



SCHUYLKILL HERITAGE

A Newsletter of the Schuylkill County Historical Society



Volume 18, Issue 6

"To discover, procure and preserve ..." November-December 2023

From the president

Members, we thank you for all you do

By J.R. Zane

This is the last newsletter for the year. I hope you enjoyed all of them.

This year we finally saw the start of our window replacement project, and I apologize for the long delay (which I blame primarily on Covid and bureaucratic red tape).

I respectfully ask for your continued financial support during our Annual Appeal, which runs from November to Jan 6.

All donations are truly appreciated and put to good use, but if you are over the age of 70½, please consider the tax benefit of making a charitable distribution from your IRA.

You, the members, are the bedrock of the Society. I thank you for keeping your membership up to date, attending programs, contributing to the Annual Appeal and recognizing the importance of history.

I also thank our Executive Director Diana Prosymchak and Assistant Director Steve Young, as well as our dedicated volunteers, for moving this institution forward.

We held more in-house programs than ever before, and they were well received. (**See the next two pages for our upcoming activities.**) Meanwhile, new exhibits keep popping up. I am so proud of the Society for the progress it has made!

I thank the board members who took a committee assignment or helped when asked.

Qualities for a good board member include a passion for and knowledge of the mission and vision of the Society, respectfulness and collegiality, dependability, eagerness to participate, a willingness to express one's own opinion, and some expertise.

Board vacancies do occur periodically. If you can think strategically to promote the Society's



Reading Deputy Fire Chief Michael Glore leads a tour of the sites of major fires in downtown Pottsville, one of many programs that the Society held this year.

mission and its vision, then please let us know.

We also need more volunteers. We encourage anyone with sales, secretarial, artistic or computer skills to offer their services. We can also use people well-versed in building repairs and improvements. At the same time, you may have a talent we don't know we need!

We welcome students looking to fulfill community service requirements; we had several Nativity students help us out during the past year.

Fortune magazine recently had an article on the decline in volunteerism that started decades ago but accelerated during the Covid pandemic.

Loneliness also spiked then. Volunteering can alleviate that as well as fulfill a sense of purpose. Volunteerism was woven into the fabric of the nation. We live in a state where the first volunteer fire company was begun in 1736.

I understand that family commitments and economic pressures cut into the ability of many to volunteer, but if you do have the time, please consider volunteering here at your county historical society.

Come to our programs to kick off the holiday season

Schuylkill County Historical Society

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305 North Centre Street

Pottsville, PA 17901

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Open 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.



(Left) Children try out antique toys at Porcupine Pat's program at the Tremont Public Library. (Right) A ball 'n cup.

Toys for kids and boilo for adults are among the exciting activities the Society has planned to get you in the holiday spirit. *Mark your calendar and make your reservations now!*

ANTIQUÉ TOY PROGRAM

Wednesday, Nov. 15 at 6:30 p.m.

"Porcupine" Pat McKinney will show us how children used to entertain themselves. You and your little ones will be able to play with his collection of pioneer and folk toys, which include buzzsaws, whimmy-diddle gee-haws, ball 'n cups and Dancing Dandys.

Admission is \$5 for the general public and free to Society members.

BOILO-MAKING CLASSES

Thursday, Nov. 16 at 6-8 p.m.

or Tuesday, Dec. 12 at 6-8 p.m.

Boilo expert **Amy Dougherty** is returning to teach us how to make this traditional coal region beverage, but space is limited!

The fee is \$30 for Society members and \$35 for the general public. As an added bonus, there will be samples of the final product.



And here's what else is happening ...

Our annual **holiday tree-decorating contest** for local historical societies and nonprofits is getting under way. You'll be able to see the trees in our hallway starting on Nov. 8.

You can cast as many votes as you want for \$1 each. Come in, make your voice heard, and remember that every dollar you spend goes directly to the organization you vote for.

Speaking of new things to see at the Society, we are giving local historical societies an opportunity to promote themselves with **displays in our large hallway cabinet**.

Starting in January, they can take their turns decorating the space for two-month periods.

And if you can't attend a program, you may be able to catch it online on our **new youtube channel**. Currently the channel features our recent Holocaust and coal plane programs, but we'll be adding more! Check out our channel here:

<https://youtube.com/@SchuylkillCountyHistoricalSociety>

We'll be **open late on Wednesday, Nov. 22**, as part of the unveiling of Pottsville's new holiday lights.

And check out the latest on the Society and T-102's **Local Reads** book club on our Facebook page and on this website:

<https://www.t102radio.com/localreads>.



The Majestic Theater tree, which won our contest last year.

Take this Naval Veterans Quiz to test your knowledge of seafaring servicemen and servicewomen from our county. Match the person or place on the left with the correct answer on the right. Answers are on page 4.



- | | |
|---|-------------------------|
| 1) Robert E. Baker Legion Post location | A) John J. Bergen |
| 2) Congressional Medal of Honor recipient | B) John Barry |
| 3) Rear Admiral Joan Nielubowicz's hometown | C) Shenandoah |
| 4) Commanded USS Independence during combat operations in Grenada in 1983 | D) Minersville |
| 5) Rear admiral later involved with building NYC Madison Square Garden | E) Schuylkill Haven |
| 6) Brought a captured slave ship to the U.S. in 1861 | F) Norman Farquhar |
| 7) Township named after this Father of the American Navy | G) Joel Boone |
| 8) Sailor held prisoner by North Korea in 1969 | H) William A. Dougherty |
| 9) WWII Rear Admiral Daniel McGurl's hometown | I) Francis Ginther |
| 10) Rear Admiral Nancy Lescavage's hometown | J) Port Carbon |

75 years ago

Santa wows Pottsville in a helicopter

By Lisa Von Ahn

When Santa Claus accepted an invitation to spend Black Friday 1948 in downtown Pottsville, he didn't have to bother with a reindeer-drawn sleigh.

Instead, the city merchants who invited him provided what was then cutting-edge transportation — a helicopter.

It was the first of many such trips he would make to Pottsville and other Schuylkill County towns in coming years, and it attracted a record number of people for a Christmas event.

Newspapers were full of articles about the possibilities for this aircraft technology, which had been used in World War II. Santa himself had taken several trips in this way in the past few years, but this was his first such Pottsville appearance.

In the preceding days, local papers tantalized their readers with hints that something big was happening on the day after Thanksgiving.

"Santa Claus is coming to town Friday, Nov. 26th at 10 A.M.," a *Pottsville Republican* ad proclaimed on the previous Saturday. "Guess how?" Another ad two days later presented 11 possibilities, from hitchhiking to parachuting — but not via helicopter.

The answer finally came on Tuesday: St. Nick would emerge from a helicopter at the former bus station on what is now East Norwegian Street and Claude A. Lord Boulevard, and he wouldn't go back to the North Pole until sometime in the afternoon.

As many as 20,000 people gathered for this unprecedented event, the *Republican* reported. There were shouts of glee as the crowd saw the helicopter approach and trace a figure eight before "gracefully" landing.

Police and Chamber of Commerce officials kept the throng back during the arrival, the paper said, "but once the 'copter departed, the crowd surged through the check ropes and besieged their bewhiskered idol, some to just get a close

Santa Claus Is Flying To Pottsville!



Santa Claus
North Pole,
November 24th

Dear Boys and Girls: *grown-ups too*

I have made special arrangements to visit Pottsville, Friday, November 26th. Every year at this time I try to make a visit to the good little boys and girls in all the land. This year I have a helicopter, which means that I can get to lots of places and my letter to you.

Pottsville is one of the first stops on my list. I expect to see all of you at the Pottsville Bus Terminal, Friday morning at 10 o'clock. Please have your letters ready! I will pick them up, when I parade on Centre Street.

See you Friday morning.

Signed,
Santa

P. S. I almost forgot to mention that I will be leaving Pottsville in my helicopter sometime Friday afternoon. Please be on hand to say "Good Bye!" S. C.

THE BIG SURPRISE! THE BIG THRILL!

Santa arrives by

HELICOPTER

Pottsville—Friday, Nov. 26th—10 A. M.—Bus Terminal

Parade... Centre Street After Santa's Arrival

look at the patron Saint and some to hand him their special Christmas gift lists."

Santa then hopped on a float with 10 Pottsville High School majorettes who helped him collect more letters from the children.

The Third Brigade Band, which had entertained the spectators as they awaited the helicopter, followed the float. Hundreds of singing children pranced behind.

Santa's mode of transportation excited the community to such an extent that the pilot, Al Furlong of New York, brought it to Deer Lake on the following Sunday so that people could get a closer look and take a ride.

And on Monday, the helicopter-happy Santa handed out candy and books at the Pottsville Children's Home and the St. Francis Orphanage in Orwigsburg, thanks to Pottsville Chamber of Commerce President Robert Gable of Pomeroy's and music dealer Mart Malarkey Jr.

Answers to the quiz on page 3: 1. E; 2. G; 3. C; 4. H; 5. A; 6. F; 7. B; 8. I; 9. D; 10. J

WELCOME TO OUR 2023 HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE



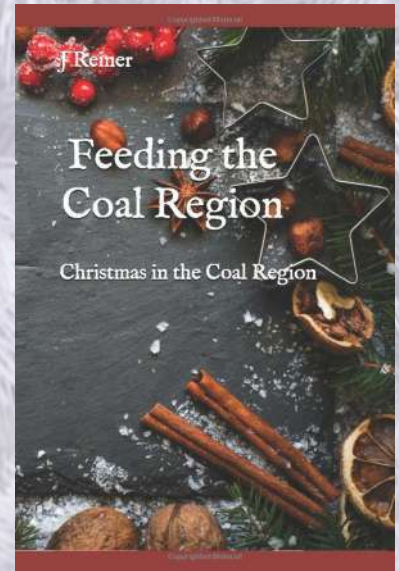
FEEDING THE COAL REGION BOOKS AND MORE



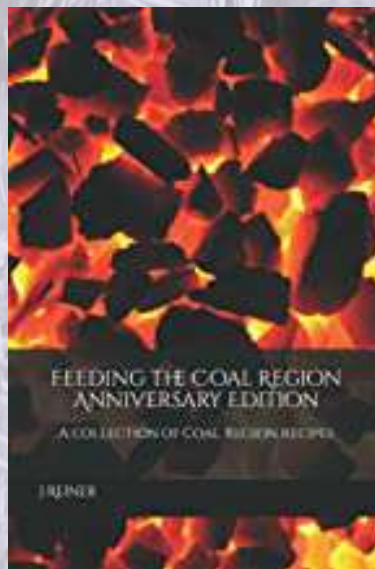
'Feeding the Coal Region' apron, \$15; tea towels, \$8 each; hot bologna and chili mixes, \$2.99 each



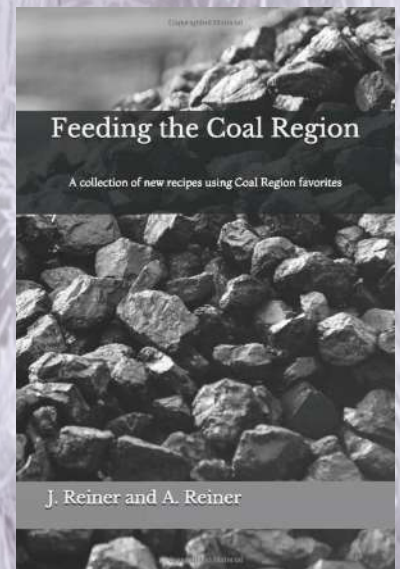
Spoon, \$5, and cutting board, \$20.



\$16.85



\$19.99



\$17.85



PUT A LITTLE *MAROONS* IN YOUR HOLIDAYS



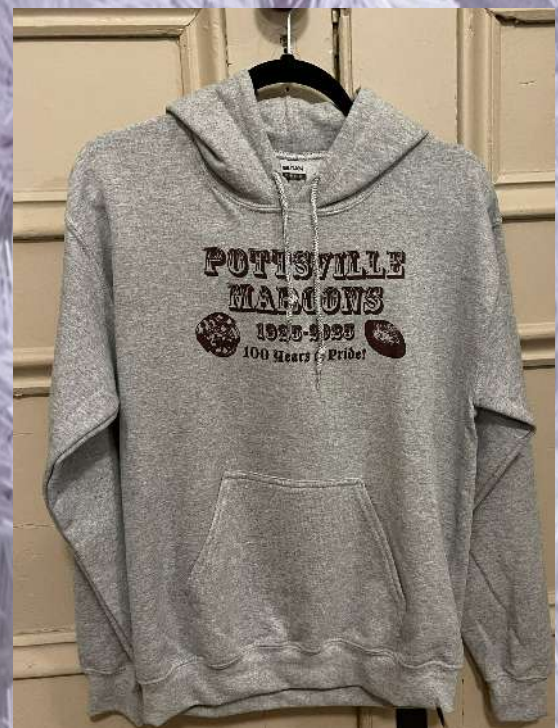
T-shirts: upper & lower left, \$20; upper & lower right, \$18



Book \$8, cap \$20



Clockwise from top left: decal \$2.99, lanyard \$8,
bottle/can holder \$3, mug \$19.95, mousepad \$10.99



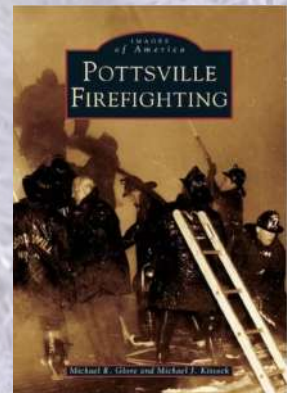
Sweatshirt \$35



FOR FIREFIGHTING FANS AND RAILROAD BUFFS



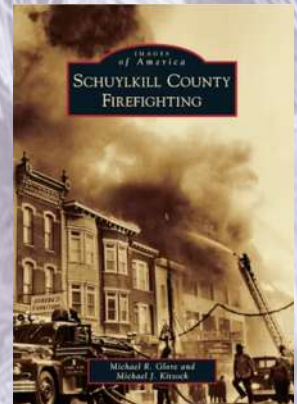
T-shirt (front and back) \$18



Pottsville Firefighting
\$21.99



Small prints \$10 each, large prints \$15, *Reading Railroad Heritage* book \$28.95



Schuylkill County Firefighting \$21.99



Box of Schuylkill County
fire engine cards \$9.95

SHOP BY PHONE

Just use this QR code and you'll be directly connected to our gift shop!





DRINK IN THE HOLIDAY SPIRIT



Mugs \$8.99 each, shotglasses, \$5 each, boilo kit \$10 each



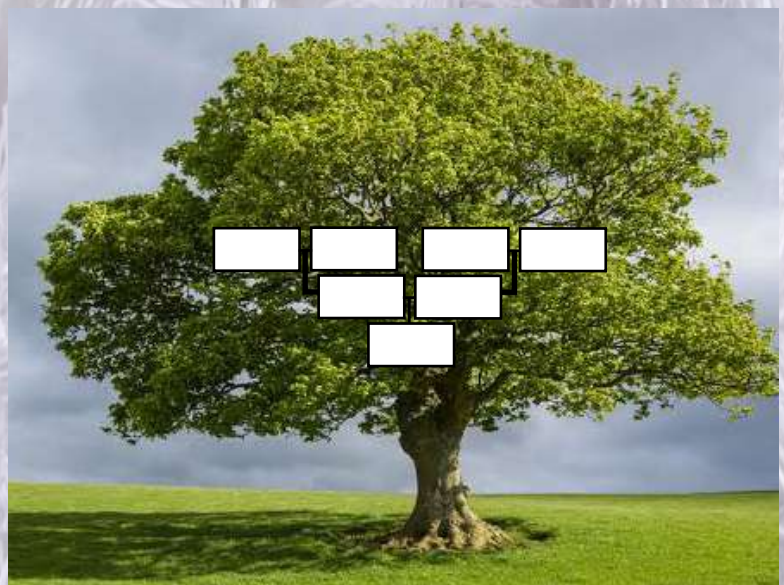
Insulated cups, \$15 each

GIVE SOMEONE YOU LOVE THE GIFT OF HISTORY

Few gifts are as personal or thoughtful as a family tree, a family history book or a history of a building that's important to to your friend or relative.

We'll give you as much or as little help as you need. More information and pricing are available at www.schuylkillhistory.org.

But if a special someone is already a history buff, give them a Society membership so they can enjoy our programs and exhibits!



A massive fire hit Shenandoah in 1883

By J.R. Zane

The worst fire in Schuylkill County history left one-third of Shenandoah in ruins on the cold, windy afternoon of Nov. 12, 1883. It took nearly 60 years to determine how it started.

The community had only been incorporated as a borough in 1866, but within 17 years, it had six hotels, two foundries, many stores and churches, a concert hall, a newspaper building and an opera house. The population had increased from 2,950 in 1870 to more than 10,000 in 1880.

For decades, the townspeople believed the fire had started in the three-story United States Hotel on the southwest corner of Main and West Centre streets, where an M&T Bank branch now stands. Hamburg native George F. Leitzel owned the hotel's frame building, reportedly the oldest in town.

Like many disasters, rumors and conflicting reports spread after the fire.

Separate accounts blamed a careless hotel maid and a guest named Mrs. John Davis. Another even insinuated the hotel was really a brothel and that a prostitute accidentally started the fire.

A Nov. 12, 1940, investigative report by the *Shenandoah Herald* said the fire apparently originated, not in the hotel but in an apartment above its adjoining stable.

A woman there threw a pan out of the window after the lard in the meat she was frying

caught fire, and the flames spread quickly.

Two eyewitnesses, Welsh-born Ernest Harsley, 10, and his friend George Knott, 9, were on their way to school for the afternoon session when they saw what was happening. So did a Mr. Hart, who was outside a nearby butcher shop.

Ernest ran home to tell his mother. With no fire boxes or telephones, she alerted neighbors, who rushed to the Columbia Fire Co. Some of the firemen sought help at the nearby collieries. About 20 men pulled the fire engine with ropes over the unpaved streets.

Due to the low water pressure and cold winds, the fire destroyed more than 300 structures within a few hours. Among them were the Academy of Music, Rowe's Opera House, the *Herald* office and the Presbyterian and Methodist churches.

Mrs. Philip Wolf, who was rescued from a burning building, died of fright. Upon hearing the signal for help, miner George Heaton was injured while trying to board a train and subsequently died. George Whitaker, 23, had a leg broken, and fireman Jerry O'Neill received serious injuries.

The area smoldered for days. More than 500 families were left homeless and sought shelter in school buildings.

Nearby towns provided generous aid, as did Philadelphia through the efforts of famed department store owner John Wanamaker. The Pottsville



The Phoenix Fire Co. building

Third Brigade Band held a successful benefit concert.

Chief Burgess D.J. Williams closed all saloons and had 100 men patrol the five-acre disaster site to deter potential looters.

However, the boom times soon resumed. Shenandoah was rebuilt by late 1884, and it later was hailed as the most densely populated U.S. town. The Shenandoah Phoenix Fire Co. was formed, and by 1887 fire boxes were installed.

Ernest Harsley, who reported the fire, spent the rest of his life in Shenandoah. Although he worked in the mines and later at the Artificial Ice Plant, he was best known as "Mr. Fireman."

In 1899, he began to drive the dray wagon for the Rescue Hook & Ladder Co. When he died in 1964, he had been president of Shenandoah's fire department for more than a half-century.

10 Questions/ 10 Answers



Peggy Smith is a retired insurance agent. Besides volunteering in the Society's gift shop, she helps keep our building spick and span.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. I've lived in Pottsville all my life. I grew up in the '50s and '60s on South Second Street near the Henry Clay monument. I spent a lot of time in the Bunker Hill section playing with numerous kids from the area.

Q. Where and when did your earliest known ancestors settle in the county?

A. My mother's family came from Ireland in the mid 1800s and settled in Branchdale and worked as miners. They were from Galway and Roscommon County. My father's family also came from Ireland around the same time and settled in Black Heath, but I'm not sure which area of Ireland they were from.

Our family moved from Branchdale to Pottsville in 1951.

Q. Have you ever had a hero in Schuylkill County?

A. I have three brothers and five sisters, and my parents were my heroes. My parents worked full time in factories until retirement and in part-time jobs long afterward. I still have no idea how they managed. Amazing!

Q. What was the most significant global or national event that occurred during your childhood?

A. The deaths of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. I believe our country never recovered politically after those horrendous murders.

Q. Who inspired your interest in local history?

A. My husband, Tom, loved all history, world or local, and passed that interest on to me. I've read a lot of books and watched many documentaries on various historical events that were never taught in school.

Q. Do you have a favorite local musician or band, past or present?

A. The Jordan Brothers from Frackville, who played at Willow Lake in Schuylkill Haven. My husband's family owned the Lake, and my husband spent many years as a bouncer at the dances and a lifeguard at the pool. I just danced...

Q. Can you name a teacher who had a positive effect on your life?

A. Father Daniel Lynch

taught religion at Nativity. He had a different approach to teaching. He didn't rely on a specific curriculum but raised questions leading to a lot of discussions. We were friends till he passed in 2006.

Q. Who is your favorite sports figure from Schuylkill County?

A. My niece, Paige Stoner Wood, a 2014 Pottsville Area High School grad who was also president of her class and a National Honor Society member. She ran cross-country and broke many records in high school, college and professionally. She currently runs for Team HOKA and is based in Arizona.

Q. What county business do you miss?

A. All the businesses that lined Centre Street as I was growing up – Pomeroy's, Goldy's, Miles and Triangle shoe stores, Tobias', the White Shop, H.L. Greens, Woolworth's, Knapp's, Kerwick's and many more. I would meet my best friend and her sister downtown every Saturday, and we would spend the whole day shopping.

Q. Why did you volunteer at the Society?

A. Like a lot of people who are retired, I wanted to give back some time to the community. I also volunteer at the Pottsville Library and St. John the Baptist Church. Volunteering is a way to get you out of the house, meet new people, and learn something new.

We are grateful for these deeds of gift

Joan R. Leedom – Koppenhaver family photos, papers, and effects.

Judith Lengle – Baby clothes, baby shoes, ladies gloves and containers of salve lotion.

Marley Mikovich – Coal mine handmade art piece, Pottsville Area High School drawings and Gordon and Schuylkill Haven train drawings

Bo Reiley – Yearbooks.

Vernon Kleckner – Collection of military medals, plaques, photos, papers, caps, a parachute and flags from John Kleckner, and a tool bag.

Mary Moran – Pottsville High School yearbooks and Hi-S-Potts issues.

George Schreder – World War I books.

Gerald Hudock – High school sports uniforms and equipment.

Debra Miller – Lewis Moyer diploma and class photos with papers.

Debra Hydock – *Pottsville Republican* newspaper bag.

Schuylkill Haven Historical Society – Year-



A plaque from Vernon Kleckner and a miniature coal mine cart from Marley Mikovich.

books, Liner's Furniture store logo items, postcards, cookbook and Schuylkill County event programs.

Anonymous – Document from Notre Dame 4 Horsemen player referencing Maroons game.

Carl Sheeler – Framed coal mining death toll and medicine ball from Minersville School, Seltzer.

Kristopher Ziegler – Schirner Family photos and papers.

Thomas P. Reid – Collection of photos and a cashier machine from Santander (formerly Miners National) Bank.

WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS!

Ed Dougert

Ellen Catherman

Joanne Stramara

Cynthia R. Reidler

Doranne Polcrack

Mike Weres

Cindi Mette

Nancy K. O'Rourke

Martin Joyce-Brady

Debbie Sheehan & Bob Smith

Thomas V. Boran

Bob & Janet Peiffer

Euchre & Promenade
Charlton's Hall
Wednesday Evening, Nov. 28th

Everything is in readiness for the big euchre and dance to be given by the United Societies of St. John's Church in Charlton's Hall, tomorrow evening.

Adelphia Players Will Furnish the Music
 150 Euchre Prizes 50 Prizes for Non-Players
Big Door Prize

Last car for Schuylkill Haven, Port Carbon, St. Clair and New Philadelphia will leave at 12 o'clock. Yorkville cars every 20 minutes until 1 o'clock.

There Will Be A Big Crowd and A Good Time for Everybody.
Admission 50c

Henry's Colonial Inn
 BRANDONVILLE, PENNA.
HENRY E. BEDNARD, Prop.
Formerly Steward At Country Club, Ashland, Penna.

Thanksgiving Day Menu—From 12 noon until —

Stuffed and Table Celery	Sweet Pickles	Chow-Chow	Salted Nuts
Cream of Chicken Soup a la Liberty			
Roast Stuffed Young Native Turkey			
Giblet Sauce	Cranberry Sauce	Chestnut Dressing	
Carrots in Cream	Buttered Turnips	Mashed Potatoes	
An Old Time Salad		Ice Cream	
Colonial Chocolate Cake	Apple Pie	Hard or Cherry Sauce	
Plum Pudding	Mince Pie	Milk	
Coffee	Tea		

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

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OR CURRENT RESIDENT

Don't let the holidays stump you!

Whether you want to help someone celebrate their coal region heritage or learn more about it, our **Holiday Gift Guide** on pages 5-8 has a wealth of gift-giving ideas for you.



Come in or visit our online store (www.schuylkillhistory.org) for Schuylkill County gifts