



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

The Historical Society has partnered with Second Life E-cycling of Pittsburgh and their non-profit affiliate Orro Fundraising for what promises to be a successful fundraiser. In short, we will collect used electronics—working or broken—and Orro will pay us a portion for what we collect.

Eligible for recycling are:

- Cell-phones of all sorts
- Gaming systems, handheld games, DVD players
- Computers, laptops, tablets,
- Flat-screen monitors, printers
- Digital cameras, stereo amps, turntables

We cannot accept tube-type televisions and monitors (non-flat screen) or non-electronic appliances.

Watch for announcements of special days to drop-off your items.

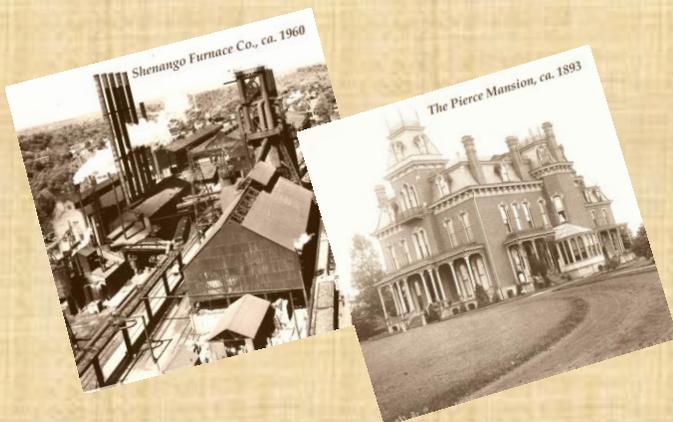
Our partner, Second Life, adheres to high standards of data handling to ensure any personal data will be wiped clean.

By participating, you'll be keeping heavy metals and other chemicals from leaching out of landfills, clearing clutter from your home or office, and helping the Historical Society raise funds for the ongoing renovation of our historic headquarters.

So gather up that drawer-full of old cell phones and that computer tower serving as a door stop—and bring them down. Now doesn't that feel good?

Items for Sale

Natural Stone Drink Coasters
featuring lithographed scenes of old Sharpsville
17 different choices



\$8 each, any 4 for \$30

available at Mehler Insurance or through our website
at www.sharpsvillehistorical.org

Upcoming Events

ANNUAL ICE CREAM SOCIAL
AT MAHANEY PARK
6/28 DATE POSTPONED
DUE TO WEATHER

Watch for announcement of rescheduling



GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIPS
Seneca Niagara Casino July 22nd
Wheeling Island Casino August 26th

Call 724-813-9199
for info and reservations



Valley Lyric Opera presents
Puccini's immortal opera of jealousy and regret

TOSCA

Pierce Opera House
August 20th and 22nd

A Look Back

Church and State in 1884

The question of prayer in the public schools remains a source of controversy. Whichever side one takes in the debate, however, most now would consider it something that arose with the U.S. Supreme Court decisions of 1962 and 1963 and the divisive social issues of that decade. It may be a little surprising then to learn the matter was contentious in 1884, with Sharpsville a center of the controversy.

Granted, at the time, the issue involved whether the State was granting preference to one Christian church over another; whereas, today lawsuits usually involve government preference for any Christian symbols or public prayers. Nonetheless, even in the 1880s the inter-denominational dispute was recognized as potentially abridging the rights of the non-Christian or agnostic. We should also be mindful that doctrinal differences then stood in sharper relief than they do now. Nor can it be ignored that, like today, newcomers to America generated suspicion. So much of prior generations' anti-Catholic animus had to do with the arrival of immigrants from Catholic lands, particularly Ireland, but later Italy and Eastern Europe.

From the first wave of Irish immigration in the 1830s and 40s hostility against Catholics took root in this country. For its part, the Catholic Church saw little reason to assimilate. As the Church in Ireland had endured centuries of suppression, immigrant Catholics were particularly concerned with safeguarding the faith in a majority Protestant country. This was likewise the principal motivation behind the establishment of Catholic schools in this country.

A striking example of sectarian strife originated with a request the Bishop of Philadelphia made in 1842 to the city's school board to remove textbooks with an anti-Catholic bias and to permit use of the Catholic Douay translation for classroom Bible readings in addition to the King James Version. The board agreed to remove the offending textbooks and proposed instead that Catholic students be excused from the Bible readings which used a Protestant translation. While the compromise was accepted by the bishop, nativist Protestants interpreted this as the beginning of a plan to remove the Bible from the schools. Mass rallies were held as an anti-Catholic fervor was stoked. From there events spiraled out of control with three days of rioting in the Kensington District of Philadelphia in May 1844, leaving among both sides nine dead and at least a score wounded. A Catholic seminary and church were burned, along with several homes and shops, before the state militia regained control. A second riot in south Philadelphia later that summer left another ten dead and twenty wounded. In reaction to the unrest in Philadelphia, mobs gathered in New York and St. Louis, though there violence was averted.

On the other hand, there is little evidence of religious animosity of any degree, let alone violence, taking root in Sharpsville. Local newspapers announced happenings among the various congregations in town even-handedly and without condescension. General Pierce, moreover, like other town-building industrialists of his day, donated lots for various congregations to build their churches. His ecumenical spirit was also motivated by the need to attract and accommodate the faiths of the workers required to man his furnaces.

Nevertheless, early in 1884 parents of Catholic schoolchildren were troubled by the morning Bible exercises in the Sharpsville schools. The complaints here match almost exactly those that preceded the Philadelphia riots forty years earlier: Scripture readings were taken from the King James version with no accommodation for the Catholic Douay translation; prayers and hymns were also of Protestant origin. To an age of lukewarm belief, differences in translation may seem of little consequence. Nonetheless, the competing versions contained within them important matters of doctrinal difference, the omission of certain books, and notions of textual primacy. While these distinctions may have been, for the most part, lost on a young audience in the classroom, they were emblematic to the larger communities of very real differences in their conceptions of Christian faith and identity.

In a visit to St. Bartholomew's, Bishop of Erie Tobias Mullen instructed parishioners not to permit their children to take part in the classroom scriptural readings. As a result, many pupils were absent during the morning devotional, were marked tardy, and some eventually suspended. The matter was appealed to the School Board which upheld the principal's actions, but reinstated the suspended students so long as they thereafter adhere to the school's rules. The Board secretary P.J. Bartleson then asked the State Superintendent of Public Instruction for guidance. Harrisburg's answer, dated June 6, 1884, opined that the mere reading of the Bible without commentary from the teacher was not sectarian. If objections remained, the Catholic students should be provided with a Douay translation, or if the verses were recited, children of dissenting parents could be excused from the exercise.

cont'd on page 3

Church and State in 1884, cont'd.

Suspension of non-participating students met with strong disapproval.

The State Superintendent's ruling riled an anonymous letter-writer to *The Sharon Herald*. Signed merely as "A Taxpayer," the letter criticized how on the one hand Scriptures come under the head of textbooks, yet sectarian books were still to be excluded. The authority of the Superintendent to ignore what the writer thought was the plain wording of the State Constitution was also contested. Indeed a prediction was made that the grievance would continue to the county court or even the Supreme Court, but not before this salvo: "Sectarianism has grown upon our school system like a lot of warts or weeds. Let the letter and spirit of the Constitution be upheld; and let the fire-eating bigots, fanatics and extremists be ignored."

In July, a petition, characterized by *The Sharon Herald* as a "dignified and pointed remonstrance," was presented to the school directors. It began by outlining the prohibitions in the state Constitution against compulsion of attending worship, preference to any religious establishment, or tax money being used to support sectarian schools. To the issue at hand it then protested "against the gross violation of the letter and spirit of the Constitution in squandering the money of the school taxes and State appropriations upon sectarian teachers, who make use of a Protestant Bible, Protestant prayers and Protestant hymns in defiance of Hebrew and Catholic, Infidel and Indifferent parents, guardians and taxpayers."

To add fuel to the fire, following the delivery of the petition, sermons were delivered in the Baptist, Methodist and Universalist churches here, all taking strong grounds against the removal of the Bible.

By the time school started in September, the Board adopted a resolution in line with the State's guidance. Reading of the Bible was maintained; a sectarian character to any exercises, while denied, would be guarded against in the future; and students would be excused from the Bible lesson upon the request of their parents.

Alarmed by the prospect of the Greenville School Board following Sharpsville's example, an anonymous "Protestant" penned a lengthy and indignant missive to the newspaper of that town. Describing the excuse of Catholic students from Scripture readings as an "insult" to "our old Bible," the writer predicted an unmanageable state of affairs caused by such ready acquiescence of authority to claims of conscience. He unapologetically declared, "Our common school system is a Protestant system."

The solution adopted by the Sharpsville school directors—to excuse objecting students from the morning exercise—as is almost always the case with "separate but equal" treatment, did little to resolve the complaint. Later that fall, Bishop Mullen urged the parishioners of St. Bartholomew's to appeal to the courts for injunctive relief. Suit was filed in Mercer County Court of Common Pleas in February of 1885, and after long deliberation, on September 12th of that year Judge Samuel S. Mehard upheld the school directors in the suit against them.

In a lengthy decision, Mehard reasoned that the that it was in the public interest to teach morality as a means of safety and stability, and that the Bible is admittedly in the front rank of books which may be used for moral instruction. He found public acknowledgment of Christianity, in itself, was not barred given the number of examples of such recognition. (Though the example he gave of the preamble to Pennsylvania's Constitution dated only from 1874. The two prior versions, it should be noted, had based their establishment on "We, the people," without an invocation of "Almighty God" or "His guidance.")

The court was little impressed with the argument, on the one hand, that Catholic ecclesiastical courts have declared the King James version to be incorrect and sectarian, and, on the other hand, the School Board's contention that said translation was nearer the original writings than any other. The crux of the decision, though, hinged on whether the existence of disputed translations proved their sectarian character. (The Constitutional prohibition read "No money raised for the support of the public schools of the Commonwealth shall be appropriated to or used for the support of any sectarian school.") Mehard opined that since the State is concerned only with the moral element of the Bible, and if such teachings are essentially the same in all versions, then the Bible cannot be held to be sectarian, regardless of the version. For this conclusion, he relied heavily on the 1844 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Vidal et al. v. Girard's Executors*. He did look favorably upon the District excusing any objecting students from the morning exercises, especially since they were "provided comfortable separate accommodations."

Despite the suspicions of the Catholic press, Judge Mehard did not appear to base his decision on any open

cont'd on page 5



This procession along Mercer Avenue of Grand Army of the Republic veterans of the Civil War dates from about 1906. Jonas Pierce is in the white hat and in the middle behind the flag-bearer is Curtis Foster.

Born near Clarksville, Curtis Foster was Sharpsville's last living Civil War veteran, dying in 1932. He fought in the Pennsylvania 57th and stood guard over President Lincoln's coffin. The devotion and sacrifice of his family to the cause of Union was nothing short of remarkable. Not only did Curtis and his brother fight in the Civil War, but so did his father and six uncles. Two uncles died at Fredericksburg, his father at Fair Oaks, Va. and his brother fell at Alexandria. Curtis and another uncle were both wounded in battle.

Building Update

As noted in our last newsletter, we have a number of projects underway to restore our headquarters, built in 1884 as the First Universalist Church of Sharpsville. Recently completed is the work on the south chimney—rebuilt to its original height and with the original decorative brickwork. Work was done by master mason Phil Bertelli and the crew of Joseph T. Bayer & Son. Work on rebuilding the north chimney will resume this fall.



A view of the original chimney.



The chimney as it looked prior to restoration.



The completed chimney.

Church and State in 1884, cont'd.

bigotry. Rather, he took pains to note it was an important question, both sides ably argued their cases, and would likely be appealed to the State Supreme Court.

The decision, though, may have more to do with what sociologists call dominant group privilege—the often unconscious assumptions members of the majority make about what constitutes a norm (and the expectation of entitlement that goes along with it). In contrast, a minority's views are considered the variant or exception, and thus are ignored, or at best something to be tolerated. The point here, though, is not so much to delve into the mentality of 1880s but to consider how much the religion and ethnicity of the population has changed since then.

A 2010 religious census for Mercer County shows 28,244 Catholics, 21,831 mainline Protestants, 13,379 Evangelical Protestants, 1,147 Black Protestants, 929 Orthodox, and 612 other. (It also categorizes 50,136 as “unclaimed,” which includes believers who do not regularly attend services.) In contrast, the inset box shows the results for a 1904 religious census of Sharpsville. The numbers include a second wave of Irish immigration in the 1890s and the very beginning of the influx of Italian, Slavic, and Hungarian Catholics. Looking back further, we find the Catholics as a smaller group yet. The adult members of Sharpsville congregations listed in an 1888 History of Mercer County totaled about 628 for the seven Protestant denominations here. The number reported at St. Bartholomew's was 65 families. Even at two adult members for every family (which is a generous assumption given the number of single male laborers in town at the time), Catholics were a significant but decided minority.

Reaction to the 1885 controversy in Sharpsville varied: *The Sharon Herald* maintained neutrality by publishing without comment the text of Judge Mehard's decision, and by printing two weeks later the official Catholic response.

This response was more fully given in diocesan newspapers such as *The [Pittsburgh] Catholic*. It reiterated the contention that Protestant translations of the Bible were sectarian. Moreover, by characterizing the reading of the Bible and the Bible alone as central to the faith of various Protestant denominations, such readings would in themselves be sectarian acts of worship. The rejoinder then took a broader view of the controversy by asking (perhaps disingenuously) “Has not the Jew the plain right to object to the reading of any and all versions of the new Testament? . . . The Constitution certainly protects him. Do not the infidel and agnostic also claim protection?” To Mehard's central point that the Bible can inculcate “moral culture” without a religious basis, the newspaper asserted, the Christian must answer “no.” The organ of the Cleveland Diocese, *Catholic Universe*, went further and said the Sharpsville case called for a re-examination of the relationship between public and denominational schools. Since religion and morality are necessary elements in the instruction of our children, the paper urged that education was best left to the schools run by the various churches, rather than the “godless” public system. As a corollary, those who support parochial schools should be exempt from the taxes to maintain public schools.

In contrast, the editors of a Seventh Day Adventist newspaper included an excerpt from *Illustrated Christian Weekly* that applauded Judge Mehard's reasoning as a “sound and sensible decision [which] ought to carry conviction

DENOMINATIONS.	No.	Under 18 Years	Regular attendance Sunday School	Per Cent. age of Pop. ulation.	
				Attendce at church at least once a mo.	Attendce at church at least once a mo. Regular attendance at Sunday school
Baptist	337	148	111	162	39 29 12
Catholic, Greek	142	13	0	0	9 0 0
Catholic, Roman	883	335	144	514	37 16 58
Christian Disciple	15	8	3	1	53 20 6
Church of God	4	1	0	1	25 0 25
Episcopal Protestant	23	7	1	8	30 4 34
Evangelical Association	9	1	0	4	11 0 44
Lutheran	29	9	3	9	30 10 30
Methodist Episcopal	932	285	220	339	30 23 42
Methodist, Free	125	48	34	68	38 27 58
Presbyterian	467	164	138	232	35 29 49
United Presbyterian	20	7	4	7	35 20 35
Reformed Church	262	97	75	155	37 27 59
United Brethren	39	11	6	6	28 15 15
Universalist	130	59	46	69	38 35 53
Christian Science	22	8	6	15	36 27 68
Millennial Dawn	2	0	0	0	0 0 0
No Preference	71	11	0	6	15 0 8
Refused Information	3	0	0	0	0 0 0
Not at Home	50	25	10	20	50 20 40
Totals	3605	1228	801	1670	34 22 46

Note the Greek Catholics, i.e., Byzantine Rite, did not attend church as they had nowhere locally to worship. St. Michael's (originally in Farrell) was not founded until the following year. The pair of Millennial Dawn adherents were followers of Charles Taze Russell, a Pittsburgh minister whose six-volume Bible study series of that name, led to what was called the Bible Student movement, forerunner to the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Church and State in 1884, cont'd.

to all unbigoted minds.” Lest one be unsure which minds lacked bias, the article continued, “But Rome is bigoted and intolerant, and fears and hates the open Bible as its most dangerous foe.” Yet, a few pages later the editors railed against the oppressive power of the state when it came in conflict with that denomination’s distinctive beliefs about a Saturday Sabbath.

A Free Thinker’s journal also weighed in on the case. “Freethought” refers to an outlook, flowering in the United States in the late 19th century, which emphasized Reason and rejected Revelation, and that was generally agnostic. It decried all entanglements between church and government and often expressed hostility toward hierarchical religion.

In reporting the trial, a Lancaster, Pa. newspaper reasoned that since neither version of the Bible was universally accepted, each must be considered sectarian. The newspaper urged, however, that as a practical matter “common sense and neighborly amenities, mutual concession and religious tolerance rule most places and, where these are not strong enough to prevent any disturbance, the best plan it to quietly avoid any occasion for offense.”

Despite a unanimous belief (joined by Judge Mehard as well) that the matter would ultimately be decided by the State Supreme Court, no appeal was made. Perhaps the plaintiffs lacked the funds and will to continue the fight. Perhaps the justices in Harrisburg tired of hearing of the spats in our little borough, as this case came on the heels of appeals of two railroad cases from Sharpsville in 1879 and 1884.

In October of 1885, the man at the center of the whole controversy, Father J.C. McEntee, pastor of St. Bartholomew’s, was reassigned to lead churches in Clearfield County.

The controversy here was widely reported, appearing in newspapers in Boston, New York, San Francisco, and London. It also appears as a citation in subsequent legal cases well into the twentieth century. For some time, the law on this question remained unsettled with courts in various states arriving at differing conclusions. Indeed, the question of religion in the public schools was, legally, for many years purely a matter for the individual states under The Bill of Rights. (Those amendments only restrict action of the federal government: “*Congress shall make no law . . .*”) Only after the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 and after development of the jurisprudence in subsequent decades, could the guarantees of the First Amendment apply to the states. And so it came to be in 1947 that the U.S. Supreme Court first broadly applied the First Amendment’s prohibition against the “establishment of religion” to actions or practices of state and local governments, insofar as they would “deprive any person” of his fundamental rights “without due process of law,” as outlined in the Fourteenth.

While the legal terrain and our country’s diversity have changed markedly in the last 130 years, the questions raised in the Sharpsville case are not fully settled: can public schools effectively provide moral instruction, should they, and if so what moral code should be taught? Judge Mehard would not be surprised that in matters of conscience disagreements would persist; however, what he perhaps would not have foreseen would be that today the majority of United States Supreme Court justices are Roman Catholic.

A Look Back

Pomp and Sabre Dance?

In the late 1890s, a sword drill by the graduates was part of Sharpsville High’s commencement ceremonies held at the Opera House. Even if the blades were blunted, it seems as if school principal was just asking for trouble.

However odd the drilling may seem to us today, such an exercise did reflect the ethos of the era. As the frontier closed and the sturdy yeoman migrated to the city, it was feared a life of urban ease would result in a less virile American, weaker in both body and spirit. A movement to instill masculine virtues was epitomized in the life of Theodore Roosevelt as well as in his signal 1899 speech “The Strenuous Life.” In it, TR extolled the virtues of physical toil, risk-taking, and military preparedness, both for the individual and the nation.

Contact Us

website: www.sharpsvillehistorical.org
email: sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com
see our website for officers’ phone numbers

Headquarters: 131 N. Mercer Ave., Sharpsville, Pa.
Mailing address: 955 Forest Lane, Sharpsville, Pa.
16150

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

*We welcome new members, involvement with
our projects, or articles or suggestions for this
newsletter*