

BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

Vol. XXVI - Number 1, August, 2010



www.benavon.com/BAAHA/
mailto: baaha@benavon.org

An Old House

by Jane Winter

We moved to the Ben Avon area in 1957. Bob had taken a job with Pittsburgh Corning. Partly he was impressed with Pittsburgh based on what he saw from the train station and Gateway Center. When he returned home to Concord, Massachusetts he told me I had a job to do finding a home in the Pittsburgh suburbs. Coming from Concord, I was used to New England architecture and looked for the same thing here.



One day, tired from my search, I stopped at the drug store on Church Avenue for a cup of coffee. The proprietor of the drug store, Bill Espy, Jr. recognized me as a stranger and asked if there was anything he could do. Finding

that I was house hunting, he said he would telephone Sid Evans, a local realtor. Sid was only a couple of blocks from the store and shortly arrived to start a local tour. No luck with finding what I was looking for. Finally, Sid suggested renting. This would give me plenty of time to look around. We ended up in a unit of the triplex on Breeding and Forest in Ben Avon.

In two years living in the triplex, I fell in love with the Ben Avon area. My small poodle, Mop, was a big asset. During walks with him I became acquainted with nearly

everyone and every home in the surrounding area. One place that was appealing was an old farmhouse on three acres of land located at the intersection of Thornridge Road with Ben Avon Heights Road. The place was overgrown with weeds, but it also had an abundance

of wild flowers. The house was a central entrance, two story colonial building -- appealing to this New Englander.

However, it also had not been lived in for three years. It had been vandalized. Windows had been broken, doors were ajar to the open air, the staircase had been carried off. Worst of all, a beautifully bricked cistern, "miles deep", sat nearby with no protective lid. Local boys threw stones in it, but their bodies could have easily followed. I told Bob to buy the place and he agreed only if we could find someone who could restore it for a price we could afford.

Upon making inquiries, I found Mr. Oliver (Rick) Rickard, a local building contractor, living nearby on Merton Road. He turned out to

be a restoration genius. He and his men were enchanted by the way the house had been constructed. The beams that supported the first floor were tree trunks with bark still on them. Bricks were made of clay found on the property. Walls of plaster clung to a lattice-work of hand split laths woven like a basket. The plaster itself had pig hair reinforcement.

Perhaps hardest of all was dealing with the basement. There is a fairly steep drop-off of the hill at the front of the house. Steep enough that when built there was a direct entrance to the

basement underneath the stair to the main entry door. The basement had a dirt floor and although not deep, deep enough to allow for the horse that was kept there by at least one of the former owners. Rickard's men removed a couple of feet of dirt, installed a concrete floor, and closed the front opening. The final step was to chisel a new opening through a couple of feet of sandstone foundation!

My task to sell this project was helped when Rickard advised Bob of a \$3,000 drop in the asking price and pointed out it was time to make me happy.

Finally we did buy the house and three acres from Mr. Charles Bahl. That parcel had been carved out for Charles and

his sister by their father. They lived in the house until old age and sold vegetables, fruit, eggs and home made wine to the people of Ben Avon. *[Ed. Note: The wine sales must have been very discrete given the ostensible temperance of Presbyterian Ben Avon.]*

Charles' father sold most of his farm to a group of five attorneys for \$10,000 during the Great Depression in the early 1930s. While they had to sit on the investment until after World War II, when GIs returned the home building began.



What had been a farm became Shannopin Highlands.

A visit to the Recorder of Deeds showed the house to be built between 1830 when a deed has no mention of a house and 1833 when the house is mentioned. We use 1832 for convenience.

Bob and I moved into the house before renovations were completed. I was terrified when Bob left town on business because there were no locks on the doors. All I had to protect me was a medium size poodle with a strong sense of duty. Fortunately it was not Halloween, as the structure was termed the Haunted House by locals.

Now, having lived here happily for many years, we have never seen a ghost, but we have seen many happy times in this old house and in this community.

BAAHA Links:

by
John Warren

With this article we begin a series spotlighting websites which focus on local history, and thus might be interesting to readers of this newsletter.

As you may know, each issue of the newsletter is posted and available to you at <http://www.benavon.com/BAAHA/> our BAAHA website. Thanks to Jeff Cieslak (our webmaster), you can read the newsletter online as an HTML page or display it as a PDF file. The PDF version of the newsletter can also be printed or downloaded. Share it with family and friends, and convince them to join in supporting BAAHA!

For these 'BAAHA Links' articles, the plan is to collect them on a separate page of the website. Within each article, the links (like the one in the preceding paragraph) will be clickable, so that you

can read the text and then visit the website it describes.

It seems appropriate to begin the series by describing a website that includes old photographs of the building (the former Otto Dairy) that now houses the BAAHA office. At the same site, you could view a 1761 plan of Fort Pitt, study a 1906 property map of Ben Avon, or search for the name of an ancestor in an 1860 directory of Pittsburgh.

The Historic Pittsburgh website <http://digital.library.pitt.edu/pittsburgh> is a project of the University Library System at Pitt.

Work on the site began in 1998, with a series of meetings about digitizing rare materials – maps, photographs, and books – and making them available through a website. The materials that were digitized came from many sources, including the Heinz History Center, the History & Landmarks Foundation, and Pitt's own archives. For background about the site, the different collections, and the digitizing process, see the 'About' page. For information on recent updates to the site, see the 'News' page.

Although Historic Pittsburgh was established primarily for scholars, anyone is welcome to use it. In the space available for this article, we can barely scratch the surface in describing the material available at the site. Fortunately, it is well organized, and you shouldn't have much trouble finding your way around. The material at the site is organized into seven categories. In this article we will briefly discuss three of them: 'Texts', 'Maps', and 'Images'.

'Texts'

The 'Texts' section contains over 1,200 books, including 125 city directories that cover the years between

1815 and 1945. Every page has been scanned and put through an Optical Character Recognition process, making it possible for you to search the entire collection for a particular name or combination of words. If you find something interesting, you can print the page.

Tip #1: If you are searching for the name of a relative, don't forget to try entering the last name first, as it would appear in city directories, lists of graduates, lists of church members, and so forth.

Tip #2: To figure out when somebody moved to a particular address, or when a house was built, try a search on that address. If you try a search on '713 Copeland' (that's Copeland Street in Shadyside), you get 34 hits in 23 different directories. In the list of search results, the directories are sorted chronologically. For '713 Copeland', the earliest directory listed was published in 1893. Thus you can conclude that the house was probably built no more than a year or two before 1893.

When you try a few text searches, note that you have the option of searching only the directories, or searching only the non-directory books (mostly local histories and collections of biographies).

'Maps'

The property map mentioned above is one of 1,800 maps in 46 volumes published by the G. M. Hopkins Company between 1872 and 1940. Most of the volumes focus on the cities of Pittsburgh and Allegheny, but a few include outlying areas such as Ben Avon.

The 'Maps' section includes a link to the website of Pitt's Darlington Digital Library, which is a treasure house of

maps and books, including digitized versions of the journals of Lewis and Clark and Audubon's Birds of America. Among the maps, be sure to view – and zoom in on – the remarkable bird's-eye views from 1902 of local communities like McKees Rocks and Carnegie.

'Images'

The 'Images' section contains 48 collections comprising more than 15,000 images. There are collections from the City of Pittsburgh, P&LE, Chatham, CONSOL, Pittsburgh Railways, Heinz, and – as represented in this newsletter – Otto's Suburban Dairy!



One collection includes 'Before' and 'After' photos showing the impact of the smoke control program in the Forties. Another collection documents the construction of the William Penn. There is even a small collection of aerial photographs from the Twenties and Thirties.

You will find a collection of 116 photographs assembled in the early Thirties by the prominent architect, historian, and Ben Avon Heights resident Charles M. Stotz, during work on The Early Architectural History of Western Pennsylvania.

Every photo is documented with keywords, and any other information that is available. Thus you can run a search against one collection, or all 15,000 images. You can also browse through a collection, viewing the images as clickable thumbnails, displayed 20 per page. When you find a picture that you want to print or save or email to someone, just right-click it with your mouse and select the appropriate option.

Here's a suggestion: Search for 'Indian Trail Steps'. You will be rewarded with four photographs of this long-gone set of wooden steps which climbed the face of Mount Washington – all the way from Carson Street (near the Duquesne Incline) to Grandview Avenue! Three of the pictures are from 1935, and the fourth is from 1911. Compare your mental image of the green hillside of Mount Washington to the barren lunar landscape shown in the 1911 picture.

Historic Pittsburgh is a wonderful resource for folks doing family research or just browsing through local history. On every visit, you are certain to find something interesting.

Annual Report

from

Dick Herchenroether

The newsletter volume (XXVI now) designates each fiscal year running July through June. With each first issue, or number 1, we give you a report of BAAHA as a business. Familiar names continue to serve as our board. It meets 10 or 11 times each year, usually skipping December. I am grateful for their time, counsel and general support. That would be enough but they also all spend considerable time doing BAAHA's work. We could print their names in many of the lists below, but this one time

recognition is for all they do. Board members are:

Jean Henderson, Vice President
Trudy File, Secretary
Darlene Phillips, Archivist
Tracy Ferguson
Bob Kiser
B. J. Robertson

As we grow, more and more people help with individual projects. Some are ongoing and some are of a one time nature. If you would like to offer your time and talents please contact us. Email is an easy at baaha@benavon.org. We created a list "Non-cash Donors" to recognize those who help this way. The support is meaningful beyond the specific task performed.

Another new list is to recognize those who have brought us materials for our collections and records. Such gifts are at the core of our mission to preserve and learn about our past. Now that we have had our office (Carmel Commons / 300 Camp Horne Road) for a while, we are organized well enough for you to come looking for something. Or just come for a look. We recently started the practice of someone working in the office each Wednesday afternoon. If you want to see us, we are available by appointment for other times. We will move toward adding more regular hours as we can.

Our June, 2010 financial position looks shocking. For several years we have gained a little or lost a little but held total assets at about \$15-16,000 in total. This year we dropped to \$11,300 by spending \$5,575 to replace the rotting rear, bottom log of the Log House. This type of expense has always been expected to be necessary. So our savings did what we needed to do. But in the future we will have more to do. Rebuilding our savings to be again ready

to act in the future is an important goal for this year.

Participation in the donor clubs (above \$50 for the year) increased from 28 to 37 with the return of seven givers from the first year (ending June 30, 2008 and six new names offsetting four of those who gave in 2009 but not this year.

Total membership and extra donation dollars rose from \$4,200 last year to about \$5,900 for the year ending June 30, 2010. Total donors numbered 105 which is a bit lower than last year's 117. Expanding financial and other forms of support is what we need to succeed in the future. If you have even briefly reviewed our financial report each year, you may have concluded (correctly?) we might be a deserving, but not a particularly needy operation. The combination of maintaining the Log House with our commitment to being available to the public use will up the ante (a little casino language) financially. Your reason to join a club, or up your level has arrived!

Another commitment is to create a staff of docents so we may open the Log House to visitors more regularly. Last year the house was open six times. Prior years were generally two or three times.

Last year we held only one public program, but John Kelly's lecture on art glass in the area was as fascinating as it was thorough. We helped with another visit by astronaut Mike Fincke. Visiting researchers included a Pennsylvania RR group and a Pitt graduate student.

Our Wish List

This new way to support BAAHA worked super well last year. We received a standard four drawer file cabinet. We also now have a copier/laser printer. The biggest surprise was the donation of a "Flat file cabinet" for storage of maps, blueprints, plans and oversize materials. Our neighbor on Western Avenue, contractor Keith Johnston, gave us three sections of five drawers each and sent a couple of his workers to deliver and assemble the heavy pieces.

Current wishes include one more 4 drawer file [15" W x 52" H x 26 1/2" D]. Is someone good with the ins/outs of grant money? Capital costs to preserve the Log House should be a well received proposal, I expect. We have scanners but set-up and driver stability could be better. Our OS is WIN2K service pack 4.

Financial Report

Ben Avon Area Historical Association
July 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010

INCOME/EXPENSE

INCOME

Interest	\$ 81.33
Mailing list dues	1,530.00
Donations	4,580.00
Items for sale	<u>270.00</u>
TOTAL INCOME	<u>\$ 6,461.33</u>

EXPENSES

Postage and supplies	\$ 442.71
Rent	3,600.00
Maintenance	5,575.00
Electric service	100.00
Publishing	180.00
Program/Education	315.00
Fund raising	70.00
Preservation	162.23
Property Insurance	<u>809.00</u>
TOTAL EXPENSES	<u>\$11,253.94</u>

NET DECREASE **\$ (4,792.61)**

BALANCE SHEET

	<u>6/30/2009</u>	<u>6/30/2010</u>
Cash	\$127.00	\$127.00
Checking/MM	7,898.09	11,231.45
CD	<u>8,125.97</u>	<u>0.00</u>
TOTAL	<u>\$16,151.06</u>	<u>\$11,358.45</u>

Certified by:
Dick Herchenroether, President & Treasurer

Donor Clubs

Based on receipts
July, 2009 through June, 2010

Benefactors

(\$500 +)

Lynn Evans
Dick & Sue Herchenroether

Patrons

(\$200 - \$499)

Trudy File
Keith & Michelle Johnston
Henry Herchenroether
Betty Jane Robertson
John Warren

Subscribers

(\$50 - \$199)

Jane & John Angelini
Jim & Bonnie Bass
Bud & Peggy Bezdek
John & Gail Buchanan
Helen J Calhoun
Jean Clem
Nelson & Carol Craigie
John & Suzanne Graf
Mary Ann & Ed Graf
Betty Haughin
Peter & Susan Herchenroether
Harvey & Barbara Hinch
Martha B Huddy
Bill & Jody Jackson
Brian Jensen
Bill & Mildred Johnston
James D Little
Bill & Barb Millar
Mark Phillips
Todd Phillips
Tom Phillips
Bill & Shirley Sample
Robert & Marjorie Seelhorst
John & Lou Seifarth
Janet Phillips Shaffer
Marjorie T Simonds
Thelma Woelfel
Mary & Al Zamba

Corporate Support

Avon Club Foundation
Sewickley Valley Historical Society
Community Presbyterian Youth Group

Non-Cash Donors

The gift of time/talent and in-kind supplies.

Dan Benaquisto
Jeff Cieslak
Mike Connolly
Lloyd Corder
Nelson Craigie
Ralph Fink
David Henderson
Keith Johnston
Pat Mature
Barb Meehan
Johanna Schaffner
Paula Templeton
John Warren
Mary Witul

Historical Materials Given

Richard Batchelor
Ellie Brennan
Elsa Dickson
Carol Fisher
Diane Hartman
Henry Herchenroether
Janet Lewis
Martha Mitchell
Tom Phillips
Lou Seifarth
Katie Simmons
Marj Simonds
Ralph Stroyne
Jane Winter
Charles (Chuck) Wright
Avon Club
Ben Avon Borough

Renewing Members – THANK YOU!

Jean Kratzert	Aliquippa PA
Marj Simonds	Kilbuck
Trudy File	BA
Johanna & Allen Schaffner	BA
Janet Phillips Shaffer	Franklin Park PA
Mark Phillips	El Segundo CA
Thomas Phillips	Aleppo PA
Kathleen Schurer	BA
Al & Mary Zamba	Evans City PA
Joan Turnbull	Vista CA
John & Gail Buchanan	Kilbuck
Fred & Gloria Karn	Ohio Twp
James Little	McCandless PA
Patty & Richard Latshaw	EMS
Margo Forsythe	Kilbuck
Helen Calhoun	BA
Ed & Jan Steinhauser	BA

Ben Avon Area Historical Association
 c/o 136 Dickson Avenue
 Ben Avon
 Pittsburgh, PA 15202



ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Renewing Members – THANK YOU!

Mary Ann Wrenshall	Avalon
John Warren	BA
Ed & Mary Ann Graf	Pittsburgh PA
Suzanne & John Graf	BA
Karen & Tim Graf	Alexandria VA
Carol & Richard Snively	BA
Betty Haughin	Zelienople PA
Peter & Susan Herchenroether	BA
Bob & Jane Winter	Kilbuck
Kathleen Elder	BA
John & Adda Ferguson	Aleppo
Len & Barbara Barcosky	BA
Keith & Michelle Johnston	BA
Tim & Diana Hartman	BA
Todd Phillips	Franklin Park PA
Dick & Sue Herchenroether	BA
Lynn Evans	BAH
Bud & Peggy Bezdek	El Dorado Hills CA
Mary Witul	Kilbuck
Ronald Hahn	Glenshaw PA

Ben Avon Area Historical Association c/o 136 Dickson Avenue, Ben Avon, PA 15202 baaha@benavon.org	
Name:	
Address:	
City, State, Zip:	
Local Municipality:	
Phone:	
Email address:	
Members (\$10/\$20)	Subscribers (from \$50)
Patrons (from \$200)	Benefactors (\$500+)

The month/year on your mailing label indicates the last time we received a contribution from you.
 Thank you for supporting BAAHA