

Sewickley Valley Historical Society Signals

XXXIX, Number 6

May 2012

Wednesday, May 16, at 7:30 p.m.

Old Sewickley Post Office

The Efforts to Preserve Pittsburgh's Civic Arena

A Presentation by Scott Leib, Preservation Pittsburgh

Preservation Pittsburgh, a non-profit advocacy group whose history began with the razing of the Syria Mosque in 1991, is dedicated to preserving our region's historic, architectural, cultural, and environmental heritage. Its purpose is to assist individuals and organizations in preserving the integrity of the architecture and physical surroundings they value. Members, who include both professional preservationists and interested citizens, are united by their concern that the future of Pittsburgh's irreplaceable architectural and landscape treasures is in jeopardy.

The group's primary goal is to promote the importance of preservation issues in the deliberations and decisions of public officials, private groups, developers and the general public.

It advocates for the protection of Pittsburgh's historic architecture, culture and landscape by identifying resources and collaborative opportunities for preservation in our region's neighborhoods and with partner organizations; developing innovative ideas and incentives for stewardship of our region's unique sense of place and heritage; and advancing sound public planning and development policies that recognize preservation as an integral part of healthy communities.

Preservation Pittsburgh is a proponent of sustainable development, with preservation as a basic tenet. It will consider itself successful when Pittsburgh communities embrace their unique character and sustain their future through careful stewardship of their historic resources.

Scott Leib is the immediate past president of Preservation Pittsburgh. As President, he was very much in favor of the adaptive re-use of the Civic Arena. He is also the Treasurer of the JCC of Greater Pittsburgh and the Treasurer of the CRSI Education and Research Foundation.

Scott was born in McKeesport and raised in White Oak. He now lives in Squirrel Hill with his wife, Cindy, and two children. He is

a graduate of Serra High School in McKeesport and earned a BA in Business Administration from Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, PA.

For his day job, Scott is President/CEO of Applied Systems Associates, Inc. (aSa). Founded in 1969, aSa is a family owned full-service software company that provides integrated computer systems and specialty software for the reinforcing steel (rebar) industry.



One of Scott's favorite buildings was the Civic Arena, which is, of course, now gone. Why are we still talking about it? Is this what Pittsburgh calls progress? What can this iconic building, its construction and its demise teach us?

Scott questions the common view that "tearing it down" is progress. His goal is to help people understand that preservation is a resource, not a roadblock, for economic development. While the general perception of preservation is that it is too focused on the past, Scott believes that it is very future oriented, in that it respects our heritage and uses the past in creative new ways to serve the next generation.

This program will be preceded by a short Annual Meeting, the election of officers and directors for 2012-2013 and the presentation of the SVHS Preservation Award.

The mission of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society
is to promote interest in and to record, collect, preserve, and document the history of the Sewickley Valley.

The Origin of the Name "Sewickley"

Agnes L. Ellis's local history, *Lights and Shadows of Sewickley Life; or, Memories of Sweet Valley*, was first published in 1891 and greatly expanded in 1893. Her explanation for the origin of the Sewickley name has been cited by local historians ever since. On page 36 of the second edition she states:

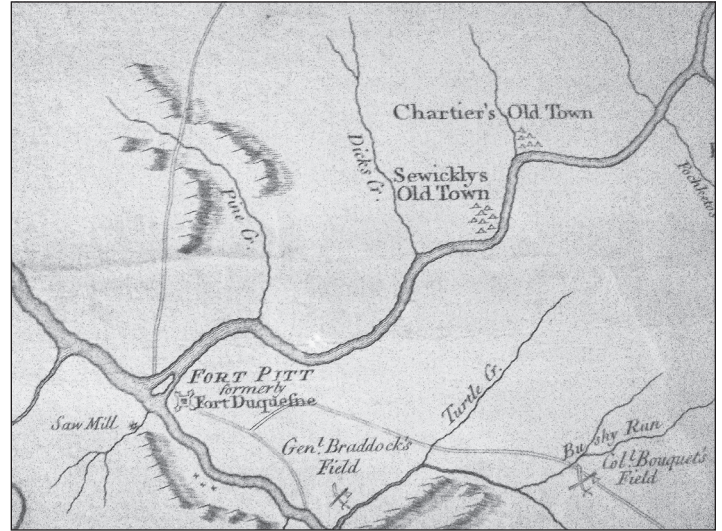
I remember seeing a letter, that had travelled some hundreds of miles, directed to "Sweet Valley or Switleyville." It came all right with its queer directions, and "Sweet Valley" has always seemed since then to tell the story of the place.....

On page 39 of the same edition she expands on this:

The Indians called the water Seweckly that ran from the maple trees, meaning sweet water, and for a time the trees were called by the old residents "Seweckly trees." Gradually the streams were called Seweckly, and we now know them as Big Sewickley and Little Sewickley Creeks. The name "Sewickleyville" was decided on in the autumn of 1840. Previously, "Contention," "Fifetown," and "Bowling Green" were among the names by which it was called.

Although Ellis's theories are picturesque, the village was probably named for a sub-tribe of the Shawnee Indians, the Asswikales. At least six other locations and streams in Western Pennsylvania had previously been named for these Native Americans, some of them well over a hundred years before the name "Sewickleyville" was adopted in 1840. The *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico* (Frederick Webb Hodges, editor, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 30, 1910, vol. 2, p. 516) provides the most detailed information regarding the Asswikales tribe:

Sewickley. A former village of the Shawnee, called by the early Indian traders Asswikales (see *Hathawekela*), later shortened to Swickleys, situated on the N. side of the Allegheny r., about 12 m. above Pittsburg, near the site of Springdale, Allegheny co., Pa. In the notes given in the table of distances by James Le Tort before the Pennsylvania Council (1731), he speaks of 50 families of these Asswikales "lately from Carolina to Potowmack, & from thence thither; making 100 men; Aqueloma, their Chief." ... These Shawnee, a short time before, had settled on the w. branches of the Susquehanna, whence they moved to the Conemaugh, then down the Kiskiminetas to the Allegheny.... A number of these Shawnee were located along the streams in Westmoreland co., hence the name for Sewickley cr., Sewickley settlement, etc. The town on the Allegheny is noted on Bonnacamp's map of 1749 as "Ancien Village des Chaouanons", through which place Celeron de Bienville passed in that year.... **Sewickly's old T.**—Evans map, 1755. **Sewicklys Old Town.**—Scully map, 1770; Pownall map, 1776. **Village des Chaouanons.**—Bonnecamp map, 1749.



A detail from the Scull map of 1770, which shows Sewicklys Old Town.

The "Hathawekela" reference appears in vol. 1, p. 536, of the same handbook:

Hathawekela. A principal division of the Shawnee, the name of which is of uncertain etymology. They emigrated from the S. about 1697, together with other Shawnee bands, and settled with them, partly on Susquehanna and partly on Allegheny r., Pa., where they are mentioned in 1731. Sewickley, Pa., probably takes its name from them....

A History of the Presbyterian Church of Sewickley, Pennsylvania, prepared by a Committee of the Congregation in 1914, contains a chapter by Franklin Taylor Nevin entitled "Sewickley: A Historical Sketch." On page 80, he states:

Charles A. Hanna, in his exhaustive study of the early history of this region, *The Wilderness Trail* (published in 1911), says (vol. i, page 298): "The name of the Asswikales Indians who came from South Carolina has been preserved to the present day under the form of Sewickley, a name now applied to two creeks, forty miles apart, one on the east and the other on the west side of Pittsburg." Elsewhere, he gives the following variants of the tribal name, some of which result from differences in the native dialects: Assekales, Asswekales, Shaweygilas, and Shaweygiras. The oldest form, he says, appears to have been Sawakola or Sawolki, derived from [the] two Indian words *sawi*, raccoon, and *ukli*, town.

Nevin goes on to say:

Be the derivation of the name as it may, the earliest mention of Sewickley as the name of a locality seems to have been in the form "Sewichly Old Town," in a grant from the Six Nations to George Croghan, dated 1749....

In an interesting letter, now in the possession of Mr. Gilbert A. Hays, which is dated at Pittsburg, 31st

December 1767, and written by one John Campbell, an Indian trader, reference is made for the first time, so far as is now known, to the Sewickley lying on the north bank of the Ohio River. He says: "Four Men that I sent off in a Canoe and who had gone but a short Distance below the Point had nearly been overset, and with great Difficulty returned without daring to attempt the Recovery of the Batteau. She was seen passing the Sewicly Bottom (a Place about 12 or 14 miles off,) that Night and was sound."

The locality is named again, as early as the year 1779, when the Delaware Indians, in gratitude for his treatment of them, offered to Colonel George Morgan, the first Indian agent at Fort Pitt, as a free gift, a strip of land extending roughly from what is now Haysville to Legionville and back to the tops of the highest hills, including the Sewickley Bottom, a tract possibly six miles long by three wide. This gift Colonel Morgan declined to accept in return for "merely doing his duty," as he expressed it.

Another early reference to the immediate area appeared twenty years before the name "Sewickleyville" was adopted. The Blaine family had built a substantial home along Big Sewickley Creek, above the Ohio River. Gail Hamilton [Dodge] writes in her 1895 *Biography of James G. Blaine*:

Here lived and prospered James Blaine and here his son Ephraim Lyon [Blaine] brought his bride. A letter of 1820 from one of his friends says playfully, if somewhat incoherently, "The Duke of Sewickley, Late Middlesex, it is said, will take a wife from the backwoods, and has selected Maria Gillespie as the object."

James G[illespie] Blaine, son of Ephraim and Maria, was to become one of the most prominent politicians in America, serving as Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives from 1869-75, as Secretary of State in 1881 and 1889-92, and as the Republican candidate for the Presidency in 1884.

From the best documented evidence, one must conclude that the name Sewickley was derived from an Indian word for a Native American tribe or the native raccoon. After 100 years, it may seem misguided to reject Agnes Ellis's reference to Sewickley as "Sweetwater." Today, however, many consider another of the early proposed names for the town — "Contention" — most appropriate of all.

Agnes Ellis's Lights and Shadows of Sewickley Life and Franklin T. Nevin's The Village of Sewickley (which also contains the historical sketch found in the church history) are available in \$20.00 reprint editions from the Historical Society. See our web site, www.sewickleyhistory.org, email us at sewickleyhistory@verizon.net, or call 412-741-5315 for details.

Gift of Hugh Davis Portrait

The Historical Society recently received an oil portrait by J. W. Vale of Hugh Davis (1777-1862) from the Murdock children, Anne, Charles and Mark, to honor their late parents, Bill and Anne Murdock. Apparently a number of copies were made of an original portrait, so that each of several families descended from Hugh Davis could have his image.

Hugh Davis married Elizabeth Henderson (1780-1852) in 1805, and they had five children, John, William, Hannah, Robert and Henderson. Davis was an important citizen in Allegheny City, moving there in 1815. He owned the town's first grocery store and served as Borough treasurer and Burgess; he built the community's first brick house on Stockton Ave. facing South Commons; he was U. S. Marshall for the Western District of Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh) for a time, beginning in 1826. So extensive were his dealings in real estate that he was known affectionately (or not) as "Corner" Davis.

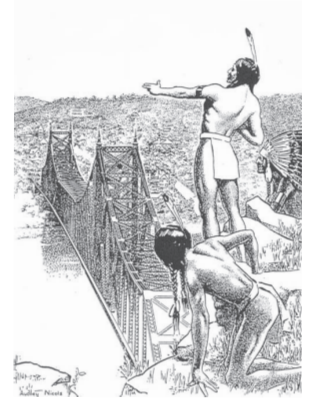
A son of Hugh Davis, Robert Hudman Davis (1814-1881), married his first cousin, Eliza Cochran (1815-1899), in 1837 and raised three daughters and a son. He was a lumber merchant and, like his father, invested in real estate. In 1855, these Davises purchased a 43-acre farm in the Sewickley Valley from the estate of Robert Peebles for \$231 an acre. In time, they accumulated property from Orchard St. in Glen Osborne to Straight St. in Sewickley. Their house, which stands at the end of Davis Lane, dates to 1824 and is the oldest surviving house in Glen Osborne. It was purportedly a stop on the underground railroad during their occupation. It became home to the Holdship family after they married into the Davis family, and Caroline F. (Wag) Holdship still resides there. Other descendants in the area included Eleanor (Sweetie) George Nevin, the mother of Hugh Nevin, Jr., and Susan Cockrell; Elizabeth George Baker; the late Mrs. B. F. Jones III, nee Katharine (Betty) White Holdship; Jane Dill Wilson, who became Mrs. William Walker of "Muottas"; Rosamund Fitch Richardson; and Anne McKnight Murdock.



Sewickley Valley Historical Society
200 Broad Street
Sewickley, PA 15143

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May 2012



Report of the Nominating Committee

The Sewickley Valley Historical Society Nominating Committee
(Joe Zemba, Chair; Gloria Berry; Milana Bizic; Maleet Gordon)

proposes the following slate of officers and directors for election to a two-year term at the SVHS Annual Meeting, May 16,

Secretary: Leslie Traugott

Treasurer: Nominations from the floor will be accepted

Directors: Charlotte Bober, James Darby, Peter Floyd, Betty Ann Miller, Marian Miller, Ross Rogers

Friends, Sponsors, Patrons, Benefactors

*Thanks to the following, who have generously supported the Sewickley Valley Historical Society
with gifts in addition to membership dues:*

Mr. & Mrs. Philip Jones

Donations

Mrs. Fred Irwin Sharp, in memory of Eva Means

Cinnamon Anne Rinzler & Richard Curry Rinzler, in memory of Leslie G. Massey

In Memoriam

Leslie G. Massey