,” it analyzes not just the more familiar battle for union, but also the Commonwealth’s internal civil wars, including the Railroad Strike of 1877 and the Homestead Strike of 1892.

It’s this subtext – of high ideals undone, of unexpected conflicts and tensions – that follows the volume all the way through, culminating most forcefully in the final chapter, an assessment of Pennsylvania’s recent history that reads like the fall of Rome. It’s not something readers might expect from a book published in cooperation with a state historical agency charged with promoting heritage tourism. But there it is, and the volume and its intellectual credentials are strengthened for it.

Perhaps the most invigorating element of the new Pennsylvania history is the second half. After readers plow through the narrative history, they’re treated to essays on such diverse perspectives as geography, architecture, oral history, photography, and literature. In most traditionally organized “text” books, these alternative ways of looking at history would have been reduced to an appendix or “for further reading.” In this book, they’re given equal time. What’s more, after browsing these chapters you get a real appreciation for Pennsylvania’s multiple textures.

Some of the most surprising and interesting material in the book surfaces in the margins. Side pieces on both well-known and lesser-known Pennsylvanians are liberally distributed throughout and there’s an absolute treasure trove of graphic material: everything from iconic Pennsylvania artifacts to political cartoons, rarely seen genre paintings, political broadsides, ephemera, and early maps. Best of all, each image is thoughtfully annotated. It’s a refreshing change from most academic histories, where “illustrative material” is often confined to a few visual cliches sandwiched into the middle of the book. It also affords readers with another way through Pennsylvania’s past. Even if you just flip through the marginalia and the pictures, you’ll catch the drift.
For all its strengths, the book is not flawless. Close readers, particularly in this part of the state, may take exception to evidence of the southeastern Pennsylvania bias that has dogged broad, statewide history projects for as long as state history has been around. It might be excusable during the early chapters. Pittsburgh was merely a glint in the eye when Philadelphia was the largest, most-important city in the American colonies. But by the 20th century, one would have thought that the formation of the United Steelworkers – admittedly one of the largest and most powerful unions in the country – would warrant more than the one sentence it receives. But perhaps in a state wrought with serious cultural riptides, regional balance is an admirable but probably unattainable goal. We may not have much in common as a state, but we have a common past, and now, a good book to tell it.

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The Forgotten Charge: The 123rd Pennsylvania at Marye's Heights, Fredericksburg, Virginia
by Scott B. Lang
(Shippensburg: White Maine Books, 2002)
Illustrations, 179 pp., $12.95 softcover

The Forgotten Charge is an in-depth look at the "suicidal" attack of seven Union divisions against several thousand entrenched Confederates at Fredericksburg in December 1862. It is also a well-written and informative regimental history. The 123rd Pennsylvania regiment was the state's only infantry regiment consisting entirely of Allegheny County recruits. The author, a practicing attorney and great-great grandson of a soldier in the 123rd infantry, integrates segments of diaries and letters into the text, providing the eyewitness perspective and documentation that is often elusive in late-19th century regimental histories.

Civil War regiments usually consisted of 10 companies, recruited from several different counties and numbering about 1,000 men. Although several histories exist of regiments recruited in Western Pennsylvania, histories of nine-month regiments are rare. Lang's volume is a welcome addition to the literature and will prove useful to anyone interested in troops recruited in Pittsburgh and Allegheny City (now Pittsburgh's North Side). The men who eventually enlisted in the 123rd came from all occupations and professions, from doctors to blacksmiths to the mayor of Allegheny City who commanded Company H. The regiment was a cross section of society as existed in the 1860s.

In mid-1862 in the wake of the monumental battle at Shiloh, Tennessee, and the June-July Virginia Peninsula Campaign, recruiting had slowed significantly in the north. Pennsylvania recruiters were faced with the problem of finding volunteers for three years service during Lincoln's July 2, 1862, call for 300,000 men. The administration reluctantly permitted the recruitment of nine-month regiments.

Recruitment for the 123rd, although initially slow, received a boost from an unlikely source: Reverend John Barr Clark of the 2nd United Presbyterian Church, Allegheny City. Clark's "fiery" influence raised the number of recruits from 159 to 594 men in one week. Clark was eventually appointed a colonel in the regiment. In just five months, the former civilians from Allegheny County would encounter their first taste of combat in one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War. The war had entered its 20th month (December 1862) when more than 100,000 Union soldiers under General Ambrose Burnside confronted some 80,000 dug-in Confederates under generals Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and James Longstreet on the heights overlooking Fredericksburg, Virginia. Although the battle would rage along a front nearly eight miles long, the greatest carnage occurred on Marye's Heights in front of a one-half mile long sunken road and adjacent wall bristling with nearly 3,000 Confederate muskets from several North Carolina and Georgia regiments. The Union divisions assaulting this position had to advance over 1,000 yards of open field with little or no cover.

Lang argues, and rightly so, that the charge against Marye's Heights in the left center of the...
Confederate line has received limited attention from Civil War historians compared to Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. Its feature in the recent movie, Gods and Generals, is the first exposure many people had of the charge at Fredericksburg.

In The Forgotten Charge, we view the attack from the perspective of the 123rd regiment and three other regiments in the 2nd Brigade: the 155th, 131st, and 133rd Pennsylvania infantry. The 155th Pennsylvania, a three-year regiment consisting of several Allegheny County companies, assembled in July-August 1862 along with the 123rd at Camp Howe in the Oakland district of Pittsburgh. The two local units formed a "bond" that only intensive combat can produce. At Fredericksburg, the second brigade alone lost over 500 men in killed, wounded, and missing, 135 of these in the 123rd. In the appendixes, the author details losses in every division (total of 7,348) in the Union Army compared to the 6,467 suffered by the Confederates during Pickett's Charge.

Of course, Gettysburg became a magnet for spectators only a few days after the Union victory. The defeat of Pickett's men also culminated in a monumental Confederate defeat at the Battle of Gettysburg, contrasted to Fredericksburg, where the Union army suffered a humiliating defeat.

The Forgotten Charge continues to follow the regiment to its final battle at Chancellorsville, Va., on May 2-4 1863, only three days before their term of enlistment ended. Fortunately the 123rd suffered no deaths during the battle; initially positioned at the extreme left of the Union line, they were spared from General Stonewall Jackson's monumental flank attack against the right of the Federal line.

The 123rd regiment returned to a heartfelt welcome on the West Commons of Allegheny City on May 16, 1863. In only nine months of combat, the regiment suffered 60 deaths from combat and disease and 125 wounded and missing. Colonel Clark, while still a minister, would in July 1864 spend three more months in the field when he assumed command of the 100-day 193rd regiment also raised in Allegheny County. Lang has packed a liberal amount of interesting anecdotes into the text and endnotes, making this volume very informative for anyone interested in Civil War-era Pittsburgh.