

# BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## NEWSLETTER

Vol. XXIX - Number 1, August, 2013



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[Editor's note: *Hindsight is always clear. The story of the initial planning of Ben Avon Heights raises a question, "Why did the first golf club fail so quickly in an era when the sport grew rapidly." With this article the answer is easy.]*

**Walter P. Fraser,  
Reverend Arthur Purkiss  
and the  
Christian Laymen's Association**  
by Michael Weir

### Walter Fraser

Walter Pringle Fraser was born in 1872 in Allegheny City, now part of the City of Pittsburgh. He eventually moved to Bonnie Brae, a large house he built at

the corner of Dickson and Perrysville Avenues in Ben Avon. He was the developer of Ben Avon Heights. In 1910, he bought 83 acres of farm land from the Taylor family and, in the following year, subdivided it into building lots and a golf course. The golf course did not survive and, in 1926, was subdivided into additional lots.

He was a developer in Brighton Heights and Morewood Heights in Pittsburgh, as well as in Ben Avon Heights. He was the president of McCann's and Company, a food store with locations on Market Street and in East Liberty. McCann's was similar to today's supermarkets. It was founded by the McCann brothers in 1876 as a butter



Kirk West (Priscilla), Janet Fraser Lewis (Harlow & Fraser), John Fraser, Sarah Hathaway Fraser (Ellen West), Mahlon Lewis, Walter Fraser, John Fraser, Helen "Tuck" Fraser West

and eggs store. Fraser joined them and eventually became president. In 1930, Fraser described himself as a former developer and current CEO of McCann's. McCann's remained in business until 1956.

Fraser and his wife, Sarah Hathaway Fraser had four children, a daughter Janet who married Mahlon E. Lewis, a second daughter Helen, and two sons, John and Stephen. Lewis served as the Burgess (Mayor) of Ben Avon Heights. Sarah and Stephen Fraser, Janet Fraser Lewis, and Mahlon Lewis were active in the development of the borough after Fraser's death in 1936.

During his lifetime, Fraser had a decided influence on Ben Avon Heights not only as the developer but as a guide for the new community. Fraser was described by William Neely, a resident of Ben Avon Heights, as bringing to Ben Avon Heights "an aura of high morals." Fraser's faith led him to take an active interest in the community. He served as the Chairman of the Woods Run Relief Committee and was active in the Associated Charities of Pittsburgh. He was one of the founders of Suburban General Hospital. He was described by Neely as generous with his contributions. He may not have been entirely successful promoting his vision for the Borough. Another resident, Norman Ward, suggested that the first golf course failed because there was no Sunday golf or alcohol at the course. This was not the case with the Shannopin Country Club.

### **Christian Layman's Association**

Fraser founded the Christian Laymen's Association of Pittsburgh. He served as its general secretary. Neely suggests that Fraser may have been inspired by the English Oxford movement in the Anglican Church which argued for

the reinstatement of lost Christian traditions of faith and their inclusion in Anglican liturgy and theology. The motto of the Laymen's Association of Pittsburgh was "a yielded will, the power of prayer, the morning watch and witnessing for Christ daily." The Christian Laymen's Association was a national movement with Associations in a number of cities.

The Laymen's Association in Pittsburgh began with a group of men forming a fellowship for Bible study, leadership training and recreation. The Association began meeting weekly at the downtown YMCA. Fraser wrote a book, *Life Principals or the Science of Human Nature*, which was published by the Laymen's Association in 1924. In it, he promotes "Practical Imagination," the ability to separate cause from effect, or impressions from facts." He credited Jesus Christ and Sigmund Freud, "the Columbus of the mind," as his inspiration.

The Association became part of the development of Ben Avon Heights. Fraser had built clay tennis courts and a yellow brick building as a conference hall Stratford Road. In 1926 he transferred the hall to the Association with a provision that allowed him to take back the property in five years.

The conference hall was used by the Association for Bible study and for social events. The hall remained in use until after the Second World War. One of the residents of Stratford in the 1930s, Jane Siegel Rose, remembers these activities as a "nice part of my childhood." Jane's mother, Edna, was an avid tennis player and Jane served as the ball girl for her mother. Her father, George, was an active member of the Association. Fraser had encouraged him and other like-minded men to move to the Borough. In

1937, he moved to 12 Oxford Road next to the old club house.

In addition to serving the Association, the hall was rented to the Borough for Council meetings and as a polling place.

Fraser's interest extended beyond the Pittsburgh region. In 1926, he bought the Asheville School, a preparatory school in Asheville North Carolina. He changed the name of the school to the Asheville School for Training in Christian Leadership in his quest to create a theological seminary. He was also interested in the land owned by the school for development. The relationship between Fraser and the school's staff was not a smooth one. He fired several faculty members who resisted the change in mission at the school. In 1928, the school's headmaster proposed that the school's alumni should buy the school. In 1929, Fraser offered to sell it for \$600,000. The sale was completed in 1930. The school survived the turmoil and the depression. It is in operation today. Fraser does not seem to have developed any of the school's property.

By the end of the 1920s, Fraser became less active in both the association and the development of Ben Avon Heights. A combination of poor health, business reverses, his position at McCann's, and the difficulties with the Asheville School may have contributed to this. He was able to pass some of his burdens on to the Reverend Arthur Purkiss.

### **Reverend Arthur Purkiss**

Arthur F. Purkiss was born in Michigan in 1873. He graduated from Kalamazoo College in 1900 and the University of Chicago in 1904 with a degree in divinity. He was married twice. His first wife, Mary Stow Neal, died in

1933. After her death, he married Margaret Barber. She outlived him, dying in 1972. The three are buried together in the Allegheny County Memorial Park. He had a daughter, Margaret, with his first wife.

Purkiss served as the Pastor in Baptist churches in Sharon Pennsylvania, Elgin Illinois (1908), Jamestown New York 1915), Norwich Connecticut (1917-1918), Mt. Lebanon (1921-1923), Peters' Creek Pennsylvania (1934), and Crafton (1937 to 1939).



Reverend Arthur Purkiss

His association with Fraser and the Christian Laymen's Association began in the early 1920s. Purkiss and Fraser were regular speakers at church conferences. In 1925, they organized an evangelistic conference bringing 300 Pittsburgh clergy and 100 Pittsburgh business men together. In 1926, the Association brought Pittsburgh clergy to the Beaver Valley for a week-long campaign to win souls for Christ. By 1930, the Laymen's Association of Beaver Valley had been organized. As the Kingsport Tennessee Times put it in 1926, the two men were active in "developing in each church a deeper spiritual life as well as a zeal in winning souls." For his activates, Purkiss was granted an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Geneva College in 1927. In

the same year, Purkiss moved to Ben Avon Heights and lived in the old golf club house.

By 1927, Fraser had become less active in the Association and Purkiss became the general secretary. The Association itself seems to have become less active in the 1930s. The Association in Pittsburgh did not survive long Purkiss' death in 1964. After Purkiss died, the hall was torn down and two houses were built on the site of the conference hall.



Arthur Purkiss, wife Mary, daughter Margaret c. 1925

Purkiss served Fraser in another role. In 1926, Fraser sold Purkiss the old golf course club house for \$7,500. He also transferred the ownership of the 48 remaining unsold building lots in his development to Purkiss. This included seven lots in the 1911 plan, nine lots in Kilbuck Township on Norwood Avenue, a lot at the corner of Lynton Lane and Penhurst Road, and 31 lots from the 1926 subdivision of the golf course.

For a few years, the Borough had an Architectural Committee that reviewed the outside elevations of new buildings. The committee appears by 1924 as a deed restriction on the remaining lots as

they were sold. In 1928, the committee included Arthur Purkiss, John W. Young and Harry Demmler. All three were borough residents. Changes in the committee's membership were to be made by the Christian Laymen's Association. In 1929, Purkiss was replaced with Fraser's daughter, Janet Lewis. By 1932, the Architectural Committee disappeared from deed restrictions.

Over the next 15 years, Purkiss transferred ownership of these lots to others. Many of the lots were eventually transferred to Fraser's wife Sarah and others to his daughter Janet and her husband Mahlon E. Lewis. The Borough was also the beneficiary of some of the transfers. The land transferred to the Borough, however, was hillside that has never been built on. By the end of World War II, Purkiss retained ownership of the club house and the two lots occupied by the Christian Laymen's Association. Sarah Fraser owned only two lots on New Brighton Road. She died in Florida in 1969.

The Christian Laymen's Association does not seem to have left a lasting impression on Ben Avon Heights. The conference hall is gone. A few residents were interviewed for oral history projects, but they were only children in the 1930s. They remembered the hall and the tennis court, but could say little else about the Association. For a while, however, Fraser, Purkiss and the Laymen's Associations were important parts of the community.

## Annual Report

from

Dick Herchenroether

Each volume of our newsletter designates a fiscal year for BAAHA running July through June. Each first

issue gives you a report of BAAHA as a business. It also allows me to express gratitude for the support of our board and our members. Board members are:

Dick Herchenroether, President  
Jean Henderson, Vice President  
Trudy File, Secretary  
Darlene Phillips, Archivist  
Tracy Ferguson  
Bob Kiser

We are reduced to six Board members by the death of Betty Jane Robertson in May, 2013 at 92. After a career teaching elementary students she spent her retirement years assisting a number of local service groups. We benefited from her extensive firsthand knowledge of families in the area, particularly Emsworth. We will not look to replace her but will look to add people who have the character and positive outlook she brought to our deliberations.

Supporting members of BAAHA pay an annual fee of \$10 or \$20 and are listed in each newsletter following payment. Members who donate at least \$50 get extra recognition annually. Not all donations are monetary. We receive office supplies and unpaid labor from many people. When we can identify a monetary value, we try to capture that in both donations and expenses of our financial statement. The Non-cash Donors list recognizes these gifts of time and expertise. The historical materials in our archives are key to our mission to promote interest in local history. Donors of historic materials (artifacts, photos, documents) are recognized separately.

In my report of a year ago I mentioned Terri Blanchette volunteering her professional time. This gift of time (hundreds of hours overall) and talent (professional knowhow) has helped us significantly improve the accessibility by

the public to our archives. Her work organizing a couple of large collections will serve as hands-on examples for us to follow in the future.

## **Education**

Terri's volunteering led, somewhat indirectly, to our largest project of the year. Early in the year, Robert Stakeley, an educator at Heinz History Center, visited Terri at the BAAHA offices. His review with her of our archives, plus his existing contacts with a few Avonworth teachers led to a special opportunity for selected Avonworth eighth graders.

Bob and teachers Jason Smith and Melissa DeSimone met at the BAAHA office to see first-hand how we could work together. BAAHA provided a list of subjects students might chose to investigate. The teachers organized the project. Bob provided oversight and expertise in doing research, including the conventions used by institutions who have primary source materials that are accessible to the public.

The result was a trial project offered to 15 students selected from the eighth grade. The idea was to provide an enhanced social studies experience based on local history. The students picked a local subject to research using primary source materials and documents. The type of finished product (written report, slide show, video, story board, etc.) was each student's own choice.

After turning their product in to the teachers the final step for the student was an oral presentation of what they had done and what they had learned about primary source research. These 3 to 5 minute briefings were judged by a six person panel chosen by the teachers, BAAHA and Bob Stakeley. These projects did not result in an academic

grade but the judges' scoring resulted in cash awards for the top three oral presentations courtesy of the Avonworth Fund for Excellence to be announced at the Middle School Award Assembly.

Ten students signed on and eight finished. Two dropped due to competing interests which is not unusual for eighth graders. The titles of the results shows the project came alive for them. The three award winners are first, the others by name alphabetically:

Cassidy Southern	"Dixmont"
Spencer Haver	"Emsworth Landmarks"
Whitney Brown	"Camp Horne Road"
Blake Aber	"Barnabas Blinney"
Bethany Adamiak	"Avonworth Population"
Trevor Gamble Borsh	"ACORD Park"
Megan Williams/Abby Busse	"History of a Home"

In addition to working on their subject each student spent at least three hours helping BAAHA with something that needed a hand. Staying up with even eight students required both teachers, Bob and two Heinz History Center Volunteers plus three from BAAHA. And we had Post-Gazette writer Len Barcoucky speak on how primary source materials are used in his work with the newspaper.

The overall result was satisfying and enjoyed by all involved despite the significant time it required. We adults are not quite done. Our review the project as a whole is very positive, but improvements will come from assessing the details.

This joint venture with our Avonworth teachers is in line with promoting interest in local history. Utilizing the expertise and resources of Heinz History Center demonstrates the value of its Affiliates Program. Heinz History Center educator Bob Stakeley presented an overview of the project in one of the sessions at the Affiliates Program hosted by Ellwood City

Historical Society in June. He plans to promote it to other local school districts through the Allegheny Intermediate Unit.

In summary, this joint project is a step for BAAHA becoming an active resource to Avonworth educators and students. Thanks to Bob Stakeley for putting the idea forward and to teachers Jason and Melissa for their time to organize it. We look forward to next year.

**Borough of Ben Avon Heights  
Centennial Celebration  
June 21 - 23, 2013**

Anticipated and talked about for the past year and planned by a committee formed in 2011 this weekend of planned and informal reunions and reminiscences was a grand affair. Friday's schedule had a golf outing during the day and a cocktail party in the evening. Saturday events included games for kids and adults, a walking architectural tour in the morning and open houses in the afternoon. All events with size limits were oversubscribed. Many prior residents participated by returning to visit family members, local friends and neighbors.

Official remarks shortly before 6:00PM were limited, mainly serving to announce the buffet lines for the picnic dinner were open.

BAAHA participated in that official program. Three high school students who had prepared a time capsule, turned it over to Dick Herchenroether who received it on behalf of BAAHA to hold for 50 years, until 2063. The three, Sean Harpst, Austin Harvey and Rich Kastory, hope to return then when it is to be reopened.

We also recorded people telling their story about living in The Heights or other subjects at our "Tell Us a Story" booth in the driveway of One Wilson Drive. After

a slow start, over 20 people participated with a few telling more than one story. We expect some of these recordings will be useful as content for future newsletters.

**Financial Report**

Ben Avon Area Historical Association  
July 1, 2012 through June 30, 2013

	INCOME/EXPENSE	
	Year ending <u>6/30/2012</u>	Year ending <u>6/30/2013</u>
<b>INCOME</b>		
Interest	\$ 9	\$ 7
Mailing list dues	1,420	1,530
Donations	5,239	5,228
Items for sale	<u>391</u>	<u>277</u>
<b>TOTAL INCOME</b>	<b><u>\$ 7,059</u></b>	<b><u>\$ 7,042</u></b>
<b>EXPENSES</b>		
Postage/supplies	\$ 185	\$ 1,227
Rent	3,900	3,900
Maintenance	0	40
Electric service	100	100
Publishing	466	450
Program/Education	115	165
Fund raising	115	15
Preservation	0	1,150
Property Insurance	774	791
Filing fee (IRS)	<u>400</u>	<u>0</u>
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b><u>\$6,055</u></b>	<b><u>\$7,838</u></b>
<b>NET DECREASE</b>	<b><u>\$ 1,004</u></b>	<b><u>\$ (796)</u></b>

	BALANCE SHEET	
	<u>6/30/2012</u>	<u>6/30/2013</u>
Cash	\$135	\$110
Checking/MM	<u>10,589</u>	<u>9,818</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b><u>\$10,724</u></b>	<b><u>\$9,928</u></b>

Certified by:  
Dick Herchenroether, President & Treasurer

**Corporate Support**  
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Sewickley Valley Historical Society

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<b>Ben Avon Area Historical Association</b> c/o 136 Dickson Avenue, Ben Avon, PA 15202 <a href="mailto:baaha@benavon.org">baaha@benavon.org</a>	
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 Thank you for supporting BAAHA