

Sewickley Valley Historical Society *Signals*

XLVI, Number 5

March 2019

Thursday, March 14, 2019

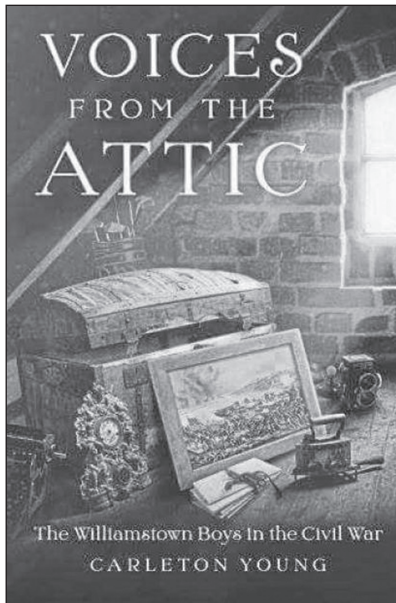
7:30 p.m., at the Old Sewickley Post Office

Voices from the Attic:

The Williamstown Boys in the Civil War

A PowerPoint Presentation by Carleton Young

Imagine clearing out your family attic and discovering hundreds of letters written during the Civil War. Faced with that situation, Carleton Young used various resources to discover how two Vermont soldiers fit into his family heritage. *Voices from the Attic* is the story of two brothers who fought in the Peninsula Campaign, South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness and Cedar Creek. Their surprisingly detailed and insightful letters offer a valuable source of information as seen through the eyes of soldiers as they fought in the Civil War.



Carleton Young has undergraduate degrees in Economics and English from Westminster College and Point Park University, an MA from Ohio University and a PhD in the history of education from the University of Pittsburgh. For 37 years he taught a very popular AP history class at Thomas Jefferson High School in Pittsburgh. He has also taught at the Community College of Allegheny County, the University of Pittsburgh, Eastern Gateway Community College and in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Carnegie Mellon University. He and his wife, Carol, reside in Pittsburgh.

Please note that this is a THURSDAY meeting.

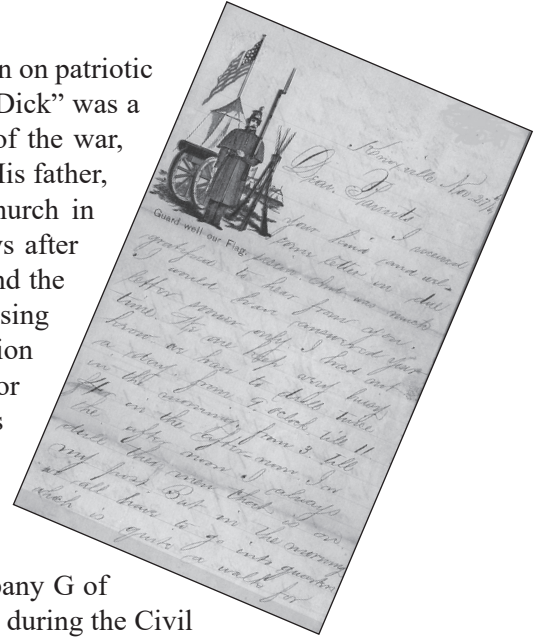
If Quaker Valley schools are closed because of inclement weather, Historical Society programs are cancelled. Check the QV website, <https://www.qvsd.org> — or KDKA, WPXI or WTAE television newscasts or the stations' websites for closing information.

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 SVHS “Attic”

Sewickley Valley Historical Society’s collection includes a great deal of material of interest to Civil War buffs, including original letters, a diary, first-hand accounts of battles, transcribed letters, photographss and books—all available for you to study at our headquarters in the Old Sewickley Post Office. Below are but a few examples.

Quite poignant is a collection of letters rescued from a bonfire in 1975, written on patriotic stationery in a quite legible hand by John Dickson Tracy to his parents. “Dick” was a corporal in the Sewickley Rifles, a military company formed at the outbreak of the war, which became Company G of the 28th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers. His father, Bruce Tracy, was the carpenter who constructed the first frame Methodist church in Sewickley. The letters date from July 8, 1861, to September 27, 1862, ten days after the Battle at Antietam. Tracy was killed at Antietam on September 17, 1862, and the final letter in this collection was from Conrad U. Meyer to Bruce Tracy expressing sadness at the death of his son, explaining how he died and describing the location of his remains, which were later recovered and brought to Sewickley Cemetery for burial. In 1976, Lloyd Booth, Jr., wrote a series of three articles entitled “Letters from the Front” for the *Sewickley Herald*, putting these letters in context, so you can read the originals next to Booth’s commentary.



Robert McElwain Erwin, a carpenter by trade and another corporal in Company G of the 28th Pennsylvania Volunteers, also wrote home to his Sewickley family during the Civil War, between July 20, 1861, and November 13, 1862. These letters were transcribed and edited in 1944 by George O. C. Johnston, Erwin’s maternal great-grandfather. Robert Erwin was discharged as disabled in 1862, and a year later married Bruce Tracy’s daughter, who bore him eight children. These twenty-two “Soldier Boy Letters”, while not transcribed in their entirety and heavily annotated at a later date in our typewritten copy, are nevertheless quite interesting, especially if they are compared with Dick Tracy’s, which were written at the same time.

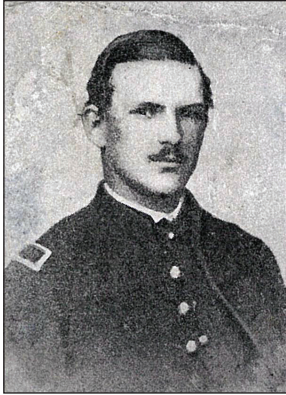


John Irwin Nevin (1837-1884)

“It was a bitter night & the stars shown [sic] out with that keen brightness that we only see in a wintry sky; the wind howled about us and through us, chilling us to the very bones, as we stood there in the ranks hour after hour waiting until the head of the column could find passage between the overhanging mountain and the swollen Potomac which mournfully wailed along at our feet as if grieving, ‘if aught inanimate can grieve,’ that her waters might no longer keep apart the angry brethren that she had kept from mutual slaughter so long.””

Thus begins the account by John I. Nevin, a lieutenant in the Sewickley Rifles, of his capture and imprisonment in Libby Prison, Richmond, in the spring of 1862. The transcription in our collection, comprising 74 handwritten sheets, closes when the prisoners left Richmond for Salisbury, North Carolina, where they were later exchanged. After the exchange, Nevin participated in the Gettysburg campaign, where his regiment played a prominent role in the defense

of Little Round Top. Following the war, Nevin published his account of the Battle of Gettysburg in the *Pittsburgh Evening Chronicle*, owned by his father. Nevin died in 1884, but his description of the battle was reprinted in 1894 in the *Pittsburgh Leader*, which he had founded and edited. It subsequently appeared in the *Sewickley Herald* in 1930 and on the 125th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1988. The *Herald* articles can be found in the SVHS collection.

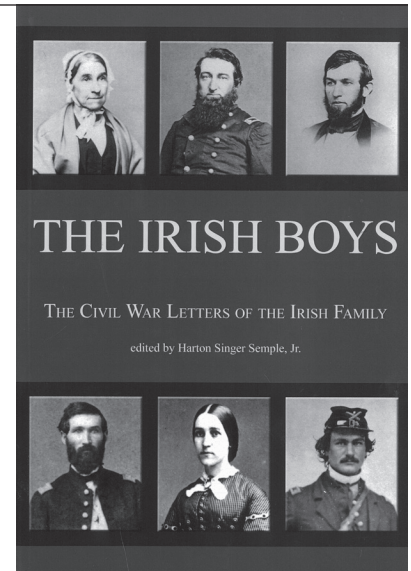


David Shields (1844-1937)

Also published in the *Herald* in 1988 are the recollections of 19-year-old David Shields, originally contributed as a chapter in the *Life and Letters of General Alexander Hays* (edited by George Thornton Fleming from data compiled by Gilbert Adams Hays, Pittsburgh, 1919). Immediately after Pickett’s Charge, Gen. Hays took his aides-de-camp David Shields and George Cortis down the front of the cheering Union lines, dragging captured Confederate battle flags. The event was the high point of Shields’ life and was commemorated in a painting he commissioned, now lost, by Sewickley artist Audley Nichols, the artist of the SVHS logo. For more on the painting, entitled “The Turn of the Tide of Rebellion,” and on David Shields, visit the SVHS website, www.sewickleyhistory.org.

Finally, a cache of local Civil War letters was found in the Edward O’Neil house at 615 East Drive in the 1990s, and they were published in 2013 by Harton S. Semple, Jr., President of SVHS, as *The Irish Boys: The Civil War Letters of the Irish Family*. Four soldier boys wrote home from the field and were answered by family, affording an insightful view into the trauma and mundane nature of the war. The passage below is excerpted from a letter written by Frank Irish to his sister from Bellefonte, Alabama, August 27, 1863.

“We left our camp at Tullahoma (execrable place) on the afternoon of the 16th, marched until 2 AM over the most intolerable roads, through low marshy woods half knee deep in mud, dark as midnight, men & horses tumbling about and swearing (not the horses but the men) some, halted at last, when I rolled myself up in my bully old overcoat, and with my saddle for a pillow, laid down in the damp, dank weeds, and slept soundly as Dickens’ Joe, till 4 AM, when reveille sounded, and our weary march commenced again. Laid down in a soft place among the rocks and slept like a top – forgot all about snakes until morning, when as were starting, the boys killed three monstrous rattlesnakes where we had bivouacked. One of them was a real old sickdollafee (?), with 14 rattles, and easily as thick as my arm. He was a whale, I tell you, and must have been distantly related to the one that came ... over old Mother Eve. By St. Paul! my blood fairly froze as I looked at him & turned him over to admire his beautifully variegated skin – and my hair fairly lifted my hat off to think that we had lain all night quietly in such horrible proximity to such reptiles.”



More information on the book can be found at www.theirishboys.org.

Staff Changes at SVHS

The Board of Directors announces that John Poister, Jr., has resigned as Executive Director of Sewickley Valley Historical Society. He will continue to assist with special projects. Susan Holton has been appointed Acting Executive Director, and Blythe Burgan Davis is our new Associate Director. Please welcome Blythe to the staff.

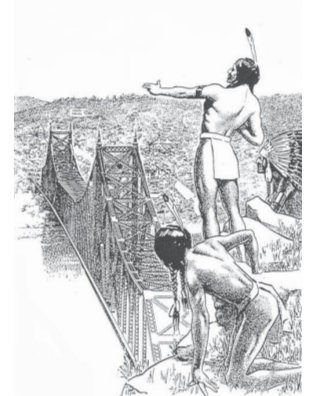
Proposed Dues Increase

In conjunction with the Finance Committee, the Board of Directors recommends that SVHS dues be increased from \$20 to \$25 for individuals and from \$30 to \$35 for families. Out of State dues will remain at \$10. In accordance with the Bylaws, the membership will be asked to vote on these increases at the Annual Meeting in May.

Sewickley Valley Historical Society
200 Broad Street
Sewickley, PA 15143

Non-Profit Org
U. S. Postage
PAID
Permit 70
Sewickley, PA

March 2019



**SEWICKLEY VALLEY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

President

Harton S. Semple, Jr.

Vice-President

Joe Zemba

Secretary

Mary Beth Pastorius

Treasurer

Connor Cogswell

Directors

Gloria Berry
Brewster Cockrell
Verna Corey
Edward Harrell
Ivan Hofmann
Lori Kastan
Marty McDaniel
Marian Miller
Simon Noel
Ian Semple

Acting Executive Director

Susan C. Holton

Associate Director

Blythe Burgan Davis

Honoring Sewickley Valley Hospital School of Nursing

The 2019 annual National Nurses Week will be celebrated from May 6, also known as National Nurses Day, through May 12, the birthday of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing.

This year, a reception and an exhibit honoring the history of the Sewickley Valley Hospital School of Nursing are planned during Nurses Week at the Old Sewickley Post Office. Details will follow.

Friends, Sponsors, Patrons, Benefactors

Thanks to the following, who, since the last newsletter, have supported SVHS with gifts in addition to basic dues.

Mr. & Mrs. Kenneth Johns, Jr.; Wade Weissmann

Special Contributions

Araminta Roberts Brown, to the B. G. Shields Memorial Fund, in memory of Sally Roberts; Elsie MacKenzie

New Members

Susan Riegel Price, Corning, CA; Ronnie Sines, Freedom, PA

In Memoriam

Fitzhugh L. Brown