



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

Thanks to our donors, large and small, as well as the supporters of our fundraising events, the Society is able to progress with the restoration of our headquarters building. Completed in 1884 as the First Universalist Church of Sharpshville, this is the fourth oldest church structure as well as the fullest expression of High Victorian Gothic architecture extant in the Shenango Valley. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the building is a nationally significant example of the Akron Plan of church design.

Since the building's purchase in 2000, we have finished a number of projects representing 40% of the estimated expenditures needed to complete the restoration. After the work planned for this year is complete, we estimate that we will approach 60% of a full restoration of this architectural gem. Specifically, we aim to accomplish the following in 2015:

- 1) Rebuilding of the front entry steps and installation of Victorian cast-iron railings.
- 2) Rebuilding of the chimneys with the original decorative brickwork to their original height.
- 3) Rebuilding of selected stained glass windows.
- 4) Repair and repainting of the exterior woodwork.

As our work progresses, we expect to be able to use the building more and more as a home to display and interpret our archives, a distinctive space for cultural and community events, and as a focal point for civic pride. Like all our projects, they help fulfill our mission to strengthen a sense of community by connecting the people of the Sharpshville area with their shared past.

With local foundations so far unable to offer support, we rely on private donations to continue our work here. We invite you to visit our building and see what your gift—large or small—can accomplish. As a 501(c)(3) organization, contributions to the Historical Society are tax-deductible.

Upcoming Events

ANNUAL ICE CREAM SOCIAL AT MAHANEY PARK

Watch for an announcement of the date and time this summer



GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIPS

Seneca Allegany Casino May 20th

Hard Rocksino June 17th

Call 724-813-9199 for info and reservations



Please also support the quality productions of the Area Community Theatre of Sharpshville, showcasing local talent.

Noël Coward's comic romp

Blithe Spirit

May 29-31st

Pierce Opera House

call 724-815-4388 or go to actsharpshville.org

Collections update

Tom Demas donated a 1920s log book from the Sharpshville Railroad.

The Society also acquired a 1911 ticket from the Sharpshville Railroad, a 1955 Masonic initiation apron from the Sharpshville Lodge, and a promotional flyer for Rev. Dr. Roscoe Foulke and his "Sharpshville Junior Republic."

From the Collections

Stained Glass Windows

We are particularly proud of the stained glass windows at our headquarters building. While we first thought all the windows dated from the building's construction, both physical evidence as well as old photos that have recently come to our attention show that not all the windows are original. Apart from the memorial windows, the earliest windows were of a simpler design, with the window at the staircase landing a good example. (This window has been rebuilt as part of our 2015 Restoration Project.) Despite their simpler design they make liberal use of ruby glass—a costly hue on account of the use of gold in the firing. Ruby glass is used elsewhere in the church, as it was in the cupola of the Pierce Mansion next door. These windows were largely replaced in the sanctuary sometime between the 1890s and ca. 1906, with more decorative designs in cathedral rolled glass. A further, post-1906 change was made in the Sunday School room with the original muntined perimeter panes retained, but with a decorative pattern out of different types of glass in the central area.

The original memorial windows, though, contain the greatest amount of decoration, but unfortunately will require substantial expense for us to restore. The persons memorialized are worth mentioning. The large west quatrefoil is in memory of General James Pierce, whose life has been well-documented in other histories of the town. One lobe shows a lamb, with the other lobe flanking originally depicted a descending dove. (The decoration on bottom lobe is, so far, unknown). The east quatrefoil is in memory of Nathan Morford (1817-1881), who served a term in the Pennsylvania Legislature representing Mercer County. The donor, Nathan's widow Mary Ann, née Smith, was the niece of none other than Thaddeus Stevens—the “Old Commoner,” who as a Pennsylvania legislator was most responsible for ensuring free, universal public education in the Commonwealth. Later, as a Congressman, he was leader of the abolitionist wing, unyielding advocate of equality, architect of the Reconstruction, and father of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. (Tommy Lee Jones portrayed him in the recent movie *Lincoln*.)

The two other memorial windows are lancet-shaped with painted pictorial scenes. The chancel lancet was dedicated to Mrs. Esther (Coulson) Fell (1806-1882), by her husband Jesse Fell. The Fells were pioneer settlers of the county and Jesse lived at the family farmstead on what is now Rte. 846 near its intersection with Colt Road (which was once known as Fell's Corners); he was a first cousin to Nathan Morford. Both Jesse and Nathan were among the incorporators of the now 155-year old Pymatuning Mutual Fire Insurance Company.

The Sunday School room's lancet window was dedicated by Ellen H. Johnson of Boston in memory of her mother. Why was someone from Boston giving money to the church here? Further research reveals Ellen's mother to be was Rhoda Holbrook Cheney (1804-1877), sister of Chloe Pierce, who was widow of the General and main benefactress of the church. Ellen, an only child, was brought up largely in the companionship of her father, an agent for a cotton manufacturer; he taught her to fish, swim and ride on horseback, as well as to attend to the lighter duties of their New Hampshire farm. In 1849 she married Jesse C. Johnson and moved to Boston, where he was a clothing merchant. In 1861, Ellen helped organize the New England auxiliary branch of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, a private relief agency founded to support the war's sick and wounded soldiers. Widowed in 1880, she was best known as a pioneer in the movement for the reformation of women's prisons, especially in providing separate and better prison accommodations for female convicts. Ellen later became superintendent of the Reformatory Prison for Women at Sherborn, Mass., where she introduced many successful improvements. Her efforts were honored at the Columbian Exposition, and in 1899 she was invited to deliver a paper at an international Women's Congress in London, where she died unexpectedly.



The landing window, restored thanks to a gift by the SHS Class of 1964

A Look Back

The Football Field

Prior to the beginning of this last season we were asked when the football field was built here. While some may disagree, and other reluctant to admit, the stadium may very well be Sharpsville's most venerated shrine. Yet what has been nicknamed "The Pines" since the mid-1980s was not always there.

The 1933 season began on an ominous note. In an inexplicable lack of foresight, Sharpsville's home field at 13th Street had been bisected by an extension of Pierce Avenue that spring. Other locations were considered, but all available spots—here in the depths of the Great Depression—had been turned into relief gardens. Temporary measures were taken by filling in the (apparently unpaved) road for the season, but that was deemed a less than adequate solution. Supporters of the visiting Greenville squad complained (after a loss, of course) that the field hampered their play and was "by no means level, and to add to the unpleasantness, was stony and dusty."

While kids had long played football—going back to the rugby style game of the 19th century—on the vacant lots of town, a high school team appears to have first been organized in 1909. The teams at the time, while bearing the name Sharpsville High School (and back when we were the 'Blue and White,' long before 'Blue Devils'), were not financially supported by the School District. Each fall, whether a team would be able to take the field was up in the air. The 1912 team was disbanded mid-season on account of finances. A squad was fielded for 1913 due to the success of a tag sale and 1914's team relied on a local subscription drive. Home games of this era were played at the Boiler Works Field. (At the time, the buildings of the Sharpsville Boiler Works, predecessor to the Sharpsville Steel Fabricators and now Sharpsville Container Corp., took up only a portion of the area at 6th and Main.) As might be imagined, the field conditions here were likewise not ideal with the hometown paper of the visiting Greenville gridders remarking "the greatest wonder being that the players were not injured by the condition of the grounds."



Work at a relief garden in Youngstown, 1932

Even earlier, in 1899, a football contest between Sharon and Greenville was played in Sharpsville at Speedway Park. (This was a horse race-track and baseball field on land owned by the Pierce family, along Walnut Street between Union and the borough line. It is depicted on the lower edge of the well-known 1901 birds-eye view map of Sharpsville.)

The beginning of Sharpsville's storied gridiron history, nonetheless, has traditionally been dated to the 1921 season. The following year, the School Board purchased the land around 13th Street and erected school buildings there. (Nicknamed the "chicken coops" these wooden structures, before being moved across town, originally stood as annexes next to the Deeter building.) At the time, Pierce Avenue did not extend past 13th Street, nor did 14th come south of Ridge, so Sharpsville's home football field occupied much of the area from the present-day 13th Street playground across Pierce to the alley. In 1925, there was talk of extending Pierce Avenue, but that did not come to pass and the field was safe for that year. Even then the school newspaper deemed the field an eyesore and unworthy of the legendary teams Harry Pibly was fielding, and urged the town to build a proper facility with grandstands. As a bonus, it would show up arch-rival Sharon who also lacked a stadium. Drainage was a particular problem; two volunteers spent a week digging trenches prior to a big game against Sharon. The following year, sidewalks now threatened to traverse the field. Suggested was relocation to the Thornton estate, behind the current field (where the Little League complex now stands), or else the Scotchtown lot then used for as a practice field for football and track. ("Scotchtown," was a name for the neighborhood centered on Pierce and Milliken Avenues, near Third Street.)

As the 1933 season closed, the School Board lacked funds for a new field. The condition of the 13th Street field in recent years had already forced Sharpsville to play most of its games away; now it look as though all home games would be eliminated. Fortuitously, the New Deal was then getting underway and Civil Works Administration funds were secured to build a new field and stands. (The CWA covered a wide range of infrastructure projects. Put into place on November 8, 1933 and lasting less than five months, its aim was to put men to work at once in an effort to revitalize a collapsed economy. It was succeeded by the larger and longer-term Works Progress Administration. As an example of how earnestly Keynesian economics was applied under the program, only a few days after approval of CWA funds to build the Sharon football stadium, 500 men were hired and construction started. Besides the Sharon stadium, CWA projects were also responsible for the athletic fields at Brookfield, Greenville, Grove City, Mercer, Leesburg, No. 5 Mine, and Jackson Center.)



This view of the Mercer Avenue school dates from about 1907. Of course, those who remember it know it as the Deeter Building, so named in 1949 in honor of long-time teacher Emma Deeter. The structure was built in three stages. The first in 1869, with a matching section alongside in 1876. The rear section with the bell tower and a connection between the two wings was erected in 1883. Sidney W. Foulk of Greenville and New Castle (who also designed the First Universalist Church here) was the architect of that third addition. The building was closed in 1964 and demolished in 1973. The Mertz Towers now occupy this lot, with School Street the only reminder of what once stood here.

The Football Field, cont'd.

Dubbed the Sharpsville Athletic Field, it included both a football field and for many years a baseball diamond. (The first game was played to a crowd of over 800 paid admissions on September 15, 1934 against Erie East. Underdogs against the powerful Erie squad, the Blue & White surprised even their most ardent fans by outgaining their opponent and playing to a scoreless tie. Many in attendance though believed that in a fourth-quarter run by Johnny Lucas, the ball crossed the plane of the goal line before being fumbled. The referees called it otherwise and denied Sharpsville a victory.)

Stadium lights were erected in 1944, with the first game under them the home opener against Bessemer. (The Blue Devils won 25-0.) Night games, however, were played for at least the prior two seasons with portable lights providing the illumination. The original scoreboard was donated by the First National Bank of Sharpsville and folded up when not in use. An electric scoreboard replaced it in 1953; its base contains a plaque honoring the Sharpsville men and women who gave their lives during World War II.

The First Street ticket booth and the old field house (now the Gridiron Club concession stand) were erected shortly after the field was built. The locker room facilities were expanded in 1958. The current field house was built in 1982, with the funds raised throughout the community and particularly with the support and volunteer labor of the Booster Club.

Though called "The Pines" by sportscasters, the official name of the facility is McCracken Field. The name was bestowed in 1974 in honor of James McCracken, long-time superintendent of the Shenango Furnace who, in steering the Sharpsville plant back to profitability and in his efforts to improve the community, contributed much to the town.



The perhaps too-often overlooked Second World War memorial plaque at the base of the scoreboard

With Gratitude

We received a significant donation from the:
Sharpsville High School Class of 1964

The following made gifts in memory of
Ruth McKeel:
Mary Ann Zirafi and Dorene Ward

Contact Us

website: www.sharpsvillehistorical.org
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See our website for officers' phone numbers

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