

UP FRONT



ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

George Greer House New Castle, Pa.

Today's industrial managers and owners live tucked away in tree-lined suburbs far from the source of their income, but late 19th- and early 20th-century company owners proudly displayed their success by building imposing homes, often on hilltops overlooking the factories and railways below. The George Mesta house in West Homestead overlooks his former Mesta Machine Works. Charles Schwab's house perches on a hillside above the Edgar Thomson Works in Braddock. Stephen Moltrup, founder of the Standard Gauge Steel Company and later the Moltrup Steel Products Company, built his house in Beaver Falls above the factory.¹

In New Castle, Lawrence County, tin manufacturer George Greer likewise built his home overlooking the city and its tin mills. Greer was born in Neshannock Township, north of New Castle, in 1844.² The family farm remains close to the King's Chapel United Methodist Church where the family worshipped.³ But George didn't confine himself to being a successful farmer. He began importing Shorthorn Durham cattle in 1867 and throughout his life retained his prize cattle even as he became a tin mill owner. George's only brother, Charles, opened a music store in New Castle, and in the early 1890s the brothers undertook joint ventures in the city.

Dining Room doorway detail of leaded glass.



Former George Greer house, 408 North Jefferson Street, New Castle, Lawrence County, now home of the Lawrence County Historical Society.

All photos by Lu Donnelly.



George and Charles opened the New Castle Steel and Tin Plate Company in 1893. It grew from four hot mills to 20 and became so successful it was known locally as “Greer’s Tin Mill.”⁴ George took over the Shenango Valley Steel Company’s tin mill during its construction in New Castle in 1899. This facility ultimately had 30 mills. By the turn of the century, New Castle’s 50 tin mills employed 3,500 men and the city’s population hit 40,000. In 1908, United States Steel purchased both companies and George retired to pursue his banking and manufacturing investments, ranging from automobiles and cattle to cement.

In 1904, George commissioned local architect Frank Harold Foulk⁵ to design his home at the northeast corner of North Jefferson and East Lincoln streets. The lot was initially part of his wife’s family farm. Foulk created a large Colonial Revival house, probably inspired by McKim, Mead & White’s 1886 Newport “cottage” for industrialist Henry Augustus Coit Taylor. The Greer house has beautiful leaded glass throughout, befitting Greer’s board membership of the nationally known H.C. Fry Glass company in Rochester, Beaver County. The outstanding glass is further enhanced by an unattributed figure

window, on the stair landing, of King David playing his lyre. This stained glass window has the layered glass and coloration of the Tiffany Studio, but has not yet been attributed.


Although built for a childless married couple, the house has generous proportions but is not outrageously elaborate. The living room features a piano for George, who was active in the musical aspects of the First Methodist Church of New Castle.⁶ The quite large third floor is open across the front to allow for parties and musicales. All the rooms retain their original wood trim, window seats, and fireplace surrounds.

UP FRONT

Stairway, railing, and newel post of Greer house.



George and Alice were married 61 years, and although they had no children of their own, they adopted their niece, Charles' daughter Amanda "Pansy" Greer, so she could inherit their estate. (Charles Greer's house was next door, so Pansy never had to travel far.) She was married in her Uncle George's house. In a wedding photo, the bride is seated between her two "fathers" while the groom stands with other family members behind them. Pansy inherited the house in 1926 when both her aunt and uncle coincidentally died on the same day, Alice of a lingering illness in New Castle, and George after surgery in Baltimore. Pansy, her husband Robert Love, and their four children lived in the house until 1965, when the contents were sold at auction. Only one piece of original Greer family furniture remains in the house, a sideboard in the dining room.

Today George and Alice Greer's house is owned by the Lawrence County Historical Society. Ironically, it was built for the local tin mill master, but donated to the city of New Castle by a former tin mill worker, Joseph Clavelli, in 1982. 

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania* (University of Virginia Press, 2010) a book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

Stained glass window on stair landing of Greer house.



¹ Mesta house built c.1890, no known architect, at 540 Doyle Avenue; Schwab house built 1889, designed by Frederick J. Osterling, 541 Jones Avenue; Moltrup house built 1907-1911, designed by Angus S. Wade at 914 Eighth Avenue; George Greer's house built 1904-1905, designed by Frank H. Foulk, at 408 North Jefferson Street.

² George's wife, Alice White, was born the same year as George within blocks of the site of their future home on what was then the White family farm.

³ The older church has been replaced, but the congregation remains.

⁴ The New Castle Steel and Tin Plate Company was re-named the American Tin Plate Company in 1898.

⁵ Architects Frank Harold Foulk (1874-1929) and his father Sidney Winfield Foulk (1848-1932) practiced together in New Castle from 1900 to 1907. S. W. Foulk ultimately moved to California, but he left many innovative designs in New Castle and several eastern states. S. W. designed the stone Raney house (1891) across the street from the Greer house. In 1928 the Foulks added an "e" to their last name to connect with their European relatives, but all architectural ads and drawings are labeled "Foulk" without the "e." The architect of brother Charles' house (414 N. Jefferson Street) is not known.

⁶ George Greer donated a Moeller organ to the Scottish Rite Cathedral of the Free Mason's Lodge #433 in 1926, the year of his death.

HCAP

History Center Affiliate Program

Lawrence County Historical Society

- Chartered in 1938, the Lawrence County Historical Society is housed in the Joseph A. Clavalli History Center in the 19-room Greer mansion, built in New Castle, Pa., in 1904.
- The LCHS active outreach program engages all ages, from school students to adults, with programs such as the Lawrence County Trivia competition and a monthly lecture series.
- The Joseph A. Clavalli History Center houses rotating displays including reproduction photographs, narratives, oral histories, and artifacts. Current exhibits include: *A Portrait of An American City: 200 Years of New Castle History*; *It's About You: 150 Years of Life in Lawrence County*; and *Shenango China*.
- The Clavalli History Center offers guided museum tours, a neighborhood walking tour, and a library research facility.
- Contact the Lawrence County Historical Society at info@lawrencechs.com or (724) 658-4022.

The History Center Affiliate Program, HCAP, is a membership-based network that allows local and regional historical societies and museums access to museum professionals and best practice standards through the Senator John Heinz History Center.

To find out more about HCAP or to apply for membership for your organization, please contact Natalie DeRiso, Community Programs Manager, at nnderiso@heinzhistorycenter.org or (412) 454-6373.