



SCHUYLKILL HERITAGE

A Newsletter of the Schuylkill County Historical Society



Volume 17, Issue 5

"To discover, procure and preserve ..."

September-October 2022

\$150K grant will help replace windows



Our state legislators gave us a lot to celebrate on August 16. Front row: Society volunteers Barb Conage, Sue Dellock, Jean Dellock, Executive Director Diana Prosymchak, volunteer Felicia Wolf, state Rep. Joe Kerwin, state Sen. Dave Argall, county Commissioner Gary Hess. Back row: Society President Jay Zane, volunteer Dot Loy, Assistant Director Steve Young, Pottsville Mayor Dave Clews and state Rep. Tim Twardzik.

The Society is beyond grateful to our state legislators for securing a \$150,000 grant from the Department of Community and Economic Development that will allow us to start replacing the original 67 windows on our 159-year-old building.

Besides reducing our energy costs, the new windows will help us preserve and protect our priceless archives.

State Sen. Dave Argall, state reps Tim Twardzik and Joe Kerwin, Pottsville Mayor and Society board member Dave Clews and county Com-

missioner Gary Hess were among about a dozen local officials who joined our staff and volunteers for a celebration on August 16.

The total cost of the project is more than \$500,000, but the grant will allow us to replace those windows that are in the worst condition.

Argall said he and our county's state representatives worked during the last two budget cycles to obtain the grant money.

The Society has also raised \$125,000 by selling naming rights at \$5,000 per window, or

\$500 to be on a list of 10 names on a window.

In addition, we are waiting on a \$250,000 loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Twardzik noted that the Society preserves its 1863 building, the former Centre Street School, as well as our county's history.

"The school is the perfect headquarters and helps to anchor the downtown historic district," he said. "I am grateful to help secure this funding to keep Schuylkill County history alive."

Schuylkill County Historical Society

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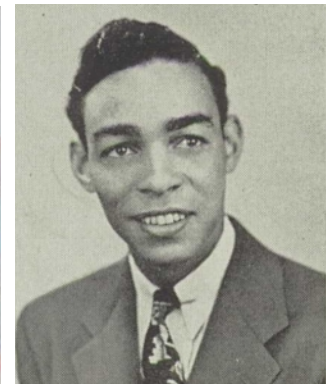
Society Hours

Wednesday-Friday 10-4

Saturdays 10-2 (except January
and February)

*Our purpose is to discover,
procure and preserve the
historical records, data and
other relevant materials of
Schuylkill County.*

Renowned artist Howard N. Watson always remembered his hometown



A Saint Clair street scene by Howard Watson (*Pottsville Republican Herald*) and his 1947 Pottsville High yearbook photo.

When Howard N. Watson was in eighth grade at Pottsville Junior High, a teacher told him to forget about art and try to get a job on an ash truck. It didn't take him long to prove that teacher wrong.

Watson, who died on June 17 at age 93, began winning awards for his artwork when he was the only boy in Pottsville High's commercial program. He went on to become a nationally known watercolorist who served as "artist in residence" in President Jimmy Carter's White house.

He came by his talent honestly. He had a grandfather who was a cartoonist; his father, James B. Watson, was a commercial artist and photoengraver; and a brother, James H., was also an artist.

After graduating from high school in 1947 and serving in the Air Force, he enrolled in the Tyler School of Art and then the Philadelphia College of Art. He held several jobs, including at a Philadelphia department store and an advertising agency, before deciding to go freelance.

Watson spent most his life in the Philadelphia area, but the *Pottsville Republican* and *Republican Herald* kept their readers informed of his accomplishments.

Though best known for his Philadelphia cityscapes, he continued to paint scenes from his hometown.

He also taught watercolor painting in the U.S. and abroad. He told the *Republican* in 1972 that he was giving talks to students at Philadelphia public schools in poor neighborhoods. "I feel that it's very important for ghetto kids to see that a Black man can get ahead in the world by doing something constructive," he said.

In 2002, Pottsville Mayor John D.W. Reiley proclaimed May 11 Howard Watson Day as the city's native son became the first inductee in the Schuylkill County Council for the Arts' Hall of Fame.

At the ceremony, he said he was grateful for the honor bestowed on him, but added that he didn't paint for recognition: "I paint mostly because it's fun for me and simply because it was what I was called to do in life."

Society makes changes to board and staff

The Society welcomes a new board member and one who has returned.

Deb Reed came back to the board earlier this year and was elected secretary. She is a retired history teacher and librarian for the Pine Grove School District. *Check out her latest article for us on page 7.*

Our newest board member, **Robert B. Patton**, is a certified public accountant in Pottsville and a longtime Society member.

In other changes at the board, **Regina Gargano** has



From left: Regina Gargano, Deb Reed, Robert B. Patton and Steve Young.

been named vice president. She is executive director of Explore Schuylkill, the county's visitors bureau, and has been on the Society's board since 2019. *Find out more about her on page 9.*

The Society is also pleased to announce that **Steve Young** has been named assistant director. He is pursuing a master's degree in history and has been an active volunteer for the past two years.

Test your knowledge of local boxing

Boxing is the theme of this issue's quiz as we mark the 50th anniversary of heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali's training camp in Deer Lake. Knock yourself out answering questions about other local boxers!



name: (A) Magic Mike (B) Big Mike (C) Iron Mike (D) Mountaineer Mike.

1. Shenandoah's **K.O. Sullivan** twice fought this world heavyweight champion: (A) Sean Thornton (B) Rocky Marciano (C) Gene Tunney (D) Rocky Balboa.

2. **William "Billy" Rogers**, 1982 Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame inductee, came from (A) Mahanoy Plane (B) Cressona (C) Mount Carbon (D) Pottsville.

3. **Alexander Suchowiecki**, from Cass Township, fought under this name: (A) Billy Shears (B) Wally Sears (C) Ivan Drago (D) Clubber Lang.

4. 1930s boxer **Norman "Pete" Updegrove** was born in (A) Friedensburg (B) Schuylkill Haven (C) Tamaqua (D) Porter Township.

5. Frackville's **Mike Kushwara** had this nick-

6. Pat "**Beltin' Harp**" Igo was a resident of (A) Shenandoah (B) McAdoo (C) Connors Crossing (D) Clamtown.

7. This Gilberton High School football player turned pro boxer. (A) Rubin "Hurricane" Carter (B) Joe "Matt" Rice (C) Salvy "Red" Saunders (D) Andy "Champ" Purcell.

8. A 1930s Pottsville boxing venue was (A) Charlton Hall (B) Eagles Club (C) Greenwood Hill Firehouse (D) Adams Cafe.

9. Shenandoah's **Tommy Gervel**, known as Joe Bush, once fought in (A) Las Vegas (B) Kinshasa, Zaire (C) The Spectrum (D) Madison Square Garden.

10. **Ryan Poletti**, who boxed in the 1990s, hailed from (A) Hegins (B) Palo Alto (C) Kelayres (D) Coaldale.

Answers to the quiz are on page 4.

Don't miss these exciting fall programs!

THE RETURN OF THE HAUNTED HISTORY TOURS

As Halloween approaches, it's time for the Society's Haunted History Tours in Pottsville.

This year we will hold two tours, one at the Baber Cemetery at 14th and Market Street and the other in the downtown area. Each will take place on four consecutive Saturdays - **October 8, 15, 22 and 29.**

The Baber tour will begin at 6 pm on October 8, 15 and 22 and at 5:45 pm on October 29. The downtown Pottsville tour will start at the Society at 8 pm on all four Saturdays.

The fees for each tour are \$12 for the general public, \$10 for Society members and \$7 for children.

The Society is taking reservations now. Reserve your spot soon because space is limited!



Schuylkill County Prison, just one reportedly haunted place you'll see on the downtown Pottsville tour.

AFTER-HOURS PROGRAMS



Wednesday, September 21 - Board member and anthracite mining engineer **Dave Williams** will discuss the 1892 York Farm Mine explosion in Pottsville. This disaster, which killed 15 men, took place near what is now the John S. Clarke Elementary School.

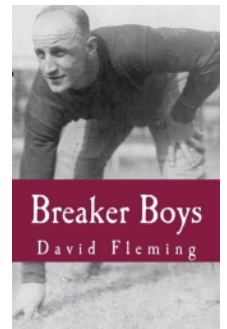
Wednesday, October 12 - Quilting expert **Kathleen Ebner** will give a talk about the history of quilting and how to store those works of art.



All After-Hours programs start at 6:30 pm and are held at the Society. Admission is free to members and \$5 for the general public.

LOCAL READS BOOK CLUB

Wednesday, September 28 - As the football season heats up, enjoy a look back at the Pottsville Maroons. T102 radio host **Kasey Owen** will lead this discussion of ***Breaker Boys: The NFL's Greatest Team and the Stolen 1925 Championship*** by ESPN's David Fleming.



Wednesday, October 26 - Paranormal researcher **Jeffrey A. Dengler** will discuss ***The Minersville Mansion***, his book about his investigation of the historic DiNicola Mansion.

T102 and the Society's Local Reads Book Club, meets at 6:30 pm at the Society.

Answers to the quiz on page 3: 1. C; 2. A; 3. B; 4. D; 5. C; 6. A; 7. B; 8. A; 9. D; 10. A.

A look at some of our recent programs



We had some fascinating programs over the summer. (Clockwise from the top) Many people brought items for antiques appraiser George Blum to evaluate, including the large vase that's shown. Hillside SPCA volunteer Janine Choplick (left) and manager Sherrie Schafer discussed the animal shelter's history. Trolley expert George Gula showed pictures of a transportation system that was once prevalent in Pottsville. And many thanks to Society volunteers Dot Loy and Barb Conage for their presentation on local hotels and to T102 Radio's Kasey Owen for our Local Reads book club discussions on Pomeroy's and Jimmy Dorsey!

Help the Society with a 'Smile'; stay up to date on Facebook



If you shop on Amazon, you can donate to us by buying on Amazon Smile. You just have to go to smile.amazon.com and designate the Historical Society of Schuylkill County as your charity of choice. We'll receive 0.05% of the purchase price. And don't forget to like us on Facebook so you can stay informed about our news and upcoming events!

Tamaqua absorbed some township schools, but some districts resisted a 1962 consolidation plan

By J.R. Zane
Society President

It is hard to believe that for many decades Schuylkill County had 67 school districts, each with its own administration. Today there are only 12.

The state government tried to reduce the number of school districts in Pennsylvania with Act 561, which took effect in 1962. However, some townships in our county had already joined larger "area" systems.

Other districts sent their children to the bigger schools on a tuition basis. Those in Rahn, Schuylkill and West Penn Townships, for example, educated their younger students while their high-schoolers went to nearby Tamaqua.

In 1957, Rahn only had 31 students in its two elementary schools. One was on Arlington Street near the east end of Tamaqua and the other on Route 309 at Owl Creek, a mile south of the borough. Even after the district closed the Owl Creek school, its financial problems persisted.

Nevertheless, the school board voted 3-2 in 1960 against entering the proposed Tamaqua Area Jointure.

Then the state Department of Public Instruction said Rahn, Schuylkill and West Penn must join or be left out altogether when Tamaqua considered plans for a new high school.

In 1962, the Rahn school board reversed course. That fall, its students, as well as those



Students at Rahn Township's Owl Creek School in approximately 1945.

from Schuylkill Township, were among the 2,422 entering the Tamaqua Area School District. West Penn followed a year later.

Meanwhile, the Schuylkill County School Board – the predecessor of the Schuylkill County Intermediate Unit -- adopted a resolution in 1962 calling for Coaldale schools to be in a Carbon County district and to reorganize Schuylkill into five districts:

- Porter/Tower City, Tri-Valley areas and part of Northumberland Co. (4,419 students)
- Schuylkill Haven, Blue Mountain and Pine Grove (3,961)
- Pottsville, Minersville and St. Clair (6,210)
- Ashland, Shenandoah and Frackville (4,885)
- Tamaqua and Mahanoy Area (4,881)

Those recommendations were largely ignored.

Many objections to school consolidation were based on past school culture and identity. Would there be a loss of com-

munity? What would the name, the colors and mascot of the new school district be?

There were also concerns about longer bus rides and fears that students would feel alienated and drop out.

Of course, throughout any discussion was the elephant in the room – "How will a consolidation affect one's taxes"?

The number of school districts statewide had fallen from a peak of about 2,700 in 1957 to 501 in 2013, but Governor Ed Rendell's call for further consolidation went unheeded. However, the problem of how to increase student achievement and decrease the burden on taxpayers continues to be debated.

As for Rahn Township, it became part of the borough of Tamaqua after the Commonwealth Court upheld an annexation petition in October 1971. For its 428 residents, the township as well as its school district was just a memory.

A WWII airman in a neglected grave

By Deb Reed
Board Secretary

As someone who believes in the importance of cemeteries, I often try to find the stories behind markers, to make them more personal – more human.

Recently, a friend living outside Harrisburg asked me to take a photo of her uncle's grave, which she had last visited in her youth. She knew he was buried in Pottsville's Odd Fellows Cemetery, but she couldn't remember exactly where.

Using a book about the cemetery, I was able to locate the grave. It was off the main road, on a steep embankment that ran into a thicket. Tombstones, many broken or overturned, were scattered everywhere.

I finally found the marker partially hidden under leaves and tree branches. I cleared away as much as I could and took the photo, but I knew I wasn't finished until I could learn more. Who was this man?

Using online military records, local newspaper articles, and items shared by his niece, I now have a clearer picture of Staff Sergeant Paul Hruska.

Paul was one of seven children of John and Mary Marton Hruska, immigrants from the Austria-Hungarian Empire. He was born in St. Clair on September 26, 1918, and named after his maternal grandfather. John, a miner, later moved the family to Pottsville.

Mary, who had taught herself to read, was fluent in many languages. She often

helped translate for immigrants at the courthouse.

Paul attended Pottsville schools, but left before graduation and worked as a tinsmith. He enlisted in the Army in 1938 and was serving in Puerto Rico when Mary died in 1941.

Before he was sent overseas in 1944, he told his pastor, Rev. E.W. Weber of Trinity Lutheran Church in Pottsville, that he had taken out an insurance policy and did not expect to come back alive.

Paul served as a B-29 Superfortress tail gunner with the U.S. Army Air Corps. His 462nd Bomb Group was stationed in India. On November 19, 1944, his crew was scheduled to fly to Kiunglai, China, in preparation for an ambitious raid against Omura, Japan.

Shortly after takeoff, smoke and fire filled the compartment. All of the men except Paul bailed out. Locals pulled his remains from the wreckage and buried them on the spot.

The family initially received a report that Paul was missing. Sadly, they learned on December 10 that he was killed.

They didn't receive his remains for four years.

Paul became the 215th Schuylkill County Gold Star hero to be returned home for



Paul Hruska
(HonorStates.org)



final burial.

Ironically, it was Rev. Weber who conducted the funeral service on December 20, 1948.

The beneficiary of Paul's insurance policy was his sister Suzanne. The \$38 monthly benefit helped her raise her three fatherless children.

I plan to return to Paul's grave and clean his monument. I'll also see to it that he receives a proper World War II flag holder.

Paul Hruska...beloved son, brother, and uncle...rest in peace.



Left: Former miner Rick Wetzel leads a tour of the Pioneer Tunnel in 2019 as part of the Society's History Day Camp. Above: A September 13, 1962, ad in the *Shenandoah*

A community came together to turn an old coal mine into the Pioneer Tunnel tourist attraction

In the early 1960s, an abandoned coal mine hardly seemed like a potential tourist destination.

But when the idea occurred to three prominent Ashland residents, the community came together and made it happen. Since the Pioneer Tunnel opened on Labor Day weekend 1962, it has drawn thousands of people each year.

It all began when Borough Solicitor Harry Strouse and his wife, Mabel, met with Borough Manager Emil Ermert after a trip to Niagara Falls. "We thought the anthracite region could be a tourist attraction, too," Harry Strouse told the *Pottsville Republican* in 1992.

"I don't know if we knew what we were doing at the time," he added. "Some people probably thought we were crazy."

Not everyone, though. The *Republican* reported that a banker, undertaker, hotel owner and several plant operators saw the potential and joined the two borough officials to form Ashland Community Enterprises. The nonprofit organization owns and operates the Pioneer Tunnel to this day.

It would cost \$67,000 (more than \$622,000 today) to develop the site, which had produced an average of 400 tons of coal a day for the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Co. from 1911 to 1931. Since then, however, the property had become overgrown and littered with garbage.

An Area Redevelopment Administration loan provided nearly two-thirds of the funding, with the rest coming from community donations.

Local businesses helped out in various ways, the *Republican* reported. Placemats with the Pioneer Tunnel logo appeared in local restaurants, and manufacturers provided materials and labor. The Ashland National and Citizens National banks promoted the venue on each piece of their outgoing mail.

The Ashland Rotary Club, Kiwanis Club and other organizations teamed up to provide another attraction, the Henry Clay steam locomotive, which once hauled coal cars. Now it takes passengers for a scenic ride along the side of Mahanoy Mountain.

When the opening weekend arrived, the "lokie" drew big crowds. "The whistle could be heard almost continuously" as riders enjoyed a "bird's eye view" of Ashland, the *Shenandoah Herald* reported.

The tunnel itself was closed as work on it continued. Once it opened, however, tourists were fascinated to see what it's like to work in a dark underground coal mine.

Located at 2001 Walnut St, Ashland, the Pioneer Tunnel is open April through October. Tour and train ride schedules are on its website.

10 Questions/ 10 Answers



Society Vice President and volunteer **Regina Gargano** answers the 10 questions.

Q. Describe the era and place where you grew up.

A. I grew up in Palo Alto from 1969 to 1976 and in Pottsville's Mount Hope section from 1976 to 1988.

Palo Alto was full of my relatives and many, many family friends. Everyone knew everyone else and was very friendly. There was no anonymity; you truly could not get away with anything!

When we moved to Mount Hope, we quickly found many friendly neighbors, and the atmosphere was the same. Like all children of that time, I spent a lot of time outdoors.

Q. Who inspired your interest in local history?

A. My Aunt Louise told us stories about growing up in the '40s, how things used to

be. She shared stories about our Italian great-grandparents. She liked history herself and shared that with us.

Q. Name a significant world event that occurred during your childhood.

A. I remember my family all squeezed together, watching the Challenger Space Shuttle explode in January 1986, knowing those poor people inside were dead. I'd never seen anything like that before. My aunt began to cry. It was terrible.

Q. Tell us about an interesting but overlooked person from the county's past.

A. I like Jimmy Gownley from Girardville. He's a comic book writer and artist. He's the creator of *Amelia Rules!*. There is a full array of volumes of books, a comic strip, etc. It's great stuff, it really is. And I'm not necessarily a comic lover. either.

Q. Was there a teacher who made a positive impact?

A. My mother died in September when I was in third grade at Mount Hope Elementary School. My nana told me the news when I went home for lunch, and I did not return to school that day.

After school, my teacher, Mrs. Lottie Brown, who was from Frackville, came to our house to check on me. During the entire school year, she showed kindness, patience and concern without making any kind of spectacle or showing outright favoritism. She made a difficult year kinder.

Q. Name a favorite county sports figure or team.

A. Maroons. I was raised in a family of "Maroon fans," with Dad playing in high school and in the Air Force.

Q. What county business do you miss?

A. Pottsville's Raring's Shoe Store, which opened in 1890 and closed in 1986. It had an immense selection, including special orders..

Q. Do you have a favorite county or coal region food?

A. I love pierogies! Unlike a lot of our regional foods, pierogies are a pasta dumpling, and pasta is my favorite comfort food. *La pasta e' vita!*

Q. What is your earliest memory of participating in a local historical event?

A. In 1976 my cousin and I volunteered to dress in full bicentennial costumes to carry the banner for the Third Brigade Band in several parades since several family members were in that band. Our costumes were very hot. It did not turn out to be the tons of fun you'd think it would be for a 7-year-old.

Q. Why do you volunteer at the Society?

A. The opportunity to volunteer and serve on the board came to me through my position at Explore Schuylkill a few years ago. It was a perfect opportunity to share resources and be helpful. I have found it is also a tremendous learning experience, and I am grateful to be part of this team.

SORRY, THE SOCIETY WILL BE CLOSED ON OCT. 1.



SATURDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2022

12:00 - 6:00 PM

Downtown Pottsville

ENTERTAINMENT:

Doppelgänger

(German band from Philadelphia)

and

The Boys Upstairs

**FOOD VENDORS • CRAFTERS • KIDS ACTIVITIES
BEER GARDEN • WINERY • DISTILLERY**

CORNHOLE TOURNAMENT

Sponsored by

SCHAEFFER'S HARLEY-DAVIDSON

Society thanks all who have donated

Victoria Egan - Several Nativity High School yearbooks from 1958 through 1983.

Sullivan County Historical Society - July 11, 1940, issue of *The Valley Citizen* newspaper.

Angie Yurkunis - American flag that belonged to World War I veteran Stephen Caruano.

Mr. and Mrs. John Homovich - Books and newspaper articles; Welsh Society plaque.

Larry L. Arder - Minutes of the Tremont Mutual Fire Insurance Co.

Mary E. Moran - Pottsville Area High School alumni directory and yearbooks ranging from 1942 to 1981, World War II Army uniform cap, two Army fatigue hats.

William F. Van Stone - U.S. Navy peacoat, circa 1960.

Richard Nagle - Framed 1925 photo of Ku Klux Klan on parade in Schuylkill Haven.

Cynthia Sowers - Barber's chair and barber's equipment.

Joseph L. Wentz - Photos of the covered bridge at Rock.

Diane A. Bensinger - Port



A donation from Cynthia Sowers

Carbon photos.

George S. Lord - Poster for coal region movie.

Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society - Claude Weston Unger Collection, Schuylkill County genealogy

Torrance Fisher - Collection of certificates from the Whetstone family.

Corinne Herald - *Ashland School of Nursing 1897-1961* book.



The Society had a blast during Yuengling's Stars & Stripes celebration on July 9. We adjusted our hours to fit the party's and offered tours of our historic building as well as an array of food and beverages. We couldn't have done it without the products donated by these local businesses:

- BG's Value Market
- Giant Food Stores
- Weis Markets
- Guers Dairy
- Sweet G's Bakery
- Palermo's Pizza
- Koch's Turkey Farms
- Miller Distributing
- Mrs. T's Pierogies
- Larry Vinskie

And without our volunteers and staff's time and effort, we could never have held this memorable event.

Thanks to everyone who made it possible!

WELCOME

To Our New Members

| | |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Michael J. Brady | Lilly Hirsch |
| Thomas McAndrew | Jeff Dengler family |
| Don Haley family | Jeanne Sutton |
| Peggy Pacharis | Bernard J. Miscannon family |
| William Kline | Nancy Martin |
| Glenn Sherman | James P. Derr family |
| Denise Stoner family | Robyn Nesfeder |
| Karen Moran family | Heather Makac |
| Nancy Mehaffie | |

BASKET RAFFLE AND OPEN HOUSE

THE AUBURN AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY IS CELEBRATING ITS 15TH ANNIVERSARY

AUBURN BOROUGH BUILDING
451 PEARSON STREET, AUBURN, PA

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2022
10:00 AM – 2:00 PM

OUR MUSEUM WILL BE OPEN, AND REFRESHMENTS AND MEMORABILIA WILL BE AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE

Schuylkill County Historical Society
P.O. Box 1356
Pottsville, PA 17901

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Here's What's Inside

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OR CURRENT RESIDENT

WONDERING WHAT TO WEAR?



Treat yourself to our Haunted History Tour T-shirt and show off your knowledge of Schuylkill County's supernatural lore. We have them in S, M, L and XL for \$15 (XXL and XXXL for \$17).

And don't forget to sign up for one of the spine-chilling tours that we'll be offering in October! Details are on page 4.

Visit our online store for Schuylkill County gifts

www.schuylkillhistory.org