

Sewickley Valley Historical Society Signals

XXXIX, Number 3

November 2011

Thursday, November 17, at 7:30 p.m.
Council Chamber, Sewickley Borough Building, 601 Thorn Street



The Sewickley-Coraopolis Bridges, 1911 & 1981: 100th & 30th Anniversaries

The first Sewickley-Coraopolis Bridge opened one hundred years ago, on September 19, 1911, at 10:30 a.m., as Burgess W. Kennedy Brown of Sewickley shook hands with Burgess A. D. Guy of Coraopolis in the middle of the span. Gilbert A. Hays was chairman of an elaborate celebration. A lengthy parade crossed the bridge and wound through the decorated streets of both towns. There were fairs, athletic contests and fireworks. Souvenirs commemorating the event were created. Sewickley artist Audley Nicols drew the poster showing three Indians marveling at the new bridge from the south side of the river, now the logo of both Sewickley Borough and Sewickley Valley Historical Society. A Mademoiselle Oneida, clad in gauze wings, glided on a wire from the top of one of the 132 foot towers of the bridge to the beach, "suspended only by her teeth." A new era had dawned.

The 1911 Sewickley Bridge served its purpose until old age forced its closure in May 1980. Thanks to the efforts of the Committee to Save the Sewickley Bridge, the old bridge was taken off its piers and a new Sewickley Bridge opened to traffic on October 21, 1981.

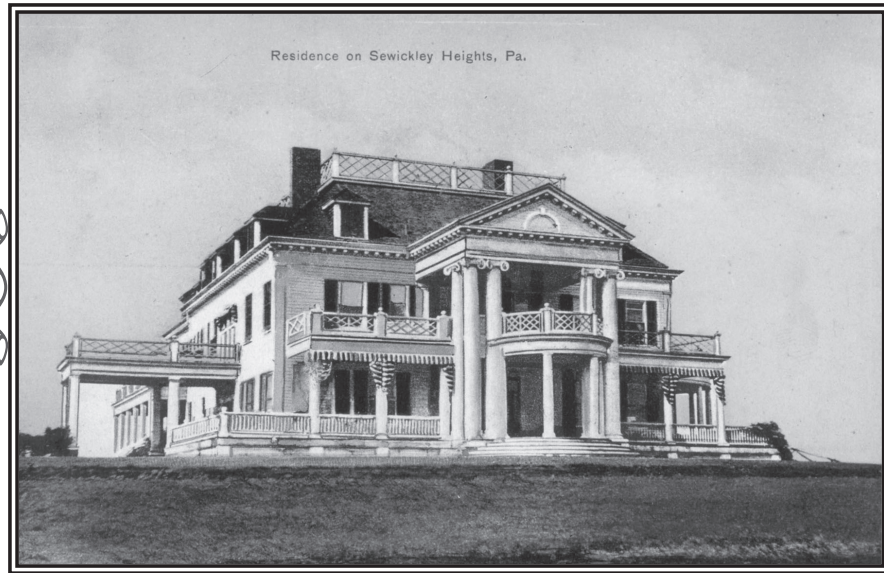
So this year, 2011, we also mark the 30th anniversary of the second Sewickley Bridge. Both the 1911 and 1981 bridges will be the subject of an exhibition of memorabilia and a program by Matthew A. Bunner, P. E., Vice President/Senior Professional Associate at HDR Engineering, Inc., successor firm of Richardson, Gordon & Associates, project engineers for the 1981 bridge; and Roger Carrier, former Penn DOT District 11 Engineer. Several members of the Committee to Save the Sewickley Bridge will also be present to participate in the program and answer questions.



PLEASE NOTE DAY & LOCATION OF THIS PROGRAM

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 "Mystery" House



Those of you who have seen the Historical Society's 2006 book in Arcadia Publishing's Postcard History Series entitled *Sewickley* might remember the image shown above, which appears on page 110 of the book with the following caption:

This house is a mystery. Although a photograph in the collection of the Sewickley Heights History Center seems to show the house in the vicinity of the Jones estates on Blackburn Road, no one knows whose it was, when it was constructed, or by whom it was designed. This reminds us that a house such as this, which would be remarkable in most other communities, can be lost to history here because of the large number of such properties that graced the Sewickley Valley.

Well, the house is a mystery no longer! Using the Sewickley Heights History Center photo, which shows the house from the Wilpen Hall estate of William Penn Snyder (Fig. 1), it was possible to locate the property on the 1906 G. M. Hopkins *Plat Book of the Northern Vicinity of Pittsburgh*, plate 11, as that of Stella D. Hays. (Fig. 2).

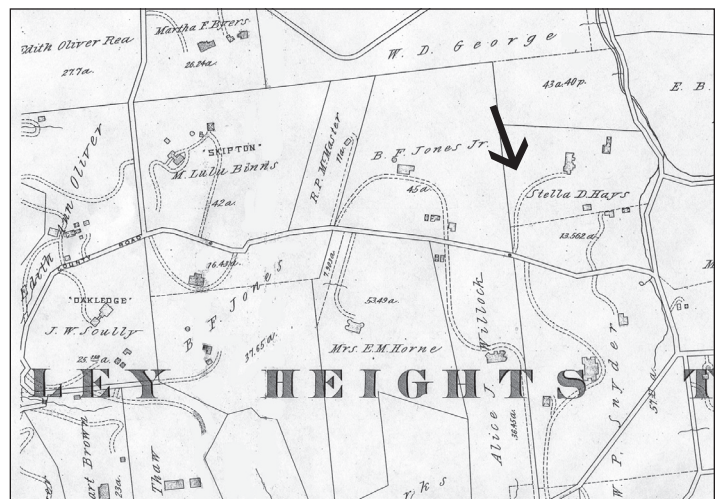


Fig. 2. Hopkins plat map showing the location of the Stella D. Hays property

Stella Hays is described in Adelaide Mellier Nevin's 1888 book, *The Social Mirror: A Character Sketch of the Women of Pittsburgh and Vicinity...*, page 80, in the section on "Women of Wealth," as follows:

One of the youngest heiresses in the city is Miss Stella Hays, daughter of the late Jack Hays, Esq. Her grandfather was a prominent glass manufacturer of the South Side, who at his death left \$5,000,000 to be divided among his heirs, of whom Miss Stella is one. She is not more than sixteen years of age, bright, and gives promise of being quite pretty. At present she is at school at Ogontz, Philadelphia's fashionable seminary for young ladies. Mrs. Hays, the mother, is a good-looking young widow, and dresses with great taste. She was a Miss Dithridge, of the well-known Pittsburgh family.

Mrs. John S. Hays (Jennie Dithridge) and Miss Stella Dithridge Hays are listed in the 1902 and 1908 Pittsburgh *Blue Book* and the



Fig. 1. "Willie & Miss Bumps." The house is on the horizon, to the left.

1908 *Social Register* at 846 Ridge Avenue, Allegheny. The 1904 *Social Directory for Greater Pittsburgh* lists them at home in Allegheny, with a summer home in Sewickley Heights, while the 1905 *Suburban Directory* has Stella D. Hays listed at Clover Farm, Sewickley Heights.

According to a card in the file compiled by Frederick Way, Jr., the Stella Hays house was occupied by Mr. and Mrs. William B. Schiller from at least 1906, and it was sold in the summer of 1911 to Francis H. Denny. We have in the Sewickley Valley Historical Society files a copy of a photo of the house with a handwritten label on it reading "Frank Denny Estate, Sewickley Hts., now B. F. Jones Estate, this house was torn down." The house also appears in two photographs in early 20th century albums from Fairacres I, the first B. F. Jones estate on Blackburn Road. In one, a photograph by R. W. Johnston & Co., Pittsburgh, the house is in the background of a photo of Mrs. B. F. Jones, Jr., and is labeled in handwriting as "Miss Stella Hays house." (Fig. 3) (While the house is identified as that of Stella Hays, it doesn't necessarily mean that she still owned it. To this day, houses are given the names of previous owners or builders.) In another album, a 1911 photo shows the house from the Fairacres gardens (Fig. 4).

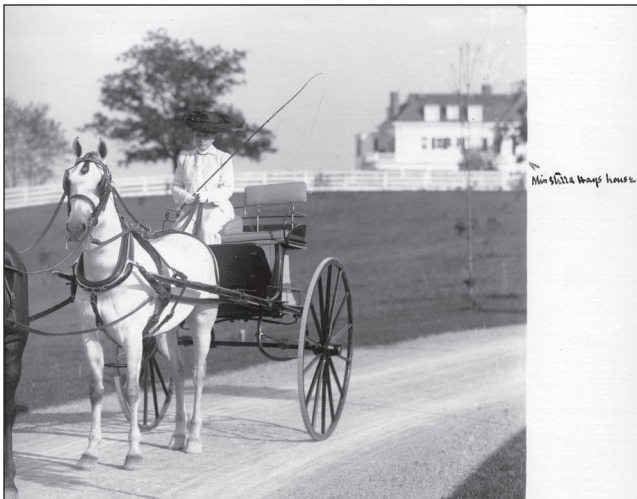


Fig. 3. Detail of R. W. Johnston & Co. photo of Mrs. B. F. Jones, Jr., with "Miss Stella Hays house" identified in the background

In Paul Mellon's 1992 memoir, *Reflections in a Silver Spoon* (New York, William Morrow and Company), there is a photo between pages 62 and 63 showing the Mellons at the Denny House in 1914 (Fig. 5). On pages 73-73, Mellon says:

Father usually took us to rented houses at Sewickley, a few miles west of Pittsburgh, in the years just before and immediately after his divorce, until the outbreak of the First World War.... In 1914...Father rented the Denny house, another large rambling house situated on one of the highest hills. The main attraction of Sewickley for Father was that he could take a train from there and be at the office in town in well under an hour.... In those days Sewickley was still really in the country, and the steel mills with their soot had not yet encroached on the green fields and lovely wooded hills that rolled down to the wide Ohio River. It was still a summer resort, rather than a suburb, and although wealthy Pittsburghers had build large houses that were scattered around the countryside, the overall impression was one of rolling farmland and meadows.

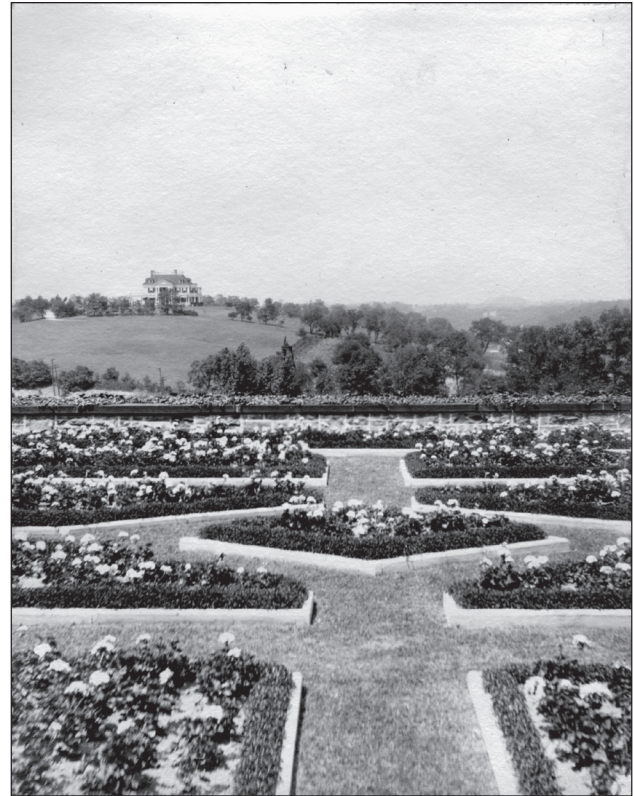


Fig. 4. The house from the Fairacres gardens, 1911



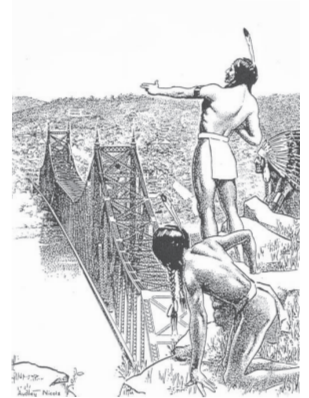
Fig. 5. "Father with Ailsa and me and our dog, Rover, at the Denny House, Sewickley, 1914"

From *Reflections in a Silver Spoon*, by Paul Mellon, with John Baskett, New York, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992

(continued on next page)

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(The "Mystery" House, *continued*)

Finally, 1916 Sewickley Heights Township tax records, also in the Sewickley Valley Historical Society collection, list the Denny family as owners of Blackburn Road property valued at \$59,090.

So, it seems that Stella Hays built her summer home some time before 1904 and still used it in 1905; her name appears on the property on the 1906 plat map. If Fred Way is correct, the Schiller family lived in the house in 1906. From 1911, it was owned by the Dennys, probably until 1916, and it was subsequently bought and

razed by B. F. Jones, Jr., more than likely when Jones was building his second mansion, Fairacres II.

Stella Hays never married. The 1920 census has her living in Leetsdale, and a photo of her can be seen on a passport application from 1921. Her name is on the passenger list for a voyage from Naples to New York and one from Hawaii to San Francisco, both in the 1920s. She died at age 80 in a convalescent home in Southern Pines, North Carolina, on September 29, 1950.

Friends, Sponsors, Patrons, Benefactors

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

Maleet B. Gordon; Wayne & Mary Murphy; Margaret A. Sickeler; Joe Zemba

New Members

William & Mary Malyszka, Sewickley

Donation

Joe Zemba, in memory of Fred I. Sharp

In Memoriam

Charles Henry Fletcher, Jr.; Dr. Irvin Iwler; Mrs. Marsena S. Neil