

BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

Vol. XV - Number 1 November, 1999

BAAHA IS BAACK!

The Ben Avon Area Historical Association was incorporated in September of 1984 following the discovery of the Dickson Log House near the Emsworth Locks and Dam. BAAHA has not been active in the recent past, in part due to the loss of two key officials. Mrs. Gladys Phillips and Mr. William Woods. We are greatly saddened by their passing and felt a tremendous impact within our organization.

Called together by Mrs. Tracy Ferguson of Ben Avon Heights, a small group started meeting regularly to plan the re-birth of the Association. On June 2, 1999, officers were elected and now serve as follows:

President	Dick Herchenroether
Vice-President	Jean Henderson
Secretary	Trudy File
Treasurer	Dick Herchenroether
	Tracy Ferguson
	Lou Seifarth
	Lori Kramer
	Darlene Phillips
	Ken Jaros
	Jim Knox

Ben Avon, Emsworth, Ohio Twp., Ben Avon Heights, and Kilbuck Twp. are each represented on the Board.

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

BAAHA fosters interest in the history of the Avonworth and surrounding communities.

We collect, preserve, catalog and safeguard materials relating to area history to encourage and support research for private and public uses.

We publish newsletters, brochures, books and other materials to promote and disseminate area history.

We develop, present and support educational programs for local schools.

We organize and sponsor lectures, seminars, exhibitions and other meetings on historical topics.

"WHOSE LAND WAS YOUR LAND"

On Wednesday, April 28, 1999, the first meeting of the re-activated BAAHA was held in the Fellowship Hall of the Community Presbyterian Church of Ben Avon. "Whose Land Was Your Land" was the subject of a lecture by Nell Herchenroether. The talk dealt with the land given by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to redeem certificates given to soldiers, in lieu of pay, for service in the Revolutionary War. The meeting was well attended.

BAAHA "CITIZEN" STORY REACHES NEW YORK!

Jim Knox, a board member, received a letter from former local residents and BAAHA members, William and Mildred Johnston. They are now newly reactivated members. Bill said he "was pleased that the Historical Association will carry on the work of the late Gladys Phillips and the late Bill Woods, both former colleagues of mine from the Avonworth faculty." Bill recalls that he participated in a program marking the 50th Anniversary of the St. Patrick's Day flood at the Ben Avon Borough Hall in 1986.

Bill is in his tenth year as official historian of the Village of Farmingdale on Long Island, NY. During his research, he came across the sad story of an Emsworth aviator, Lt. Miller L. Williams, age 23, in the November 4, 1943, issue of the "Farmingdale Post." Williams bailed out of an army fighter plane on a routine flight from Farmingdale Air Base. Injured in landing by parachute, he was hospitalized and his left leg was amputated.

If anyone has any information about Lt. Miller L. Williams, please contact a member of the Association.

CURRENT BAAHA PROJECTS

- ❑ Gathering information on Dixmont State Hospital.
- ❑ Planning a period-appropriate landscape for the area around the Log House.

- ❑ Exploring a plan to gather oral histories from Avonworth residents.
- ❑ Organizing the BAAHA archives.
- ❑ Reactivating an Educational program for our local schools.
- ❑ Sponsoring a family event for the Christmas season. (See page 4 for full details).

SUMMER SEAT - THE O'NEIL FARM DEED

On July 6, 1786, Richard Somers from New Jersey purchased at auction a 334 acre parcel of depreciation lands Tract No. 130 named "Summer Seat." A deed written on parchment was issued to Mr. Somers for his purchase.

In 1819 Edward O'Neil, an Irish immigrant, purchased Tract 130 named "Summer Seat" from the fourth owner -- Noble Calhoun. The parchment deed was given to Mr. O'Neil at the time of the sale. Four generations of O'Neils farmed the land and throughout the years, various parcels were sold or passed down to family members. About 1958 John Meighan, who had married Mary Bell, daughter of Mary O'Neil Bell, subdivided part of the O'Neil farm and sold a parcel to the Avonworth School District where the Avonworth Elementary School was built in 1960. The parchment deed was given to the school at the time of the sale.

It was about this time period when Thomas L Reilly Jr., Ohio Township Engineer and former owner of 37 acres of the O'Neil farm from 1941 to 1983 recalled seeing the deed rolled up and held in the hand of John Meighan. Mr. Reilly made a print of the deed and returned the original to Mr. Meighan.

The school had the deed framed and displayed it on a wall above a water fountain for many years. Later, the document was moved to the Avonworth School in Ben Avon. The school closed in June, 1991.

In the fall of 1991, an Australian film company started filming the movie Lorenzo's Oil" in the area of the school. A young man from the area, working part time for the film company, rediscovered the document and asked if he could have it. The person in charge said that it probably would be discarded so the young man took it with the intention of giving it to his mother who had an interest in antiques. Eight years later an antique dealer bought the framed document from them at a garage sale for \$20. The dealer noticed the deed was from Westmoreland County but did not know that this area was, in fact, Westmoreland County at the time the deed was

issued in 1786. He was going to sell the document at an antiques fair when he noticed the words "Summer Seat" and thought they sounded familiar. He went to the Depreciation Lands Museum in Hampton Twp. and discovered the deed was for land in Ohio Twp.

The dealer offered the document to Ohio Twp. Police Chief Miklos. After negotiating a price, Chief Miklos is now the owner of the parchment deed. Chief Miklos plans to have the document reframed and preserved in an archival manner for display in the new Ohio Twp. Municipal Building scheduled for construction in 2000.

Today, Reilly's Summer Seat Farm is owned by Thomas L. Reilly Jr.'s son, Lt. Col. Ret. Michael Reilly and wife Cherie. The farm specializes in Strawberry Patch tours and rides to the Great Pumpkin Patch during the Fall Harvest Festival season. Throughout the spring and summer months, the greenhouses overflow with abundant annual and perennial plants, shrubs and trees.

Finding the 213-year-old deed after such a remarkable past has got to be the "Luck of the Irish."

Submitted by Darlene Phillips, Ohio Twp. Historian

Ohio Township will celebrate a Bicentennial year in 2003. More information will be forthcoming.

HAPPENINGS!

Its always exciting when the big paddlewheel riverboats pass by on the Ohio River. There were several opportunities for crowds to gather at the Emsworth Locks this summer. The log house was open and many took advantage to look in.

The Lutheran Service Senior Citizens took a walking tour of Ben Avon this October. They were led by Rev. and Mrs. John Haeberle. Their tour started at Community Church with words from Jim Knox and ended with a visit to the log house and the Locks.

Also in October, Lou Seifarth led a Fox Chapel Historical Society group as they toured three homes, the log house and made many stops to view house exteriors. Their tour included a stop at the Emsworth U.P. Church where quilters were working.

"REDDING UP" OR MOVING?

When you find things you need to discard and think "someone might be interested in this," also think of BAAHA. Please give us a call. Thanks to Betty Haughin who did!

*Ben Avon Area Historical Association
presents*

DEAR FRIENDS

in

"An American Family Christmas"

December 12, 1999

3:00 p.m.

Community Presbyterian Church of Ben Avon

"An American Family Christmas" will be presented by the Ben Avon Area Historical Association, Sunday afternoon, December 12, 1999 at three o'clock in the Community Presbyterian Church of Ben Avon.

Featured will be the **DEAR FRIENDS**, an ensemble of talented musicians. Now beginning its seventeenth year, **DEAR FRIENDS** is the only professional musical ensemble nationwide devoted exclusively to the performance of 19th Century American music. The vocal/instrumental ensemble's authentic performances are based on materials from broadsides, sheet music, Ladies' Home magazines, songsters, letters and other historical documents from one of the outstanding American music collections housed in the Stephen Collins Foster Memorial, located at the University of Pittsburgh's Center for American Music.

The ensemble has performed at the Smithsonian Institution and regularly tours throughout the mid-Atlantic region. Music by **DEAR FRIENDS** has also been broadcast by the Voice of America, U.S. Information Agency, and Chukyo-TV in Nagoya, Japan.

For this performance, **DEAR FRIENDS** will be joined by the Sewickley Academy Choral Group.

A wonderful program for the entire family at Christmas time. Tickets are \$8.00 for adults and \$4.00 for children. Seating is limited; one performance only. Call (412) 734-3906 or (412) 364-1123 to reserve tickets. Tickets may also be purchased at the Emsworth Shop n Save.

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