

# BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## NEWSLETTER

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### Promoting Ben Avon Heights

#### A Confluence of Conveniences or A Chicken House in Every Lot

by Michael Weir

#### Growth

After the Civil War, the population of the United States rapidly increased, fueled by natural increases and immigration. Between 1860 and 1910, Allegheny County's population increased by 470 percent from 178,831 to 1,018,463. To help cope with the growth, farms in and around the City of Pittsburgh were subdivided into building lots and sold to families wishing to escape the City for the countryside.

In 1910, Ben Avon's Walter P. Fraser recorded the purchase of an 84 acre portion of the Taylor Farm for \$55,000. The deal may have been struck a few years before the sale was recorded with Allegheny County. Fraser was involved in real estate in Ben Avon and Pittsburgh. The Ben Avon Heights project was one of his largest developments. In 1911, Fraser transferred the ownership to the Highfield Company and recorded a plan subdividing the parcel into 81 building lots and a golf course. Fraser was an owner of the Highfield Company. At that time,

the land was in Kilbuck Township. In 1913, it became the Borough of Ben Avon Heights. The original plan included a few lots along Norwood Avenue that remained part of Kilbuck Township. These lots were eventually dropped leaving 76 lots for sale.

The golf course was in three sections so that every lot, with the exception of those on Briar Cliff Road, faced on a portion of the course. One section was bounded by Biddeford, Banbury and Clovelly Roads, a second was next to Canterbury Road and the third included the area around the present-day park. A club house was constructed between Biddeford Road and Banbury Lane across the road from where the Taylor farmhouse had been before it burned down in 1902.

Fraser planned the promotion of his development around the amenities that buyers could expect from its country location, as well as more urban amenities - utilities, paved streets, recreation, restrictions on use, and its easy access to the City of Pittsburgh.

Fraser's timing was nearly perfect. He was able to incorporate into his residential development advantages that would become the norm in the 20th century. The development was modern, promoted as "a country home location with all city conveniences." There were

only a few reminders of the area's more agrarian past.

### Promotion

Fraser did not waste time in promoting his new development. He began the campaign in the summer of 1910 before the subdivision was recorded with Allegheny County. An advertisement in the *City and Suburban Life* (August 27, 1910) promoted the development as:

The most exclusive home settlement ever plotted within the Pittsburgh District located within ten minutes' walk to the Ben Avon and Emsworth railroad stations and five minutes' walk to electric cars. Every plot overlooking the beautiful green lawns of County Club golf course practically having the entire golf course for your front lawn. Situated high, with a beautiful vista overlooking the Ohio River and the aristocratic little Borough of Ben Avon. Every plot large, nothing less than one-third of an acre. A country home location with all city conveniences. Every plot sensibly restricted. Prices \$900 to \$1800 (6 c to 12 c per square foot.)

Subsequent *City and Suburban Life* advertisements in 1911 added more inducements.

Every plot restricted as to architecture, location and construction of building.

All roadways private, making this tract (Ben Avon Heights) a little municipality entirely owned and controlled by its individual property owners.

Every week takes more Ben Avon Heights Home Sites off the market.

Attracting the best people to this district.

Positively and absolutely the cheapest high class suburban property ever offered for sale.

By 1911, he was building on some of the lots, advertising "Nifty" effects in stone and shingle cottages at Ben Avon Heights with hard wood floors, hot water heat, upon paved streets overlooking the golf grounds, upon 100 foot lots \$5000 complete." He began to include pictures

of houses in his ads, although some were of houses he built elsewhere.



16 Clovelly (Avalon behind) built 1911 – later enlarged

The first sale was to Mary M. Bryant. Her purchase of Lot 50 for \$1500 was recorded on January 25 1911. The lot is now 21 Briar Cliff Road. Despite Fraser's claim that he would offer no discounts, the purchase price was below the \$1900 asking price.

### Deed Restrictions

Mary Bryant's deed provides an example of the restrictions that were put on the sale to make the plan more attractive to buyers. "That there shall not be erected, or suffered to be erected, more than one single dwelling house, and a suitable and well-kept garage, stable and chicken house appurtenant to the said dwelling house on each lot." The restrictions also included a 50 foot building line and the requirement that the out buildings be located within 50 feet of the back lot line. These restrictions were to last for 20 years.

Restrictions of this sort were common before municipal zoning. The Borough's 1994 Zoning Ordinance limits residential dwellings to one-family homes and includes setback and height requirements. The building line was set at 40 feet. There is no mention of chicken houses in the 1994 ordinance.

## Golf

Golf did not come to America until the last years of the 19th century with the founding of St. Andrews in Yonkers New York in 1888. Despite the late start, it spread quickly. The United States Golf Association was founded in 1894. A USGA survey in 1900 turned up 1,040 golf courses nationwide. Locally, the Allegheny Country Club was founded in 1895 in the City of Allegheny. It moved to its present location in Sewickley in 1902. The Pittsburgh Field Club added a three hole course in 1895 on the Club's cricket grounds. By 1900, the course had been expanded to 9 holes. In 1915, the Club moved from the Park Place neighborhood in Pittsburgh's east end to its present location in Fox Chapel.



Golf at BACC with club house, water tower and the windmill in the background

Fraser captured this interest in golf in the Ben Avon Heights development. He designed the development around a nine hole golf course. It was described in the August 1912 issue of Golf Magazine as "one of the prettiest courses..." Fraser's advertisement in the July 30, 1910 issue of City and Suburban Life described the course as "a 9 hole golf course ... laid out by Mr. Jack Dingwall, a roomy club house with wide porches, hardwood floors, kitchen, bath, etc."

Jack Dingwall was a local player of some note. In 1903, he was the Western Pennsylvania Golf Association Open Champion. He was the pro at the Stanton Heights golf course. Stanton Heights was planned as a golf and residential development similar to the plans for Ben Avon Heights. It opened in 1909. The Stanton Heights golf course was closed in the 1950s. Dingwall died in 1923 while on a golf outing to England.

The course was opened on May 30th 1911. There was "motorbus service connecting with over thirty trains a day." The dues were \$25 a year.

It was not the only course locally. Bellevue boasted a 9 hole golf course organized in 1910 by the Bellevue Club, (a social group) and the Brighton

Golf Club. It opened in 1912 with the expectation of expanding to 18 holes. The Brighton Club had used the Allegheny Country Club course after the Allegheny Country Club moved to Sewickley and the new Bellevue Country Club continued to use it.

After the Ben Avon Heights course was built, Fraser sold it to the Ben Avon Country Club. The July 26 1912 issue of the Pittsburgh Press reported that the sale included "the stipulation that the ground shall never be used for any

purpose other than it is now. In case of violation, it will revert to the Highfield Co.” The golf course did not last. The front yard of the club house on Banbury Lane was sold off. Fraser reacquired the rest of course and, in 1926, divided what was left into 32 additional lots. The club house remains as a private residence. Unlike the 100 foot lots in the original plan, most of the 32 additional lots were 75 to 80 feet wide and a few about 50 feet wide. The portion on Canterbury was acquired by Shannopin. A portion of the area around the park was sold off as building lots and the rest remains the Borough’s park.

Golf in Ben Avon Heights did not disappear. Golf still remained a draw. In 1919, a new organization was established. It bought the Jackman Farm in Kilbuck and, in 1920, opened the 9 hole Shannopin Country Club course. Nine more holes were added later. The club house is in Ben Avon Heights.

John I. Thompson was its first president. In the 1930s, Thompson bought a portion of the Wilson Farm to west of Ben Avon Heights which he divided into residential building lots on Wilson Drive, Devon Lane, and Kent Road with their own set of rules and restrictions. In 1936, the Thompson Plan was annexed by Ben Avon Heights.

### **Chickens**

Chicken coops, or “houses,” were a common fixture in suburban and even urban backyards in the early 20th century. Chickens were raised for the eggs, not for meat. As the population migrated from farms into the city, they took an inexpensive source of eggs with them. It was not until the 1920s with the development of the broiler chicken and chicken farming on an industrial scale

that the backyard chicken became less popular.

Local businesses catered to the backyard farmer. In 1910, the Ben Avon Lumber Company advertised in the October 29 issue of City and Suburban Life “why not raise chickens at home this winter and be independent regarding the high price of eggs? A warm chicken house, a few chickens, and a little attention during spare time is all that is necessary. We carry lumber in stock especially for chicken houses at reasonable prices and we are ready and glad to give you any information that we can along this line.” The Bellevue Poultry Yards was willing to sell eggs for hatching. There were a number of poultry supply businesses including Lang and Close on Pittsburgh’s North Side, and Pinkerton Brothers in Bellevue.

### **Transportation**

The availability of rail, street car and automobile transportation with paved streets made suburbs like Ben Avon Heights possible. Fraser’s promotional materials stressed these transportation advantages. Some of the earlier rural housing developments were intended to provide summer homes to city residents with the breadwinner joining his family on weekends. Improvements in transportation and the close proximity to Pittsburgh made Ben Avon Heights a year round community.

Rail service was made available in the years after the Civil War by the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne and Chicago Railway Panhandle route. The line had stations at Bellevue, West Bellevue, Emsworth, and at Dixmont. Service lasted until after World War II.

The construction of the trolley lines through the northern boroughs moved

with fits and starts from the 1890s on. The construction of the original High Bridge as a trestle street car bridge between Bellevue and Pittsburgh in 1910 made it possible to have express street car service between the northern boroughs and the city. (In 1924, the bridge was replaced with a more substantial concrete structure.) The service continues today, but on busses following the trolley route along Lincoln, California and Church Avenues.

Before about 1890, it was rare to see paved streets outside of cities. Within cities, streets were usually paved with brick or cobble stones. Outside of cities, streets were usually either dirt or crushed stone. With the advent of the automobile, traveling at higher speeds than horse drawn carriages and wagons, dust became a problem. The solution was to use tar or Portland cement as a binder along with crushed stone to pave streets. This limited the dust. The term "macadamize" was used to describe this process. (John McAdam perfected the use of crushed stone on roads in the early 19th century. The use of binders was a later addition long after his death.)

In the northern boroughs, macadamizing streets and putting in curbs began in the 1890s. By the time Fraser began to develop Ben Avon Heights it would have been expected that the development would have properly paved streets

### **Utilities**

In addition to making investments into the transportation infrastructure, local governments and private companies were making investments in water, gas, sewer and electric light services. Water and sewer services had been regularly provided by local governments as public health measures.

Gas and electric light services were relatively new. One of the early predecessors to Duquesne Light was formed in 1880. The Manufacturers Natural Gas Company (later Columbia Gas), was formed to serve industry in 1885. By 1900 these and other utility companies were moving into residential development. They began to sell appliances to increase their sales. In 1912 the Allegheny Light Company, one of Duquesne Light's competitors, offered electric irons to replace sad irons heated on coal stoves. The Company also offered to wire older homes at cost if they were in reach of the Company's lines. In 1914 Columbia Gas offered Reliable gas stoves for sale.

Fraser included all of these utility services in his development. From a 21st century perspective, telephone, cable and internet services were missing, but they were added later on the Duquesne Light Company's poles.

### **Sales**

Unfortunately, Fraser did one thing wrong. He put the lots up for sale just before the country entered a recession. The recession of 1913-1914 saw production and real income decline nationwide. The economy did not see the beginning of a recovery until 1915. Real recovery did not come until the start of World War I.

Sales of the Ben Avon Heights lots did not move quickly. In 1911, after the Highfield Company acquired most of the lots, there were only 15 recorded sales to new owners by either the Company or by Fraser. In 1912, only 2 lots were sold to new owners. Fraser and the Highfield swapped 11 lots. In 1913, there was only one recorded sale to a new owner. Sales did pick up after the War. The eventual division of the golf course into building

lots added 32 lots to the initial 76. By 1929, at least 63 more lots had been sold for a total of about 81 lots. Buyers included the Shannopin Golf Club, Muskingum College, and the Christian Laymen's Association. The Laymen's Association built an assembly hall on two lots on Stratford Road. The hall was eventually torn down and the lots were turned over to residential development in the 1960s.

In the end, all of the lots were sold and the residents of the Borough were able to enjoy the amenities that Fraser brought to the development of Ben Avon Heights.

Fraser was not the only developer in the northern boroughs. Before Fraser's purchase of a portion of the Taylor Farm, the North Avalon Plan of lots had been laid out to the east of Norwood Avenue. At the same time Fraser was active, H.P. McCurdy was selling lots and houses along Home Avenue between Bellevue and Avalon. In the July 19, 1911 issue of City and Suburban Life, he offered "Cottages, Bungalows and Bungalettes ready for your approval." McCurdy was also selling lots in Bellevue as chicken farms. A few years earlier, another developer in Bellevue, the Roseburg Land Company laid out a neighborhood in Bellevue. In the October 23, 1909 issue of City and Suburban Life, the company offered the "best locations in the borough for sale at prices to attract and with restrictions and protection in the neighborhood and surroundings."

This activity quickly transformed the northern boroughs from farm land into residential suburbs for the growing City of Pittsburgh.

## **Collection Processing: The Key to Reading History**

by Terri Blanchette

For the past several months, I have had the privilege of working with the growing collections at BAAHA. The treasure trove of information and stories I have discovered along the way are only a slice of the amazing history that is in our own backyards.

Ever wonder why it's called Camp Horne Road? Or why you keep seeing the names of Thompson, Duff, Crawford, Courtney, Wilson and Dickson? Did you know that there were once plans for a ski slope and girl and boy scout camps along Camp Horne Road, or that there once was a pond near Route 65 that provided ice skating in the winter and a fun swim in the summer?

As a relatively new (since 2002) resident of Ohio Township, an historian, and a museum professional, I was aware of some of the basics of the history of the region; the early native population, the advent of land speculators, the influence of both Ben Franklin and George Washington, the Whiskey Rebellion, the early industries of coke and steel production, the diminishing of those same industries and now the budding of new businesses evident in the increase of housing and population in our local townships and boroughs.

Those histories were all well and good and interesting in their own right. However, as I have discovered, they don't outshine the depth and importance of the history that is within Avonworth, Ben Avon Heights, the townships of Ohio and Kilbuck, and the boundaries of Emsworth and Ben Avon boroughs – the area that

makes up the Ben Avon Area Historical Association. This impressively deep history became more evident as I processed collections related to the lives of the Courtneys and their mill, and most recently, the items of the James W. Knox collection.



Three of many boxes needed for Knox Collection.

History is something we all have in common. Yet, our interest in the subject can be as different as any aspect of our personalities. Some appreciate the intricacies of a military scuffle. For others, specific topics such as economics or business are what interest them. As for me, it is the people themselves that make history interesting. Who lived in the old houses? What was a regular day for them? How did they spend their free time and where did they work? This kind of “people” history, as I call it, is where my personal interests are, and while it includes many aspects of life such as military and business history, it is decidedly focused on the people involved in making that history.

Often, when people discover that I am an historian, they make a point to tell me that history wasn’t interesting to them – that is, until they were adults. I can empathize, as it was the same with me. As youths our “timeline” is relatively short,

and we have yet to realize or appreciate our place in the larger scope of humankind let alone understand how our actions as kids will someday be part of, or even guide, our total history. It is only as we age and appreciate the cause and effect of life’s activities that we can see how events are “knitted” together to form stories – our stories. I believe that it is this awareness of the boundaries of time that causes the sense of “speeding up” that older adults, including myself, marvel at. The more we can relate history to own experiences, the more relevant it becomes and the more it sticks in our minds beyond just memorizing a date or name. Looking into the faces of a family from the 1880s in an image taken in front of their modest home along Lowries (or Lowry’s) Run is infinitely more fascinating and engaging than reading “there were many families living along Lowries Run road in the 1800s.”

While it is true that we are continually weaving our own histories, it is also true that the history we think we are making, the story of our own lives, may be something different than the story a future historian or archivist will glean from those things we leave behind.

Reading history from objects can never give a stranger a complete picture of one’s life. The emotions and day-to-day interactions with others cannot be understood beyond what is captured in a photo or a letter; therefore our history can only be made up of things we share with others.

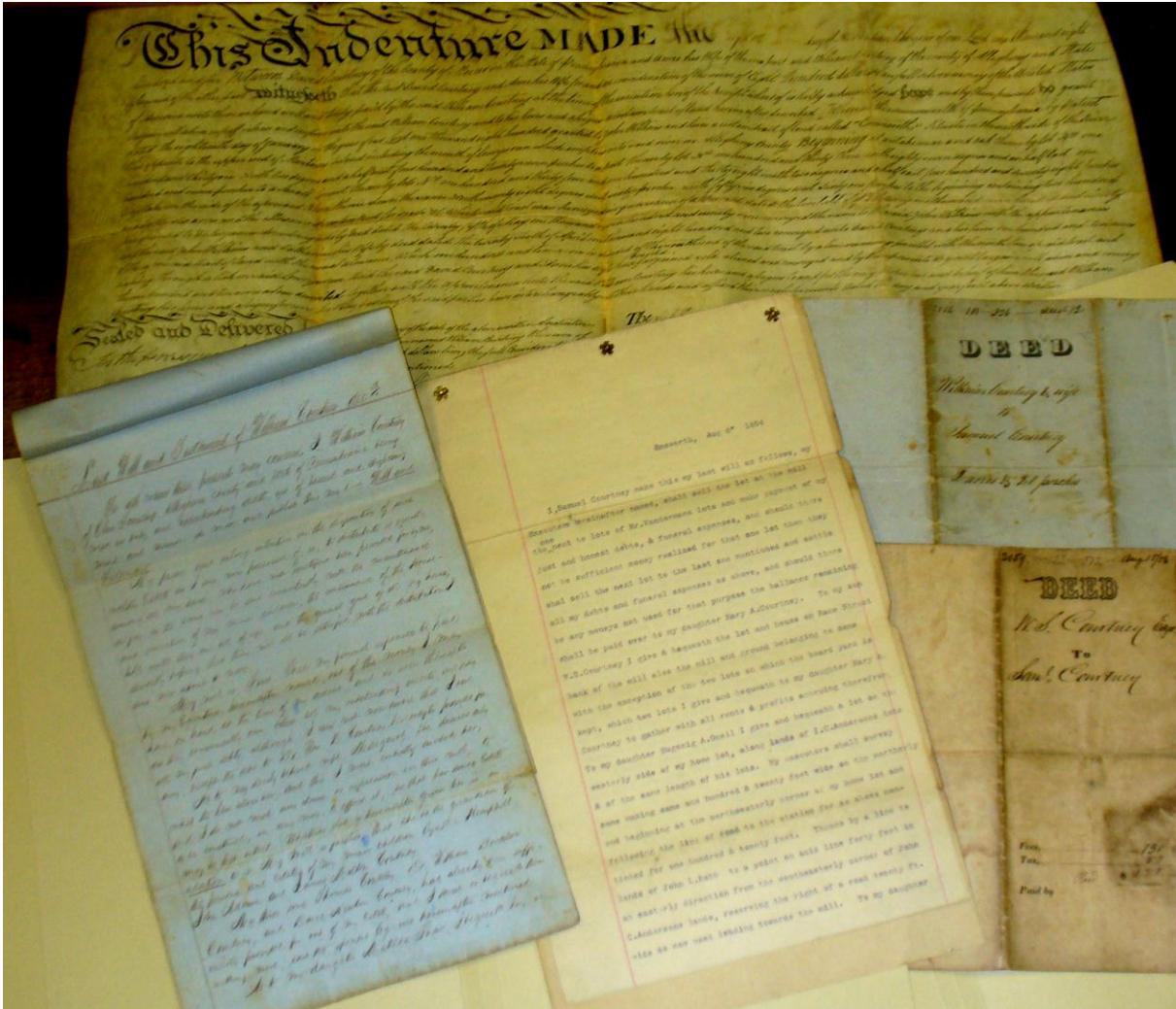
However, there is a surprising amount one can understand – and even feel – by reading historic objects such as the ones I have been working with. But first, reading a collection requires that the objects be organized in some way. The collection must be processed.

So what does “processing a collection” mean?

Collection processing, in this case, means arranging and describing items in a way that allows a stranger to the collection to get to the materials they seek and to more easily take in their meaning. Processing a collection can be

components to processing a collection: inventory, accession, and preservation.

An inventory is created using some sort of database. More often than not, something as simple as a spreadsheet is used. However, a hand-written inventory can be just as effective. Larger organizations with a significant number of



Courtney family deeds and wills (early to late 1800s) from the Wagg Collection

a time consuming, yet wholly fascinating and extremely important effort. To do it right requires some amount of training. However, it is something that can be taught to nearly anyone interested in learning. There are essentially three

large collections use a much more sophisticated computer program usually including electronic images of the items. Information about each item is entered and should include description, size and date; where the item came from, known as its provenance should also be

included. For organizations such as BAAHA, it is also important to note where the item is being kept in the building; as items are entrusted to organizations for keeping, it is vital that they can be retrieved at any time they are asked for. Being able to find an item is so important that it is often a required part of archive and museum operations to have an “audit,” where someone not directly affiliated with the collections chooses a number of items from the database and those responsible for the collection are required to present the chosen materials within a designated time period. Often a condition report is then made to show that the item remains in the state in which it was donated. This auditing not only proves the item has not been lost or sold, but it also shows it is being well kept.

The second aspect of collection processing is accessioning. Webster defines this to mean “increase by something added.” For archives and museums, it’s a sort of formal acceptance of an item into a collection by assigning it a specific number. The number has at least 3 components to it: the year it was donated to the organization, the collection number, and the item number. If you are the second person who donates next year and you donate 3 items, your accession numbers would be: 2013.002.001,002, and 003.

Finally there is the effort of preservation. For the most part, this means that there is care in how the item is stored once it is donated. Knowing how to properly store an item is critical to having that item around for years to come. There are “best practices” for the care of any kind of item donated, and often they follow common sense; an item rolled up when it is donated, is flattened slowly using weights, and then stored flat, photos are kept in a dark, cool and dry

location, and newspaper is stored separately as it can speed the deterioration of other paper-based items.

All three of these steps are critical to enable the “reading” and understanding of the history in a collection. Without the efforts of organizations such as BAAHA, much of what we know about the past would depend on incomplete bits of hearsay and/or memory. And, much like playing “telephone,” what is remembered is altered somewhat with every retelling.

So take a good look around at the “items” that you might leave behind and consider what others will “read” in your history years from now.

### **As we go to print**

On a recent Friday, we hosted a meeting of educators from Avonworth Middle and High schools and the Heinz History Center. An agenda from the Heinz Center Affiliates Program (HCAP) lead our discussion of ideas for how extra learning, senior projects and even the civics curriculum might use BAAHA resources. Local education has always been a priority and with the help of HCAP we are optimistic we have all the pieces for success. As well as putting our collections to use, this should increase awareness of BAAHA throughout our community.

### **Renewing Members – THANK YOU!**

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