

Sewickley Valley Historical Society Signals

XXXVIII, Number 2

October 2010

Wednesday, October 20, 2010

7:30 p.m. — Old Sewickley Post Office

Frank Lloyd Wright's Fantasy & Reality Residential Designs: Fallingwater & Kentuck Knob an illustrated lecture by Patricia Coyle

Fallingwater, called the most famous private residence ever built by Bruce Pfeiffer, Director of Frank Lloyd Wright Archives, was designed by Wright in 1935 for the family of Pittsburgh department store owner Edgar J. Kaufmann. Rising above the waterfall on Bear Run, *Fallingwater* exemplifies Wright's concept of organic architecture: the harmonious union of art and nature. The house, with a guest and service wing, was completed in 1939.

Kentuck Knob was commissioned in 1953 and completed in 1956 for the I. N. Hagan family of Uniontown, owner of the Hagan Ice Cream Company. It is just a few miles southwest of *Fallingwater*, high atop a bluff overlooking the Youghiogeny River Gorge. *Kentuck Knob* is a "Usonian" house, designed on a hexagonal grid and constructed of native stone, tidewater cypress and copper. It was purchased in 1986 by Great Britain's Lord and Lady Palumbo as a vacation house.

Patricia Coyle is the Director of Marketing/Events for *Kentuck Knob*, where she has been employed since the site's opening in 1996. She conducts all on-site events. Her areas of expertise include Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture, his relationship with his clients as well as the furniture, gardens and sculpture collection at *Kentuck Knob*.

NOTE: This program, originally scheduled for February 2010, was cancelled because of inclement weather.

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

Michael & Kathryn Bryson, Richard LeBeau, Peter & Elizabeth Stein

Donations

Betty G. Y. Shields, in memory of Annie B. Hays Freitag

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In Memoriam

Mrs. Larry (Annie B.) Freitag, Margaret B. Wolfe

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 Edgeworth Female Seminary

When the Edgeworth Female Seminary burned on the afternoon of Wednesday, September 15, 2010, the Valley suffered a great potential loss, as we don't know if the building will be restored. The first ladies' seminary west of the Alleghenies, the school was founded at Pittsburgh in 1825 and was subsequently moved to Braddock's Field, the site of the 1755 defeat of Gen. Braddock by the French and Indians. In 1835 it was moved again to what was later to become Edgeworth. It was named by its founder, Mary Gould Olver, for the English-Irish author Maria Edgeworth (1767-1849). President Zachary Taylor visited the Seminary August 21, 1849. The Presbyterian Church of Sewickley was organized at the Seminary, and the Shields Presbyterian Church held services there from its organization in 1864 until the school burned in 1865. The newly formed Edgeworth Club adopted the name in 1893, and its founders were instrumental in the formation of Edgeworth Borough in 1904.

After the Seminary burned in 1865, its central stone structure was rebuilt as a residence by Mary Olver Snowden Denison, granddaughter of the school's founder. Some of the house's occupants in subsequent years were a bartender from Pittsburgh; Col. Samuel McKelvey, proprietor of the Park Place Hotel; Morrison Foster, brother of composer Stephen Foster, who called the house "Olver Place;" J. Wilkinson Elliott, who is responsible for the columned portico and wing to the right of the original building when viewed from Beaver Road; Richard R. Quay, son of Sen. Matthew S. Quay; and Miss Coral Quay, Richard's sister, who renamed the house "Old Edgeworth."

Fortunately, we have several descriptions and pictures of the original buildings: from a catalog of the school dated 1838; from a novel written by a pupil from Illinois territory around 1840; from a reminiscence by Eliza Leet Shields Collins, who attended the Seminary ca. 1850; and one by Agnes Caldwell Way, a student there in the late 1850s. Below are excerpts from each of these sources.

From Catalogue of the Officers and Members of the Edgeworth Ladies' Seminary for the Year Ending September 1838.

Pittsburgh: Printed by Johnston and Stockton, 1838.

Two years have passed since this institution was removed from Braddock's Field to Sewickley, and we have now the pleasure of announcing that we are fairly settled in our new residence. Encouraged by the kindness of friends, and by the number of pupils for the past year, as stated in the foregoing Catalogue, we go forward in our course, trusting we shall be enabled to conduct the institution on the same principles which have characterized it for the past thirteen years. The accompanying lithographic will give a sufficient idea of the principal buildings, so far as [the] exterior is concerned; they are convenient and commodious in their whole construction, and being built expressly for the purpose, much has been done to render them an agreeable temporary home to their inmates. The location of the institution is much admired. It is situated fourteen miles below Pittsburgh, near the public road leading from that city to Beaver, and a short distance off from the beautiful stream of the Ohio.

Nothing has been lost, it is believed, while many new advantages have been secured, by the transfer of the Seminary from Braddock's Field. The scenery around is equally fine, the air full [and] salubrious, the

supply of water no less pure and wholesome. A better field is offered for the improving hand of art. Access is much more easy and convenient, both by land and water. And the outward accommodations, of course, are in all respects more ample and complete. Omitting other advantages that might be

mentioned, we cannot forbear to say a word on the subject of HEALTH. We have been favored with this blessing, during the past year, in a most extraordinary manner. There are probably but few families, numbering only five or six members, which have not had in the same time, more cases of sickness than have occurred here in a household counting from seventy to eighty persons.

The studies particularized show, to a certain extent, the kind of education

which is aimed at in the institution. The discipline adopted and acted upon from the beginning, is mild and persuasive, rather than harsh, being guided by affection alone. This system has been found so effective, and has been so generally approved by those best acquainted with its operation, that we feel ourselves under no temptation to change it for any other.



(*The Edgeworth Female Seminary*, continued)

The description below is from the first pages of *Early Engagements and Florence (A Sequel)* (Cincinnati: Moore, Anderson, Wilstach & Keys, 1854), written by Sarah Marshall Hayden under the pseudonym Mary Frazaer. It is a thinly disguised description of the Edgeworth Female Seminary, where Sarah was a pupil:

It was a strangely picturesque old house, densely shaded by forest trees, with a repose about it, deep and unbroken save by the low gurgling tones of a stream which swept through the lawn, or the dash of its waters over some projecting fragment of stone. Lofty hills rose suddenly up from the shores of "La Belle Rivière," and wreathed themselves around the lovely vale of its location. The emerald lawn, glittering with its golden dandelions, as the blue arch above with silvery stars, stretched away to the pebbly beach, which framed in the sparkling waves – but whose freshness and murmurs, springing up on the wings of the passing breeze, were wafted away over the valley. In the rear of the mansion, the lawn extended to the base of the hills, along which the turnpike [Beaver Road] to a neighboring city led.

Sarah Marshall Hayden (1825-1899) was recognized at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair as Illinois' first authoress. She was born in Shawneetown, IL, the youngest of seven children. Her father served in the territorial legislature and also operated a store, which necessitated frequent trips to Pittsburgh and Philadelphia for supplies. Sarah accompanied him on one of these trips and stayed on in Sewickley to attend the Edgeworth Female Seminary. Her first novel, *Early Engagements*, was written when she was sixteen. The book and its sequel, *Florence*, weren't published until 1854. Sarah's father, a friend of Abraham Lincoln, asked for Lincoln's help in distributing fifty copies of the novel. Lincoln supposedly took one home to his wife, Mary Todd, and she read half of it that very evening, reading several passages aloud to her husband.

Sarah married John James Hayden in 1843. She wrote other prose and poetry, which appeared in newspapers and magazines, sometimes under her pen name. She died in Washington, DC, in 1899.

The entire novel can be downloaded from Google Books. We have a copy on a CD in our collection.

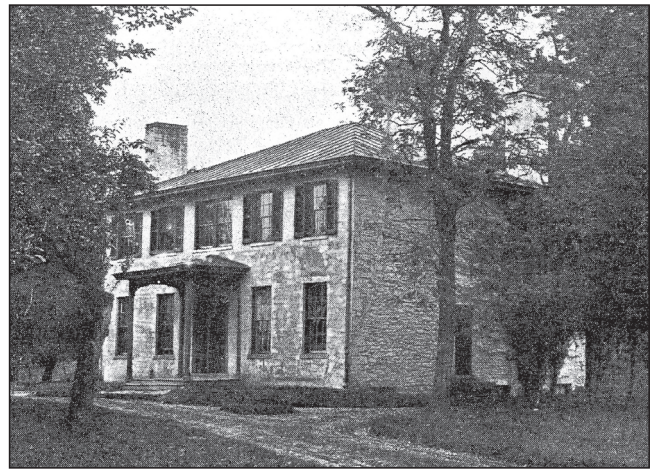
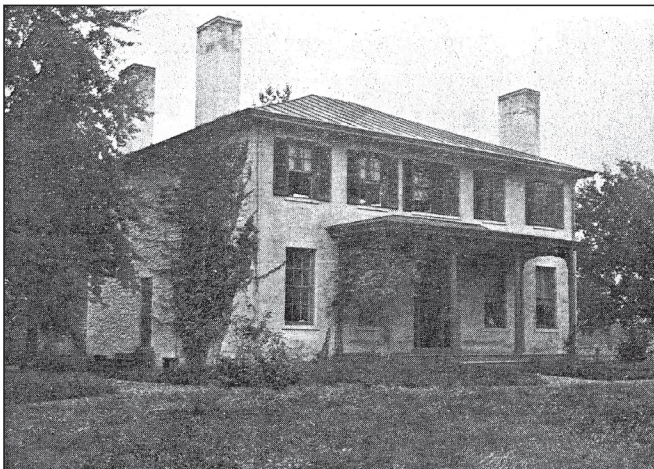
The following, which appeared in volume 13 of *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* under the title "School Girls of 1850," was written by Eliza Leet Shields Collins (died 1910). In addition to what is transcribed below, her reminiscences include descriptions of a typical school day, the spartan interior of the Seminary, final examinations and commencement exercises.

There [the Edgeworth Ladies Seminary] it was that I got my personal knowledge of Seminary life. There the grandmothers and mothers of most of the prominent families of Western Pennsylvania and Ohio received their education, indeed such was its reputation that many from Eastern Pennsylvania and New York were sent there.

The building itself was a large stone structure with wings on either end. (The wings were of frame work.) Both front and back of the stone building were long porches with pillars supporting the roof in old colonial style. It presented a very imposing appearance from all sides. It was situated some hundred yards from the river—which was not visible—and fronted on the public road. The very extensive grounds were beautifully laid out and kept. They sloped gradually to a little stream over which was a rustic bridge and along the banks of

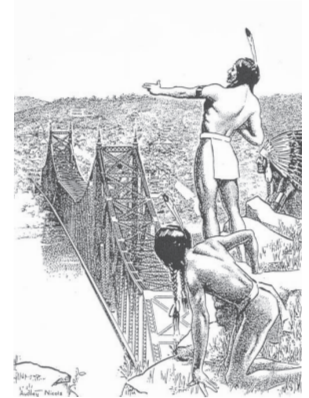
which grew very closely, willow trees, their long graceful branches constantly waving with every breath of air. The carriage drive and foot paths wound in graceful curves down to this bridge, and over it to the road, over which passed the stages and waggons on their way between Pittsburgh and the West. For it was not for some years after that a rail road was built west of Pittsburgh. The only transportation was by means of private carriage, stage once a day, or steam boat, which while being the most delightful, was uncertain owing to the stage of the water.

[After the school burned] it was never rebuilt, as the completion of rail roads East and west rendered access to Eastern Schools possible, or the rapidly increasing population of the Sewickley Valley, rendered it a less desirable place for such an institution.



The Seminary building as it appeared in 1870, after it was rebuilt.
The photo on the left shows the Beaver Road facade; on the right is the riverward side, now facing Oliver (formerly Olver) Road.
From *The Sewickley Herald*, January 9, 1941

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(*The Edgeworth Female Seminary*, continued)

Agnes Caldwell Way (1842-1943) wrote these recollections of her days as a student at the Edgeworth Seminary in 1936. They were published in *The Sewickley Herald* in three installments in January 1941. Miss Way tells how “in 1835 Mr. and Mrs. Olver came to visit their pupils, the Misses Rebecca and Hannah Shields, at their home in Sewickley Bottoms [“Newington”]. They were so pleased with the surrounding country and its situation, being on a highway and on “*La Belle Rivière*,” that the same year they purchased 30-odd acres from the Shields estate. The same year they commenced the building. It was spacious and *strangely picturesque*, built to give the effect of age in a grove of linden, aspen and locust. In the rear the lawn extended to the hill, along which the public highway to the city led.” Miss Way must have been aware of *Early Engagements*, as her description uses some of Sarah Marshall Hayden’s exact phrasing!

Miss Way goes on to describe the school during the administrations of Mrs. Olver, Rev. Daniel Eagle Nevin, Prof. Samuel R. Williams, Rev. Henry R. Wilson and Rev. Aaron Williams. There are delightful biographical sketches of students and faculty as well as accounts of significant events, including the organization of the Sewickley Presbyterian Church, the visit in 1849 of President Zachary Taylor, the arrival of the Pittsburgh & Fort Wayne Railroad and the naming of the Seminary Station in honor of the school, and the organization of the Leetsdale [later Shields] Presbyterian Church as well as descriptions of the buildings, entertainments and picnics.

Here is Miss Way’s account of the fire that closed the school: “The building was burned February 11th, 1865. The fire being Saturday, the students had to be housed over Sunday with the families in the neighborhood, returning to their homes on Monday, as there were not any Sunday trains those days. The people not wanting to lose the name of Edgeworth, Mr. George Cass, who was president of the P.Ft.W.R.R., was asked to change the name of the station ‘Seminary’ to ‘Edgeworth’ Station. Then the name of ‘Seminary Lane’ was changed to ‘Edgeworth Lane.’ When part of the Township [Leet Township] became a Borough it took the name, Edgeworth Borough.

“A little over a year after the fire, some energetic young men with a love of the romantic had the rubbish and the underbrush cleared away, tables and benches made, trees trimmed and hung with Japanese lanterns, making it an ideal place for a moonlight picnic—however, a little ‘spooky’ when one night a white owl made its voice heard.

“Mrs. Mary Olver Snowden Denison, a granddaughter of Mrs. Olver, after getting through legal controversies in regard to the property, restored the stone building of Edgeworth Seminary. The walls and all but one chimney were in good shape, and most of the old mantel-shelf and grates were still standing. Perhaps the reason of this was, it was in that part of the building where the water came in from an overflowing spring and three large spigots. The woodwork was of oak, and was charred but not crumbled. It was rebuilt just as it had been, and that part of the building is the same today.”