

# PRESERVING BY PUBLISHING

By Matt Strauss, Chief Archivist

Members of the 1938 Historical Tour approach Blennerhasset Island in West Virginia by boat. The magazine included accounts of tours organized by the Historical Society.

HHC Detre L&A, IA.B004.F15.101.

From Braddock's Campaign to the Pittsburgh origins of the Mr. Yuk sticker, *Western Pennsylvania History* has covered an impressive array of subjects in its 100-year run. Staff at the Detre Library & Archives have long recognized the magazine to be an invaluable resource for researching local topics. In addition to helping us understand our region, *Western Pennsylvania History* also illuminates the Heinz History Center and its predecessor organization, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. Long before the advent of online catalogs, digitization, and social media, the Historical Society used the magazine to promote its collections and activities to the public. In doing so, the pages of *Western Pennsylvania History* offer a record of the Heinz History Center's past.

The publication's launch in the beginning of 1918 created a splash with the local media. "Magazine Issued by Historical Society" announced a front-page headline in the January 20th edition of the *Gazette Times*. "It will be the mission of this magazine," according to the article, "to preserve documents and other authentic information relating to Pittsburgh." Initially published as *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, the journal followed a previous, unsuccessful attempt to start a magazine in 1902.

The goals of the new journal were further outlined in its inaugural issue. "It is hoped that the magazine will be a valuable instrument in the preservation, discussion, and dissemination of matters of local history, biography, and belles lettres. It is intended whenever possible to publish original letters, journals, records, and other memoranda."

The idea that the magazine would be acting to "preserve documents" by publishing them may sound strange to modern ears. Today, the image of preserving archival records might suggest archivists placing papers in acid-free boxes and shelving them in an environmentally controlled room. However, at the time, copying and publishing letters,



diaries, and other documents was thought to be an effective safeguard against fire, theft, and accidents. Even materials held within archival repositories were not necessarily immune to these threats—Pittsburgh's Great Fire of 1845 destroyed the collections of one of the forerunners to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. Among the collection items published verbatim was a letter written by Captain William A.F. Stockton from April 15, 1865, in which he reflects on his experience in the Battle of Appomattox Court House and mentions the disturbing rumor circulating around camp concerning the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

Along with printing archival documents, the Historical Society used the magazine to announce donations of items to its collection. This served a dual purpose: to inform readers about the growing resources of the Historical Society and to publicly acknowledge the donors of these materials, thereby encouraging others to donate their family treasures. (The History Center continues to recognize donors

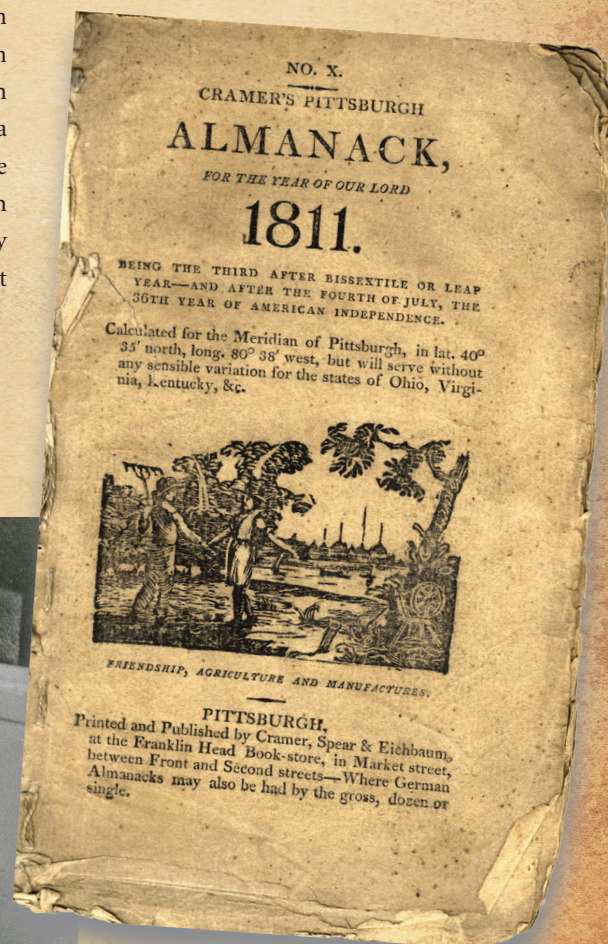
through its newsletter, catalog records, and exhibit labels.) An unexpected benefit of this feature is that it has provided current History Center archivists, curators, and registrars with valuable information about the provenance of items donated prior to the 1930s, before internal records of donations were regularly kept.

The magazine also provided a vehicle for the Historical Society to share information about its activities and to articulate its collecting goals. In a 1919 article, Burd S. Patterson, the society's secretary, described efforts to obtain state funding to build a much-needed addition to the Historical Society's original building on Bigelow Boulevard in Oakland. Published a few months after the end of World War I, the article also shed light on the ways in which the Historical Society had been affected by the global conflict. The Red Cross had set

up shop in the Historical Society, using the basement and first floor to prepare supplies for soldiers (the organization returned to the premises during World War II). The war also had an impact on collecting priorities, an early example of the Historical Society's recognition of the importance in documenting events unfolding in real time: "The society has been gathering relics and data of the World War and will assist in the compilation of

**Cramer's Pittsburgh Almanack printed  
and published in Pittsburgh, 1811.**

HHC Detre L&A, F148.8 C889.



Franklin Holbrook, Historical Society Director from 1935 until 1955, published the first definitive history of the Historical Society in the March 1938 issue.

HHC Detre L&A, IA.B001.P24.002







The Historical Society organized tours along the area's rivers in the 1960s and 1970s, including this 1962 boat tour.

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the history of the conflict particularly the part taken by the soldiers and people of Western Pennsylvania.”

Hired as director in 1931, Solon J. Buck brought changes to the magazine by updating its design, adding book reviews, and introducing a “Notes” column to provide readers with the latest news about the Historical Society. Buck had recently led a reorganization of the Minnesota Historical Society, expanding and modernizing its facilities, integrating the state archives into its collection, and launching a quarterly historical publication. His main concern as director was leading the Western Pennsylvania Survey, a joint initiative between the Historical Society and the University of Pittsburgh, funded by the Buhl Foundation.

In an article in the February 1932 issue of the magazine, Buck outlined the goals of the program, the primary of which was to “increase the existing knowledge of the region, not only by its own research work but also by discovering, collecting, and making available to others the materials from which contributions to historical knowledge may be made.”


To ensure scholars would have access to historical resources truly reflective of society, Buck advocated for expanding the Historical Society’s collecting beyond the traditional areas of politics and war. He considered local business and the city’s growing Eastern European immigrant population two subjects that should be more fully documented. Of Pittsburgh’s newly arriving immigrants, Buck wrote that they:

will inevitably have a large share in the future history of the region, and the society that will ultimately emerge here will have its roots in southern and southeastern Europe as well as in the American colonies and northern Europe. It is essential, therefore, that the history of this immigration and of these immigrant peoples in the region be studied.

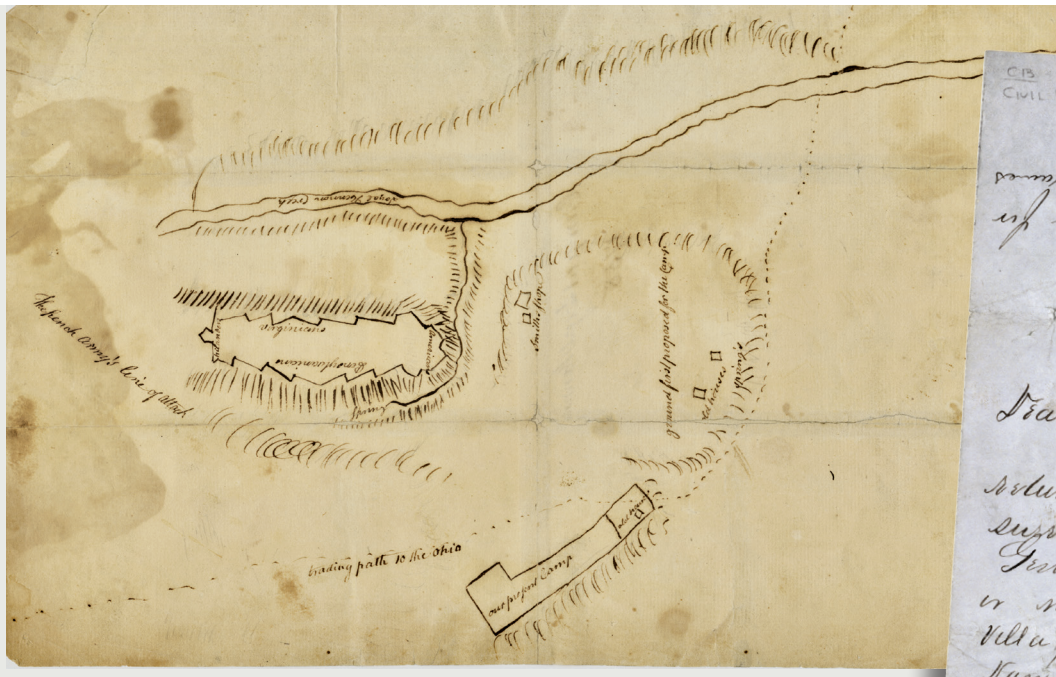
Though committees were established to build collections of Polish, Hungarian, and Czech materials, sustained attention to documenting Western Pennsylvania ethnic groups would not begin until the 1980s. Subsequent issues provided regular updates on the progress of the Survey, which would

result in the publication of a series of popular regional history books and the Historical Society’s acquisition of archival collections from notable Pittsburghers including the Denny, Mellon, and Thaw families.

More recently, the 1996 Spring/Summer issue devoted its pages to the launching of the Heinz History Center in the renovated Chautauqua Ice Company building in the Strip District. Articles in this issue chronicled the expansion of the organization’s mission and the democratization of its collecting scope, activities which laid the groundwork for the establishment of the History Center.

*Western Pennsylvania History* continues to be a vital source of information for local history as well as news about the Heinz History Center’s collections, exhibits, and initiatives. Years from now, the magazine will continue to be a valuable tool for those wanting to learn more about the History Center’s past. 





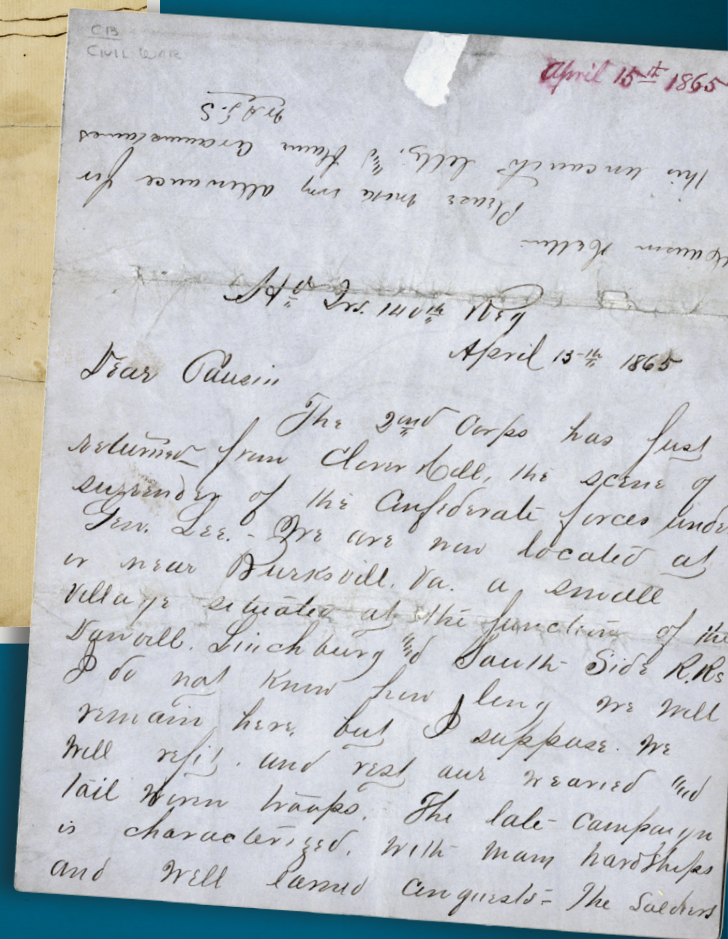
▲ Drawn map depicting the Battle of Fort Ligonier (also known as the Battle of Loyalhanna), October 12, 1758.  
HHC Detre L&A, MFF 2263.



▲ Elizabeth Mellon Sellers, granddaughter of Thomas Mellon, founder of Mellon Bank, worked as an editorial assistant for the Historical Society during the 1930s. In addition to publishing duties, she also spent time inventorying newly acquired archival collections.  
HHC Detre L&A, IA.B004.F10.10.

➤ Solon J. Buck (left) and Harold A. Phelps in the offices of the Western Pennsylvania Survey, 1931.

HHC Detre L&A, IA.B001.F24.101.



▲ Civil War letter written by Captain William A. F. Stockton, 140th Regiment, on April 15, 1865. This was part of a donation made to the Historical Society by Alice B. Lothrop on April 3, 1917.  
HHC Detre L&A, MFF 2073.

