

# BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## NEWSLETTER

Vol. XXVIII - Number 4, May, 2013



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For details on the celebration click on **centennial** at  
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### The Other Phipps Conservatory

BAAHA Links #8:  
by John Warren

Imagine that you're making weekend plans with a friend. Your friend says, "Let's go to Phipps Conservatory." Without asking, you know your destination will be Schenley Park.

But now let's drop back a century and imagine yourself in a similar conversation. Your friend suggests a visit to Phipps Conservatory. You would respond with a question: "Which one?"

For just over 50 years local residents could visit two conservatories – the 1893 glasshouse in Schenley Park and an 1887 building on the North Side, on the site where the aviary stands today.

In both cases, funding to construct the facility came from Henry Phipps (1839 – 1930), who was a childhood friend of Andrew Carnegie, and later Carnegie's business partner in Carnegie Steel. Phipps had grown up on the North Side (which was the separate city of Allegheny until 1907), and he never forgot where he came from.

There were Phipps-funded projects in several locations on the North Side in the late 1800s and early 1900s. We will

focus on the conservatory site in this issue, and save the other projects for a future article. As will be seen, the story of the conservatory site includes work by two prominent architectural firms with connections to our local community.

### Allegheny Commons

In the 1880s, when Phipps decided to build a conservatory for the City of Allegheny, a good site for the building became available. The new Western Penitentiary along the Ohio River at Woods Run was completed in 1882, making it possible to demolish the old penitentiary and construct the Phipps Conservatory in its place.

This was a major milestone in a story that is too big for this article – the creation and evolution of Allegheny Commons as a public park over the past 150 years. Writing in the Post-Gazette (November 24, 2001), Patricia Lowry provided this one-paragraph summary of the early history of the land that became Allegheny Commons:

When the town of Allegheny was laid out in 1788, 102 surrounding acres were designated as common pasture land. By the 1860s, much of the land still was held in common, but the pasture had deteriorated into a swampy dumping ground where pigs roamed wild. The city hired the Manhattan firm of Mitchell and Grant to turn the rough and rustic commons into an elegant 84-acre landscaped park with two grand promenades, specimen trees, fountains, a naturalistic lake, and ornamental flower beds.

For a bit of historical context, we should note that it was 1858 when Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux designed Central Park in New York City, and in the years that followed they designed many urban parks. They were not, however, the designers of Allegheny Commons.

Considering Patricia Lowry's description of the design of the park, it seems safe to assume that getting rid of the old penitentiary must have been a high priority for the folks who were creating Allegheny Commons!

Learn more about Allegheny Commons – then and now –at the website of the Allegheny Commons Initiative [[www.alleghenycommons.org](http://www.alleghenycommons.org)]. View their interactive map to see the extent of the park, and click on various points to pop up information on its current features.

If you'd like to dig a bit deeper, go to the "About" section of their website and download the Master Plan for Allegheny Commons (in the form of a 152-page PDF file). The document includes a comprehensive history of Allegheny Commons, but we recommend that you postpone reading it until you have scrolled all the way to the end of the document and printed out the three-page timeline.

We can't resist sharing a couple of nuggets from the master plan document:

- Probably the most familiar sculptural feature of Allegheny Commons is the deer. According to the timeline, it has been there since the 1870s. Imagine how many young children have played on or around the deer since that time!

- Lake Elizabeth has had its ups and downs over the years. Sometime in the 1930s it was drained, and during World War II the dry lake bed served as a collection point for recyclable metal. After the war, the lake bed was filled in, and it remained that way until the late 1960s, when the lake was reborn.

The master plan lays out the long and complicated history of the evolution of Allegheny Commons, including the participation of two firms with connections to our local community.

After 1952, when the aviary was built on the old Phipps Conservatory site, the architectural firm of Lawrence and Anthony Wolfe began to be involved in the design of enhancements to that facility. The Wolfes were already doing work for the Pittsburgh Zoo, which administered the aviary in those days. In 1964 they produced a plan for a major expansion of the aviary, including several additional buildings. The aviary did not expand to that extent, but its site did grow from 1.5 acres to 2.8 acres in the late 1960s.

In 1966 another firm with connections to our local community, the landscape architecture firm of Simonds & Simonds, was asked to take an overall look at Allegheny Commons. They produced a comprehensive plan. Only a handful of its recommendations were implemented, but the plan did lead to the rebirth of Lake Elizabeth.

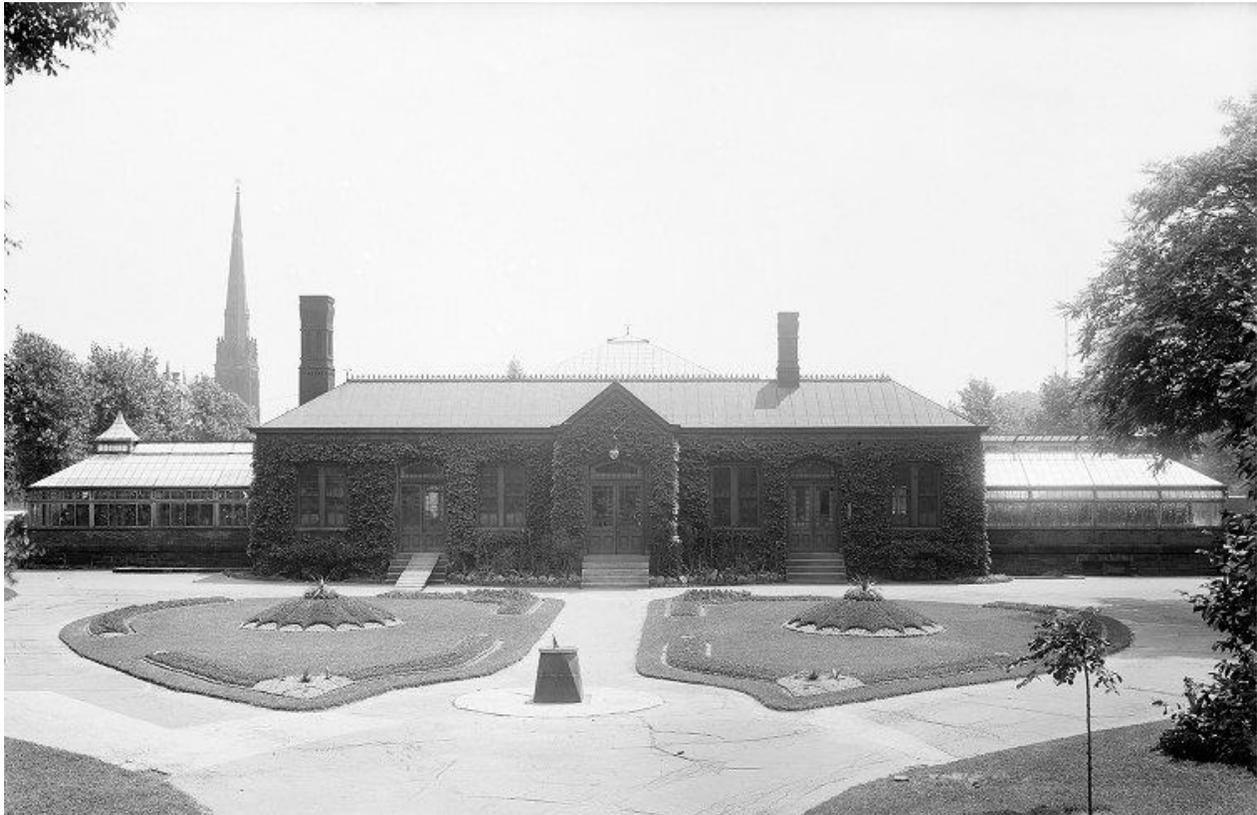
The master plan document carries the history of Allegheny Commons forward to the 21st century, including the designation of the National Aviary in 1993. The document contains a number of site plans and old photographs, and is definitely worth a look.

## Penitentiary/Conservatory/Aviary Site

Having taken note of the big picture – the evolution of Allegheny Commons – it makes sense to return our focus to the conservatory site. The 1911 photograph provides a visitor’s-eye view of Phipps Conservatory. In those days, a typical

website that we have not previously referenced in these articles.

The creator of the ‘Old Pittsburgh Maps – Pittviewer’ website starts with the property maps at Historic Pittsburgh. He selects a specific location, such as the site of the old Western Penitentiary, and



Here is the Phipps Conservatory on the North Side, as it appeared on August 1, 1911. In this photo from the Historic Pittsburgh website, we are looking south, toward downtown Pittsburgh. The conservatory was built in 1887, around the same time as St. Peter’s Church, which we see in the background. The church still stands, although it no longer has its steeple. From 1827 until 1886, there had been a penitentiary on this site. After the conservatory was demolished, the aviary was built here in 1952.

visitor would have come by trolley to somewhere in the vicinity of Allegheny General Hospital – perhaps the intersection of Federal Street and North Avenue – and made the short walk to the conservatory.

For a different perspective on the conservatory, we can look at old property maps – and do it through an impressive

determines the portion of each old property map that shows it. He then configures those maps so that they match up, making it possible for you to click from one map to the next and watch the buildings change over the years.

This link below will take you to the narrative portion of his entry about the old Western Penitentiary, consisting of some background text and a couple of pictures.

At the bottom of the narrative, click ‘Go to the Pittviewer’ to reach the map display. An explanatory pop up disappears when you click ‘OK’, revealing the 1890 map of the conservatory site. You can see the shape of the building, and you will notice that there is a bandstand behind it! [oldpittmaps.wordpress.com/2012/09/20/western-penitentiary-allegheny-commons/]

There are 10 views of this location – eight property maps (1835 – 1923) and aerial photos from 1939 and 2012. From the 1835 map, we get an idea of how the prison was laid out at the time that Charles Dickens saw it during his visit to Pittsburgh in March 1842.

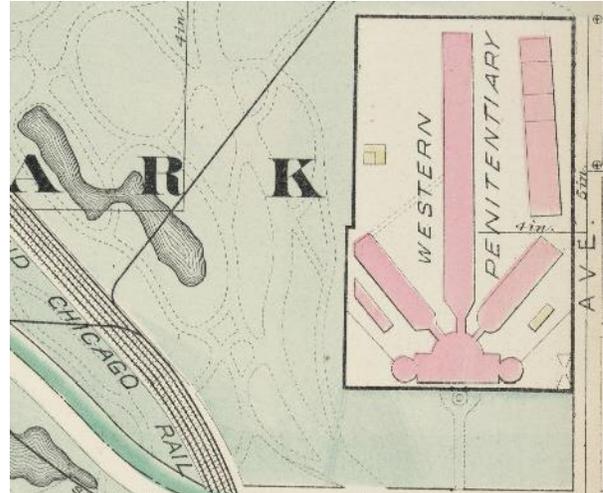
Screen captures of portions of two maps document the transition from penitentiary to conservatory.

‘Old Pittsburgh Maps – Pittviewer’ appears to be a website worth checking out from time to time, as its creator adds content to his site.

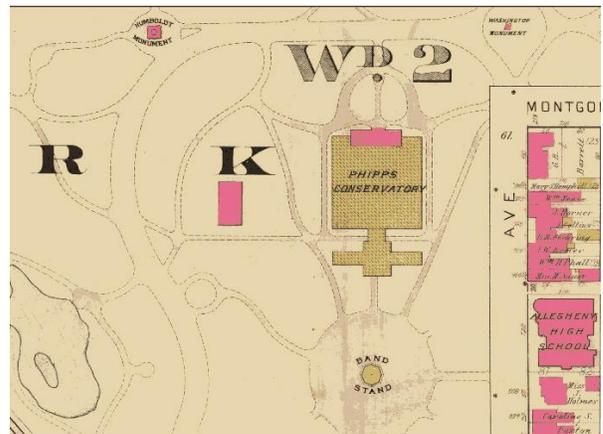
For half a dozen years, the Allegheny Commons conservatory was the only one in the area, but that changed in 1893, with the construction of the big glasshouse in Schenley Park. Now the City of Allegheny and the City of Pittsburgh each had a Phipps Conservatory!

After Allegheny was consolidated into Pittsburgh in 1907, it was probably inevitable that the Allegheny conservatory, which was smaller and older, would enter a period of reduced funding and slow decline. Nevertheless, it remained open to the public, and was particularly valued by residents of what was now Pittsburgh’s North Side.

Calamity struck the conservatory on November 14, 1927. An enormous natural gas storage tank – a cylinder 20 stories tall, located along the river at the



1882 map shortly before the demolition of the Western Penitentiary



1901 map shows the conservatory and the bandstand, on the site where the old penitentiary had been.

present site of the casino – exploded, killing 28 people and shattering windows for blocks on both sides of the river.

As might be expected, the conservatory was badly damaged by the explosion. We have run across at least one account stating that the conservatory was abandoned after sustaining serious damage in the 1927 explosion.

That account is incorrect, as demonstrated by a feature in the Pittsburgh Press on April 17, 1938 describing the 1938 Spring Flower Show,

which was held in the North Side conservatory because the Schenley Park building was being remodeled that year.

Actually, there was much more to it than that. As described in the timeline at the current Phipps site [[www.phipps.conservatory.org](http://www.phipps.conservatory.org)], a severe windstorm in February 1937 caused major damage to the Schenley Park conservatory, and it was closed for 20 months. During that time, the necessary repairs were made to the building, and extensive remodeling was also done. Keeping the building closed for nearly two years was made possible, at least in part, by the fact that there was still a functioning conservatory available to the public in the old Allegheny Commons.

After the remodeled Schenley Park building reopened for the 1938 Fall Flower Show, however, the handwriting was on the wall for the North Side conservatory. It apparently closed its doors sometime before July 1947, when a Post-Gazette story stated: "Quite a portion of the old conservatory has been torn down. The rest is in an acute and unusable state of disrepair."

In the very same newspaper story, however, there was a glimpse of the future. The P-G reported that City Council had authorized an allocation of funds for an aviary from a future capital improvements bond issue. Just as the conservatory had replaced the penitentiary, the aviary replaced the conservatory.

This article is the eighth in 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 can already be found at [<http://www.benavon.com/BAAHA/baaha.htm>],

the 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 BAAHA!

## Posting History Supplement

by John Warren

Several years ago we started the *BAAHA Links* series, with the idea that each article would serve to call attention to websites and other resources available to folks with an interest in local history. These days, the resources seem to be multiplying faster than we can call attention to them – definitely a good problem to have!

In this supplement to *BAAHA Links* #8, we're going to do a bit of catching up, by focusing on some resources that have been made available to the community by the Post-Gazette.

There can be no better starting point for this discussion than the November 1927 natural gas explosion, which figures in the article. Steve Mellon of the P-G devoted one segment of his Pittsburgh History series to that event, making imaginative use of limited archival materials to create a 6-minute video which vividly describes that catastrophe.

To watch that video, go to the Pittsburgh History site [[multimedia.post-gazette.com/history](http://multimedia.post-gazette.com/history)] and scroll down through the list of videos. That list includes features on the Allegheny Arsenal explosion in 1862 and the mysterious crash of a B-25 bomber into the Monongahela in 1956.

Before you leave the Pittsburgh History site, please make certain that you

scroll down the page through a series of still photos that supplement the video features. At the very bottom you will find a remarkable aerial photograph of the devastated site of the 1927 explosion.

When Steve discovered the 1927 aerial photo in the P-G archives, the picture was in fragments. He pieced it together and added it to the Pittsburgh History site, and also posted it as an entry at P-G Digs [pgdigs.tumblr.com], a blog which he and his colleagues Marylynn Pitz and Mila Sanina update every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Each week they dig through archives that contain more than a century's accumulation of photographs, and post entries on a wide variety of topics, including dining at the Park Schenley restaurant, clearing pavement with a horse-drawn snowplow, and welcoming Charles Lindbergh to Pittsburgh in 1927.

One recent P-G Digs entry – about Exposition Park, the home of the Pirates before Forbes Field was built – included a link to a Zoom page, where you could zoom in and move around, studying details of a 1907 view of Downtown and the North Shore that was taken from a spot near the current location of CCAC. Access to the Zoom content is handled through a link in the related P-G Digs entry.

On occasion, a P-G Digs entry will include a link to another of the paper's historical resources, the Pittsburgh Then and Now page [multimedia.post-gazette.com/thennow], where a photograph from the archives is matched to a current photo of the same spot, usually taken by Rebecca Droke or Steve Mellon. A mouse-controlled "slider" feature enables you to view one photo, and then slide it out of the way to reveal the corresponding photo.

Another page where you can explore the content through mouse-controlled features is Steve Mellon's Pittsburgh Revolution site [multimedia.post-gazette.com/Revolution] which offers 360 degree panoramas, in which you can move around and zoom in and out. All of the photos are contemporary, but some of the sites have particular historical interest. Examples include the Penn Station Rotunda (designed by Daniel Burnham) and five final views of the Civic Arena (including a link to then-and-now photos of the Lower Hill before and after construction of the Civic Arena).

If you have an interest in industrial history, be sure to check out a special project where Steve explored the old Carrie Furnace facility in Rankin with a representative of the Rivers of Steel Heritage Corporation. He then put together [multimedia.post-gazette.com/Carrie] that includes short videos, a timeline, then-and-now photos, and 360-degree panoramas that are accompanied by narration.

We should not conclude this look at the P-G's historical resources without calling attention to Len Barcoucky's series of Eyewitness articles, which appear every other Sunday on Page 2 of the P-G's first section. For a chronologically-sorted list of Len's articles, use the Search field at the upper right on the P-G's main website [www.post-gazette.com]. Type "Barcoucky" and "Eyewitness" into the Search field, and it will return a list of almost 150 Eyewitness articles.

The recent flood of resources from the P-G demonstrates that this is a great time for people who have an interest in local history!

## Dixmont Opens 1862

by Len Barcoucky

One of the joys of looking through back copies of the Post-Gazette and his predecessor publications is coming across an occasional story that mentions a person or an event with a link to the Ben Avon area. While looking for information the Civil War period, I came across this story about a local landmark, the then recently-opened Dixmont Insane Asylum.

This report appeared in the Nov. 24, 1864, edition of the Pittsburgh Gazette.

"The Lutheran, of the 20th, has a good article on the opening of this admirable institution from the pen of the Rev. W.A. Passavant, co-editor, who was present at that interesting occasion. We give an extract:

The location is on the right bank of the Ohio river, eight miles below Pittsburgh, the bluff on which the hospital has been erected having appropriately been called "Dixmont," in honor of Miss Dix, the devoted and unwearied friend and benefactress of the insane.. The view from the building and grounds is singularly beautiful and grand. It takes in the whole valley of the Ohio, with Neville Island, for a distance of fourteen miles, and this part of the river and its banks is literally a blending of all beauties. The idea of locating a Home of Mercy in the midst of such fine rural surroundings was most happy. Away from the busy haunts of men, in the pure atmosphere of these highlands, with the wild wood, the hayfield, the orchard and the vineyard, on the grounds of the institutions, the shattered intellect may find healing and repose in rest or healthful toil. At the foot of the mounts the car of commerce thunders past, and the stream of life courses on through the great arteries of trade. But above the noise and hum of man, on a higher plain and in a purer atmosphere, stands the Asylum for those on whom God has laid his chastening hand.

The buildings are of vast extent, and have been constructed without reference to cost, and with a wise purpose to the merciful objects of the Institution. We cannot give particulars nor enter in the details of the architecture, construction, adaptation and convenience of this fine structure. The State on various occasions has appropriated upwards of one hundred thousand dollars to its erection, and many generous offerings have come from individual benefactors. Nobly have the

members of the Board of Trustees devoted their time, their services, and their means to this holy work. The blessings of those who are ready to perish, and the benedictions of restored and re-united households, will come down upon their heads. The evidence of their persevering toil under great and manifold discouragements, afforded by the completed of this magnificent structure, are very gratifying. They were entrusted with a great trust, and faithfully, have they performed it. This, we think, was the conviction of the large concourse who came from far and near to mingle in the festivities of its public opening. In a few days more the insane will be removed from the former institution in the city to their new home, and they too will bless the memory of their kind benefactors."

After dwelling at some length upon the sad death of the afflicted ones for whose benefit this asylum has been prepared, and the deep grief of their friends, he thus concludes:

"Bereaved husband! Disconsolate wife! Motherless children! Who will come to your aid? Who will wipe away your tears and dry up the overflowing foundation of your grief? Mercy alone can accomplish; mercy assuming the form of humanity as did the Holy One in the days of his flesh, mercy softening the heart, unhoarding the wealth, prompting the soul to a work of love, the erection of an Asylum where the sad, demented one may find a home, a second home, if not a home of affection, yet a home of the kindest attentions; if not their own sweet home, yet a quiet and peaceful retreat, where the shattered mind may regain its energies and the desponding heart be healed, and the poor sufferer be restored to his first home in perfect soundness before God."

Dorothea Dix, for whom the asylum was named, was a 19th century crusader for better care for the mentally ill. During the Civil War she served as superintendent of Army Nurses.

Ground was broken in 1859 for Dixmont, and the asylum opened in 1862. It operated on a 407-acre campus in Kilbuck as Dixmont State Hospital until 1984. The last of the structures were demolished in 2006 for the Wal-Mart that was never built.

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