



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

Since last October, our historic headquarters has been regularly open for visitors the first and third Saturdays of the month from 1:00pm to 3:00pm. Since then, we've had a steady number of visitors from in-town, from elsewhere in Mercer County, as well as from far away.

If you haven't been here before—or even if you have—there are many features of the building's architecture or the 385 items we have on display that merit a first or even second-look.

Our docents can point out, for example, the building's colorful exterior decoration both in the roof slates and alternation of brick and stone was inspired by the Gothic architecture of Venice, as interpreted by the hugely influential English art critic John Ruskin. Inside, they can explain how the large folding doors between the sanctuary and Sunday School room show this to be a significant early example of the Akron Plan of church design. You might also be interested in the curved black-walnut theatre-style pews, the building's original tracker pipe organ, or the later addition of a walk-in baptistry.

Displays of Sharpshville history are featured in the showcases upstairs along with a large swing-panel display of 137 photos and documents. The showcases contain 90 items organized along various topics: Railroads, Clubs, Sports, Businesses, Inventors, Anniversary Celebrations, Shenango Furnace, World War I, as well as others. An album of old Sharpshville class and sports team photos can be perused if you are looking for grandma or grandpa (or just are curious about the old-timey team uniforms or hairstyles our grand- and great-grand-parents wore). Two digital slide-shows are included to display additional photos.

Our basement includes displays of an additional 52 items in showcases as well as along the walls. Topics include: World War II, the Jackson Oiler, the Great Depression, and Sharpshville Schools.

Future plans include both revamping and expanding our displays. Our collection of documents, photos, and artifacts continues to grow, with much currently in storage. (Though the stored items often form the basis for articles in this newsletter.) We foresee future displays including narrative context to better explain and connect the items in our collection.

Upcoming Events

GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIPS

Presque Isle Casino June 20th

Seneca Niagara Casino July 18th

Call 724-813-9199 for info and reservations



ANNUAL ICE CREAM SOCIAL

AT MAHANAY PARK

Sunday July 15th

National Ice Cream Day!

With Gratitude

Our appeal for donations toward restoration of our headquarters building's historic pipe organ continues to generate response. Since the last newsletter, we have received the following sponsorships:

Gold Level and above

Lindell Bridges

Florence Alexander Laurel Alexander

Silver Level

Moore's Auto Sales & Service

Bronze Level

Lock, Stock & Barrel

Ann Morris

Supporter

Dave & Ann U'Halie

First National Bank of PA, Sharpshville Branch

Patron

Laurie Kurt

Institutions

Street lighting

Sharpsville lore, as repeated in the histories written for the town's anniversaries, tells us that street lighting here was unnecessary until the blast furnaces were capped. To be sure, when most of the nine furnaces were in blast, the night sky must have been wonderfully illumined. It was said the light was so bright it was possible to read a newspaper at night for miles around. Old-timers even recalled, so it is claimed, that when birds were migrating to the south they would be attracted by the light of the furnaces, plunging to their death. Sometimes a workingman's dinner included a wild duck which had been overcome by the fumes.

Yet, even after taking these colorful embellishments with a grain of salt, the correlation between the capping of the furnaces and the introduction of street lighting was not so simple. When the municipal government was organized in 1874, the country was in the depth of an economic depression—the Panic of 1873—which particularly affected cyclical industries like iron manufacture. In times like this all or almost all the furnaces were out of blast. Moreover, the closed tops on the furnaces were not introduced all at once but only as furnaces were upgraded from a more primitive style. So, a municipal government with a demand for services outpacing the tax base—and basically starting from scratch—would need to prioritize building the infrastructure we today take for granted: fire and police protection, sidewalks, street paving, water and sewer, and street lighting.

Yet we did have street lighting by the late 1880s. They were not, however, electric street lights like one might expect. Instead fifteen kerosene street lamps were placed in various parts of town. Old photos show one in front of Universalist Church, one in front of the Opera House, one on Shenango Street midway along the block between Mercer Ave. and Walnut, and one at the corner of Mercer and Main. The 1900 Federal Census still listed Clinton Billig as holding the quaint occupation of city lamp lighter.



A close-up of one of the kerosene street lamps on Shenango St., 1880s.

Kerosene was, however, just one of the choices for illumination at the time—after all this was the “gas-light” era. In 1885, the Borough Council granted a franchise “for the Exclusive right to furnish & supply the Borough and Citizens with Natural Gas for Light & Fuel purposes.” The company requesting the franchise included four of the Pierce brothers, C.E. Agnew, and Jonathan Gordon. The investors took no action, however, as natural gas was not actually introduced here until 1903. By then, Charles Runningbrew circulated a petition asking the Oil City Fuel Supply Company to bring natural gas to Sharpsville. Pipes were laid between the fall of 1902 and the spring of 1903, bringing the service to an initial 138 customers. Harry Thompson of Walnut Street was the first to receive the service and Claire Shannon, who owned a hardware store, was the town's first gas fitter and meter reader.

Natural gas, though, was rarely the fuel that lit gas lights. As you may note, the bluish flame on a kitchen stove does not give off much light. Instead, municipal gas plants manufactured illuminating gas (also referred to as town gas or city gas), which burned much brighter. They typically used coal which was baked, with the resulting

fumes collected and piped to homes and businesses in the town. As you may guess, the process produced noxious smells and made such plants unwanted neighbors. The gas itself had an unpleasant odor. Trivia buffs are well acquainted with the fact that natural gas—normally odorless—has its characteristic smell added. This is to replicate the odor of illuminating gas. In a possibly apocryphal story, in 1865 the City of Pittsburgh replaced the illuminating gas from a coal gas plant with natural gas. No one thought to inform the public, however, that one's nose could not detect the new natural gas. As a result, many homeowners left the valves of their gas lights open thinking nothing was coming



A popular park in Seattle is set among the ruins of the city's old gas works.

Touchstones of the Past

Motto Mugs

Included in our collection are five stoneware beer mugs from the Knapp House Hotel, which stood on the corner of Main and Walnut. They likely date from the opening of the hotel in 1903. Prior to Prohibition, Pennsylvania's liquor license laws were even more arcane than they are now, with the Knapp House one of the few places in town you could get a drink. If you were a regular, you probably had a mug with your name on it kept behind the bar. Otherwise, your ale or lager was likely served in one of these stoneware mugs.



Known as motto mugs, they each displayed a witty saying extolling the pleasures of drink. Each reads as follows:

A TEA KETTLE SINGS
WHEN IT IS MERELY
FILLED WITH BOILING
WATER
BUT MAN, PROUD MAN
IS NO TEA KETTLE

EVERY MAN
HAS A RIGHT
TO HOLD
HIS OWN.

HONOR, FAME, WEALTH
& LOVE
MAY DESERT US,
BUT
THIRST IS ETERNAL

A CAMEL
CAN GO EIGHT DAYS
WITHOUT A DRINK—
BUT
WHO WANTS TO BE A
CAMEL?

WHILE WE LIVE, LET US
LIVE IN CLOVER,
FOR
WHEN WE'RE DEAD, WE'RE
DEAD ALL OVER.

Upcoming Events

Please also support Area Community Theatre of Sharpville's quality productions, showcasing local talent.

The Fantasticks

May 18th -20th Pierce Opera House
call 724-815-4388 or go to actsharpville.org



This funeral procession dates from about 1913 on Hickory Street. The houses were duplex tenements owned by the Claire Furnace Co. Though often overcrowded, and when razed 45 years later they were described as “time-beaten”; here they look neat and trim. The skip hoist of the Alice Furnace and stoves of the Claire Furnace can be seen in the background.

A Look Back

The Goose that Laid the Golden Egg

... Only it wasn't a goose, but a duck; plus, it skips to the end of the story rather quickly. From an April 14, 1907 newspaper report:

While preparing a duck for her Sunday meal yesterday Mrs. U.G. Fuller of Sharpsville, found two gold nuggets in the bird's craw. They seemed to be of pure gold, and when she took them to a jeweler he stated that they were worth several dollars. How the duck came to be lined with gold is a mystery.

Ursula Fuller, a widow, lived at 10 S. Walnut Street with her daughter Cora, who was the town music teacher.

Items for Sale

DVDs of 100 photos of old Sharpsville in slide show format—2 volumes

Cat's Meow keepsakes of the First Universalist Church

Natural Stone Drink Coasters with scenes of old Sharpsville

Street lighting, cont'd.

out. Fires ensued, with half of Pittsburgh burning down that night.

Most large cities had such gas plants—many operating into the 1920s, with Seattle's even as late as 1956; yet today the technology is virtually forgotten. Sharon had such a plant, built in 1871, and located on Silver Street (near where the electrical substation stands). Since Sharpsville was a smaller town, it made no economic sense to erect a municipal gas plant here.

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Meetings are held the First Monday of the Month at 7:00pm

at our headquarters

Street lighting, cont'd.

Yet, the First Universalist Church, completed in 1884, was lit by gas; likewise, the Opera House shows evidence of piping for gas lighting. It was also said the Pierce Mansion was lit by gas. But where did this gas come from? Gas machines were available for the manufacture of illuminating gas outside the reach of the municipal gas service. More compact than the apparatus of a municipal gas plant, they operated on a similar principal, though with the fumes produced by the evaporation of gasoline or benzene. The machines were typically installed in an underground vault since having what was basically a tank of gasoline fumes on your premises was as dangerous as it sounds. Nonetheless, the system was deemed safer than kerosene lamps, that when knocked over, were the source of countless fires.

The Sharpsville Electric Light Co. was organized in 1890. Its generating station was located on 6th Street to the south of what was later the main gate to the Shenango. By 1894 it supplied power to 65 electric arc lamps and 30 incandescent lamps at homes and businesses throughout town. This was a time of contending methods of illumination: The Universalist Church had, by 1900, changed from their gas lights to kerosene; Grace Reformed too was lit by kerosene; the Methodist and Presbyterian churches had electric lights, as did the Claire and Alice furnaces; the Pierce House Hotel had both kerosene and electric lights.



A depiction of an installation of the Springfield Gas Machine, the most widespread of such devices. Zoom in to note the underground vault containing the gas generator connected to an air pump in the mansion's basement.

The old kerosene street lamps also had a competitor when an electric arc lamp was suspended for street lighting at Second and Main in 1897. A system of 27 electric street lamps was instituted in 1900. They grew to 43 lamps on 40 poles the following year. The electric arc lamps were supplanted by incandescent lamps by 1924. Mercury vapor, sodium vapor, and now LED lamps have been more recent successors.

The Robinson boys, sons of Thomas G. Robinson, had joined their father in running a planing mill before branching out into the manufacture of furniture from a large shop on Second Street. They decided to buy the town's electric generating plant in 1897. Tragedy struck, however, on July 8, 1899 when one of the brothers, Frank, was killed at the plant. (He was tightening a loose bolt on one of the generators without shutting down the power and was electrocuted.) This apparently prompted the Robinsons to put the company for sale.

At the time, streetcar systems were large users of electricity and so had an interest in its generation. (Besides municipal and household lighting, electrical demand which we now consider commonplace did not exist. Many of the household appliances—refrigerators, electric ranges, washers and dryers—slowly entered use in the 1920s. Televisions, of course, of course were a post-war phenomenon, with air-conditioning much later. Industrial users often had their own generating plant.) So, when the Robinson Brothers sold their plant in 1900, they found an eager buyer in a syndicate of New York and Chicago capitalists who consolidated the electrical plants and street railways in the Youngstown and Sharon areas; the new company also built a streetcar line connecting those two cities. This consolidation resulted in the generating plant in Sharpsville being torn down by 1905.

The various technologies available through the years—electric, gas, and kerosene—ignores one significantly older source of nighttime illumination. In a contract proposed for Sharpsville's electric street lights in 1892, it included a common pricing option of the time: "moonlight schedule." That is the electric company would not burn the street lights during cloudless nights when the moon was shining. Given Western Pennsylvania's notoriously overcast skies, it is hard to see this provision yielded much savings.