

BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

Vol. XXIX - Number 2, November, 2013



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An Offer She Couldn't Refuse

by John Warren

As she prepared dinner on a hot afternoon in July 1900, Jane Arbutnot Warren (my great-grandmother) was more than ordinarily anxious for her son to stop and see her on his way home from work in downtown Pittsburgh. As long as she could first spend a few minutes talking things over with Charles, then Jane felt confident she could deal effectively with the real estate agent, who would be returning that evening.

After Charles arrived and greeted his parents, Jane asked him to give her a hand with something in the kitchen. There they could talk without his father hearing them. At 65, James Warren was in declining health, badly debilitated from the effects of constant exposure to lead and other toxics, suffered during half a century of work as a house painter.

Jane told her son that a man had come to the door that morning, wanting to buy the house. She had said immediately that she wasn't interested in selling, but he had been politely persistent, and she had finally invited him to return that evening.

When Charles asked what she planned to do, his mother said that she was going to set a price that was far in excess of what the house was worth, and

simply stick to that price until the man gave up and left. They decided upon a figure of \$3,000, which was probably four times what the house was worth.

After dinner, instead of heading right home to Ben Avon to be with his wife, Charles decided to stick around and meet the real estate agent. Thus he was present when Jane announced that she would not sell the house for a penny less than \$3,000 – and the man at once replied that she had a deal! He reached across the dining room table and handed her \$50, saying that he would be back before long with the paperwork.

Now let's leave Jane for the moment, stunned and pondering what to do next, so that we can walk around to the other side of this transaction.

Henry Phipps and the First Ward

We don't know the name of the real estate agent, but we know he was working for Henry Phipps, the great 19th century industrialist and philanthropist. Phipps and Andrew Carnegie were friends from childhood, growing up in the First Ward of the City of Allegheny. When Phipps and Carnegie were youngsters, they went to school in the basement of a church, but in 1874 the classes shifted to a brand new building – at a location that later became a focal point of some of Phipps' philanthropic projects.

We should take a moment here to pin down that location. First Ward School was located at the corner of Rebecca Street (now Reedsdale Street) and School Street (now Scotland Avenue). Jane and James Warren lived across Rebecca Street from the school. In 1907, when Allegheny became part of Pittsburgh, the streets were renamed and the building became Daniel Webster School.

school was about one block west of the Clark Building.

Henry Phipps had grown up poor, but while still a relatively young man he achieved great wealth as the second-largest stockholder in Carnegie Steel, and he embarked upon a series of philanthropic initiatives that would continue for nearly half a century, until his death in 1930 at the age of 90. In addition to the projects to be described



This photograph was taken from Monument Hill (where Allegheny County Community College is now located) during the flood of March 1913. We can see a good deal of the Phipps apartment building to the upper left, but the former First Ward school and its companion buildings are out of the picture to the left. Note that Exposition Park and the factories and homes along Reedsdale Street are badly flooded, but the Phipps playground is not flooded. That was no accident. Before construction began, Phipps had his contractor carefully grade the property, in an effort to reduce the frequency and severity of flooding. (Photo from Historic Pittsburgh website.)

The school closed in 1962, and before long it and all the other buildings in the vicinity had been demolished, to be replaced by highways and parking lots. For anyone trying to visualize where the school was located, the Clark Building can serve as a useful landmark. The

here, Phipps provided funding for such causes as tuberculosis research and treatment, and treatment of the mentally ill.

As described in BAAHA Links #8 (May, 2013), one of Phipps' early projects was the conservatory he donated to the City of Allegheny. This building, which

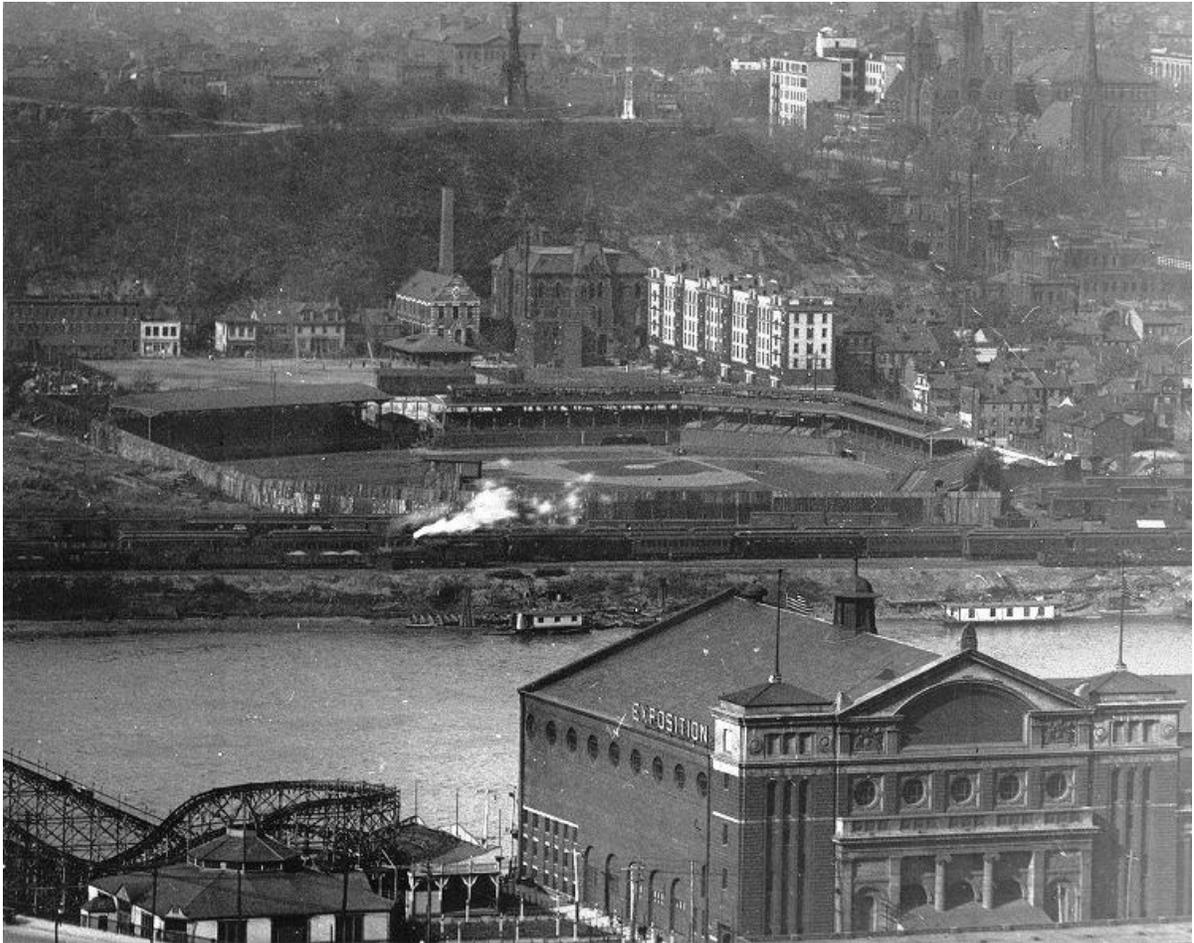
opened in 1887, stood for 60 years on the site currently used by the National Aviary. Phipps then gave the City of Pittsburgh a conservatory of its own – a glasshouse beside Schenley Park in Oakland -- that opened in 1893 and has just celebrated its 120th anniversary.

By the time he celebrated his 60th birthday in 1899, Phipps was beginning

was at this point that his plans intersected with the lives of my great-grandparents and many other First Ward residents.

“Rum Row”

The First Ward was certainly a neighborhood that could stand some enrichment. A low-lying (and thus flood-prone) area along the Allegheny River, it



Exposition Park photo from 1915 shows the former home of the Pirates – they moved to Forbes Field in 1909 – in the center. The Phipps apartment building, stands out because it opened just six years previously, and thus is much cleaner than the others. It was intended as affordable housing for local workers. Behind Exposition Park is the Phipps Playground. Across the street, the large building is the school. To the left of the school is a building identified on plat maps as a manual training academy. Immediately behind it is a small power plant with a tall smokestack. In the center at the top is the base and lower portion of namesake monument. The upper portion now stands near the sunken train tracks across West Park from the Allegheny YMCA building on W. North Avenue; (Photo from Historic Pittsburgh website.)

to envision several projects aimed at enriching the lives of people living in his old neighborhood, the First Ward. And it

was a hodgepodge of heavy industry, small shops, and railroad tracks, with small houses scattered along every

street. A majority of the residents were Irish immigrants like the Warrens, and saloons were so numerous that the area was known as “Rum Row.”

One such saloon was the building on General Robinson Street that was purchased in 1913 by Dan Rooney, the father of the Steelers’ founder. By that time, the area was part of Pittsburgh (and thus no longer the First Ward), but many of the local political traditions remained intact. Everyone who has seen “The Chief” will recall Art Rooney’s vivid stories about how the ward operated during the Twenties, and many of those practices had been going on for decades.

Before his health deteriorated, James Warren had been a bit player in First Ward politics, serving on the Board of School Controllers for the City of Allegheny. This was the equivalent of a major city’s school board, but it was like nothing we have today.

Each of Allegheny’s 14 wards had at least one elementary school – and its own 6-member school board! It was, perhaps, no accident that both of the daughters of James and Jane had once taught at the First Ward School.

The Board of School Controllers consisted of the local school boards from the 14 wards – a total of 84 board members! That’s about all we need to say about James Warren’s involvement with the school system, except to note an interesting coincidence. One of his colleagues on the Board of School Controllers, representing the Seventh Ward, was Henry A. Herchenroether.

In the three decades that they had lived on Rebecca Street, the Warrens had weathered some very tough times. James had experienced three business failures, and each time there were

neighbors who helped them get back on their feet. One neighbor had lent Jane \$700 – a very large sum in those days – with no security but a handshake and her promise to repay it.

Thus when family members, such as their married daughter who lived near New Kensington, urged them to move to a place that would be less polluted and free from the threat of flooding, Jane had always remained determined to stay where they were.

Projects for the First Ward

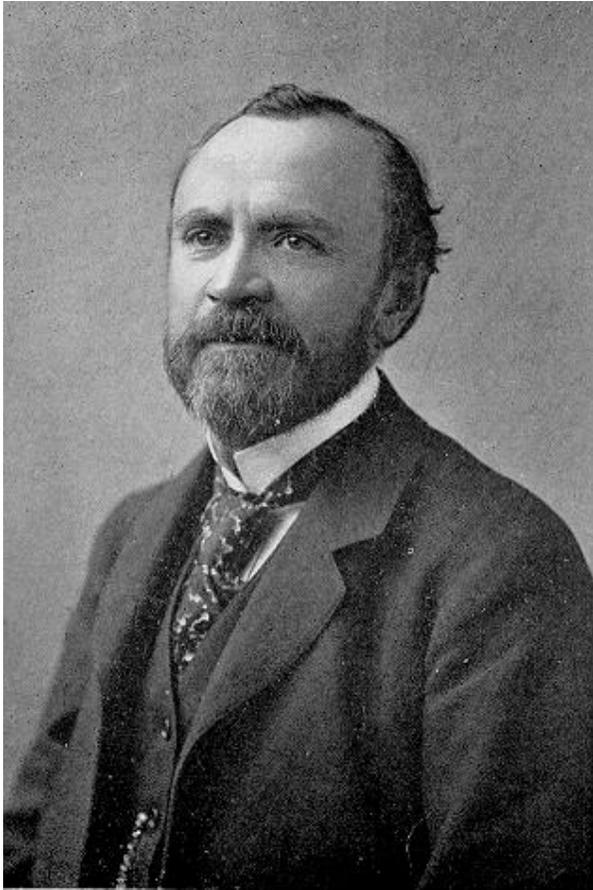
Henry Phipps had dispatched a real estate agent to Rebecca Street because his vision for improvements to the First Ward required large blocks of property in the vicinity. Phipps had decided to build a three-story gymnasium building alongside the school, and a large playground (275 feet square) across the street from the school.

The property belonging to the Warrens was one small piece of the large block of property required for the playground. When Jane announced her \$3,000 price for the home, the real estate agent was prepared to pay it, because hers would be the first home he had managed to purchase. Once he had made that first acquisition, the other property owners would be more willing to sell, and at more reasonable prices!

On July 21, 1902, the Pittsburgh Press reported that “Henry Phipps, the philanthropist, will return from Europe this fall to inspect the great playgrounds and gymnasium that he is building for the children of the First Ward, Allegheny, where he formerly resided. The playgrounds and gymnasium are being built on Rebecca Street near the school house, and they will be completed this fall. Mr. Phipps has promised to be

present at the opening, which will be made a great school jubilee.”

According to the article, Phipps had committed to covering all the operating costs of these facilities for the first few years, so that they could become well-established in the community. He would then turn them over to the school district.



Phipps in 1900

Several years later, Phipps built a six-story apartment building alongside the playground and facing on School Street. It was intended to provide comfortable but low-rent housing for 60 working families. This venture into affordable housing was a first for Phipps in Pittsburgh, but he had already begun a project of that nature in New York City. Providing affordable housing proved to be a very complex challenge – as it

remains today – and this component of a Phipps’ First Ward projects was not successful.

Moving to Ben Avon

As for Jane Arbuthnot Warren, she quickly got over the shock of unexpectedly selling her house. With the help of her son Charles (my grandfather, who wrote down the story 40 years later), in early August of 1900 she bought a lot in Ben Avon and began building a house on it.

Jane and James lived with Charles and his wife during the construction of the house, which went forward rapidly. They made the final payment to the general contractor on Christmas Eve, and presumably were able to welcome the new year in their new house.

Charles saved most, if not all, of the bills from the construction of the new home. Thus it could serve as a case study of the sort of home construction that was happening all around Ben Avon in those days. But that’s a subject for another article!

BAAHA Links #9

The Warren & Phipps story is the ninth 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.html> , part of 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!

Notes

Plat maps at the Historic Pittsburgh website, <http://digital.library.pitt.edu/pittsburgh/> show the dramatic transformation of the property near the First Ward School. Browse through the Hopkins maps and compare the map of the First Ward in 1890 (Volume 1, Plate 1) with the corresponding map from 1901 (Volume 1, Plate 12).

William Rimmel, who wrote a column for the Post-Gazette about historical events in Allegheny, discussed Phipps and his unsuccessful affordable housing initiative in an article dated 5/12/1973. It is on file in the Pennsylvania Room at Carnegie Library in Oakland.

In a New York Times article titled 'Streetscapes/Henry Phipps and Phipps Houses; Millionaire's Effort to Improve Housing for the Poor', Christopher Gray discussed the work that Phipps attempted on affordable housing in New York. The article, dated 11/23/2003, can be found by searching on the combination of "Henry Phipps" and "Christopher Gray".

All 84 members of the Board of School Controllers for the City of Allegheny were listed on Page 16 of the Pittsburg Press almanac and cyclopedia of useful information, an 1898 publication digitized on the Historic Pittsburgh website. Following the list of board members, all of the district's teachers are listed by school. In answer to a question that arises naturally from one sentence in this article: No, there were no Herchenroethers teaching in the Seventh Ward School!

Pioneer Life Lesson

A small group of Tiger Cubs (first graders in Boy Scouts) visited the Dickson Log House at the beginning of

October. Retired elementary teacher, Susan Herchenroether, spent 45 minutes talking with them about what it must have been like to be a pioneer settler in the wilderness of the late 18th century.

Basic activities from the point of view of children are the focal point of the lesson. What did they eat and what about sleeping? What chores did they have and what did they do for play? Why was a fire always burning in the giant fireplace? The lesson ends with making a simple toy to take home.

Thanks to Susan for creating an interesting learning experience. Let us know if we can schedule a time for your student group to visit. We will modify the program to be age appropriate.

Avonworth Turns 75

In 1938 the Avonworth Union School district was created by referendum to serve Kilbuck Township and the Boroughs of Ben Avon, Emsworth and Ben Avon Heights. Ohio Township joined in 1955. The current seniors (class of 2014) will be the seventy-sixth class to receive Avonworth diplomas.

What Avonworth Replaced

Education has been an important part of local life from the first settlers. The Courtney family built a schoolhouse in 1829. This still stands as part of the "cottage" at the end of Race Street in Emsworth. This and other single teacher schools were supported by subscriptions paid by the student's family.

Tax supported schools began around 1836 following a change in state law to allow the levy of taxes for education. One room schools appeared throughout the area currently served by Avonworth. In 1880-81 Kilbuck Township built the first part of a school building, consisting

of four rooms in two stories in what became Emsworth Borough. Expanded and improved in 1894 and 1914 it provided elementary education through eighth grade to residents through 1977. The building, converted to residential use, still stands on Locust Street. Its bell is the focal point of a memorial located at the corner of Center and Locust near the Emsworth Municipal Building.

When Ben Avon became a borough in 1892, a new multi-room school building was planned at the corner of Dickson and Sturgeon. This building, like the one in Emsworth, provided elementary education to local students for almost 100 years.

Ben Avon built a high school building on Dickson next to its elementary building in 1914. Students outside Ben Avon could enroll by paying tuition.

Prior to 1914 local students might take a train to Allegheny High School in Allegheny City. Avalon or Bellevue High Schools were options, especially after street cars (light rail) arrived in 1906. Oliver High School in the City of Pittsburgh began operating around 1928 and could also be reached by street car.

The common thread of all of these private and public options was meeting the residents' desire for formal education of their children. The long tenure of many of the teachers and principals is evidence of success in that desire overall.

Avonworth

The tradition of long tenured teachers and talented administrators continued after the creation of Avonworth. As did the broad interest of adult residents in quality education. That combination resulted in student achievements greater than the district's size would portend.

As the post WWII bulge in student numbers worked its way through the grades the number of graduates exceeded 170 in the early 1970s before falling dramatically in the following decades. Building programs added to high school plus expanded the Ben Avon elementary facility and created the Ohio Township elementary complex.

A watershed came in 1967 when a proposed merger with Avalon and Bellevue died. Avalon and Bellevue did join to create Northgate. Avonworth prepared for the future by constructing the first of the current Josephs Lane buildings. The class of 1971 was the first to graduate from the new facility.

Student population dropped soon after that consistent with national birthrates. This led to the closing the Emsworth building in 1977 and the Ben Avon buildings in 1991. The Ohio Township elementary campus on Roosevelt Road now serves kindergarten through fifth grade for the entire district. The Josephs Lane campus includes both middle and high schools.

If you have fond memories of favorite activities, teachers, friends and so on, share them with us by sending a note, or more, to our office or email address.

Correction

Len Barcoucky's Dixmont article (May, 2013) ends with, "The last of the structures was demolished in 2006 for the Wal-Mart that was never built." In the interest of future readers we must note that the Cammarata Building was not demolished and remains in use as the "Emsworth Commons." Also, the Dixmont Cemetery, while not actively receiving new burials, remains the permanent resting spot for about 1,300 former patients.

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