

FROM RELICS TO ARTIFACTS

By Emily Ruby, Curator

The first issue of *Western Pennsylvania History*, published in 1918, began the tradition of listing recent artifact donations to the Historical Society. This initial list of “relics” and archives consisted primarily of military materials and items that documented early and important settlers in the region. Some of the donors have familiar names such as McKee, Lothrop, and Wilkins, all influential local families whose ancestors were involved in early industry and civic development. The listing both acknowledged donor’s generosity and encouraged others to consider offering their treasured items to the collection.

Because of these lists, back issues of the magazine now provide curators, archivists, and registrars with a valuable research tool as we inventory and process our vast collection. Most staff did not have professional museum training until the 1980s, so the registration and cataloging of museum objects in the past often failed to link donors and provenance with the artifact. Professional staff hired in the 1970s

and ’80s began to reconstruct almost a century of collecting, bringing modern management skills to the collection. Back issues of the magazine could be mined for information, allowing curators to link objects to their original owners and better understand and interpret the relevance of those artifacts.

This list also reinforces our understanding about the early history of the Historical Society and how staff built the collection. Newspaper accounts of the establishment of the organization in 1879 show that most donors and supporters belonged to prominent families. In fact, most members favored a requirement that new members had lived in the region for at least 35 to 50 years. They also suggested that the Society be called The Old Residenter’s Association, further signifying the exclusivity of the organization. The personal interests of those members influenced the collection. It came to represent the history and stories that members valued—with strengths



▲ Swin Cash Olympic jersey, 2004. **Curators and archivists have built the sports collection largely in the past 15 years. Photographs of the artifact collection, which is focused on game-used equipment, have encouraged museum visitation by people who read the magazine online. McKeesport native Swin Cash played forward on the Olympic gold medal winning U.S.A. women’s basketball team in 2004.**

HHC Collections, gift of Robert Gallagher, 2012.105.2. Photo by Liz Simpson.




▲ Joseph Tatko tailor shop sign, c. 1950. **Carrying on the tradition of former Director Solon J. Buck, who expanded the vision for the collection in the 1930s, the History Center continues to acquire items that document the different people and ethnic groups, local business, and organizations that shape our region. This business sign hung outside the Overbrook home of Slovak immigrant and tailor, Joseph S. Tatko. Although born in New Brighton, Tatko grew up and learned the tailoring trade in his mother’s native Czechoslovakia, before returning to the region in 1936.**

HHC Collections, gift of Kathryn Tatko Richards in honor of Joseph S. & Xenia G. Tatko, 2006.87.1. Photo by Liz Simpson.

in military history, civic leaders, notable Pittsburghers, and the decorative and fine arts.

Today we continue to acknowledge donors to the collections by listing their contributions in the History Center newsletter. *Western Pennsylvania History* magazine now serves as a way to highlight the collections in more detail by focusing on a specific collection or recent donation in an in-depth article. The artifacts highlighted in the current magazine show the change in emphasis of the collection in the last 100 years of recorded donations. As the building and mission of the Historical Society changed and expanded into the current History Center, we have built new collections, more representative of the full history of the region. Ethnic and industrial collecting initiatives as well as new exhibits and museums, such as Meadowcroft and the Sports Museum, have broadened the base of collecting efforts.

From those early settlers' "relics" to items that document local businesses, social and cultural events, foodways, and ethnic traditions, and so much more, the History Center continues to collect and preserve the stories of Western Pennsylvania life, not just for the "old residenters" but for all people who call this region home and those beyond. The magazine remains a valuable tool to interpret and share the stories of our collections and to encourage new donors to entrust us with their treasures. 



34-star United States flag, 1864. Curators and collections staff were able to track down information about this flag for the *Stars and Stripes* exhibition using the old magazine donor lists. The flag had a number and the name of James Park written on it, but no other information. Using the magazine, they found that in 1954 Eleanor P. Kelly donated the flag gifted to her grandfather James Park, Jr., in appreciation of his work for the Pittsburgh Sanitary Fair.

HHC Collections, gift of Eleanor P. Kelly, 72.132.



ABOVE AND LEFT: Cradle and skates donated by Misses Mary and Louise Dippold, 1750. This cradle is the first donation listed in the original issue of *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*. The Dippold sisters, members of the D.A.R., and owners of an estate in Sewickley, were descendants of local river boat captains. The early records date the cradle and skates to the late 1700s, the property of early settlers who lived in Sweetwater (present day Sewickley). [See "D.A.R. Will Visit Old Dippold Mansion," *Pittsburgh Press*, September 7, 1933.]

HHC Collections, gift of Mary and Louise Dippold, 72.65, A9. Photos by Liz Simpson.