



# SCHUYLKILL HERITAGE

*A Newsletter of the Schuylkill County Historical Society*



Volume 11, Issue 6

*"to discover, procure, and preserve..."*

November - December 2016

## THOUGHTS FROM WAR

### Civil War soldier's letters donated to Schuylkill County Historical Society.

*This article was first published in the POTTSVILLE REPUBLICAN HERALD on October 8, 2016  
By Stephen J. Pytak*

While he was serving as a soldier in the Civil War, Maj. William W. Clemens, Pottsville, corresponded with his family by writing numerous letters.

On Friday, a woman from Connecticut who owned the collection for more than 35 years traveled to Pottsville to donate vintage correspondence to the Schuylkill County Historical Society.

"There are 172 letters, and some of those letters have three, four or five pages," Mary Jean Pelham, 82, of Ellington, Connecticut, said when she dropped off the collection at the society's headquarters at 305 N. Centre St.

"Total, it's between 300 and 350 pages," Thomas B. Drogalis, the society's executive director, said.

Born in Pottsville, Nov. 21, 1838, Clemens was a graduate of West Chester Academy. In April 1861, he joined the

Washington Artillerists as a private and marched with the Pennsylvania First Defenders to Washington, D.C.

When he arrived at 2 a.m. April 18, 1861, in Harrisburg, Clemens wrote a letter to his father:

"We arrived here safely at nine o'clock and were immediately marched to quarters prepared for us, such as they were. While undergoing the fatigue of a long drill in an armory here, we received a dispatch stating that we must leave for Washington in the first train in the morning and there to receive the necessary outfit."

In January 1865, he served as chief signal officer to Rear Admiral David D. Porter in the two attacks on Fort Fisher, North Carolina. And he was one of the soldiers who escorted President Abraham Lincoln into Richmond, Virginia.

On the flag ship Malvern off



Nick Meyer/Staff Photo

Thomas B. Drogalis, executive director of the Schuylkill County Historical Society, left, and Mary Jean Pelham, Ellington, Connecticut, talk about letters written during the Civil War by William W. Clemens, a Union soldier from Pottsville. On Friday Pelham donated the collection of letters to the Schuylkill County Historical Society

Fort Fisher, North Carolina, he wrote to his father at midnight Jan. 11, 1865: "I am in the midst of excitement and am so completely worn out and tired that it would be impossible for me to write much. We have been

See **Letters** on page 3

**The Schuylkill County Historical Society**

**2017 Annual Appeal Campaign Has Begun!**

Visit our website: [www.schuylkillhistory.org](http://www.schuylkillhistory.org) to make donations  
...watch your mail for campaign details!

**Schuylkill County  
Historical Society**



**President**

*J. Robert Zane, Esq.*

**Vice-President**

*Richard J. Nagle*

**Secretary**

*JoAnn Chuba*

**Treasurer**

*Diana Prosymchak*

**Executive Director**

*Thomas Drogalis*

**Board of Directors**

*Dawn Morris-Bicht*

*Jean Dellock*

*Dave Derbes*

*Allen Frantz*

*Colleen Hoptak*

*Randy Lindenmuth*

*Mary Ann Lubinsky*

*Richard Nagle*

*Pat McKinney*

*John Powers*

*Bill Van Stone*

*Richard Tomko*

*John Walsh*

Sch.hist@comcast.net  
www.schuylkillhistory.org  
305 North Centre Street,  
Pottsville, Pennsylvania  
(570) 622-7540

**Society Hours**

Wednesday 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Thursday 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Friday 10 a.m. - 4 p.m.

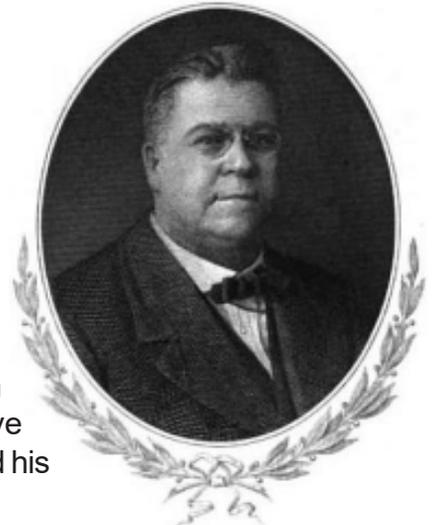
Saturday 10 a.m. - 2 p.m.

*Tourists, Historical  
Researchers, Scholars  
and Genealogists are  
welcome*

The Purpose of the Schuylkill County Historical Society is to discover, procure, and preserve the records of the history of Schuylkill County and any data or materials which may establish or illustrate that history.

## Michael F. Conry: A breaker boy achievement story

A forgotten story of local achievement is that of Michael F. Conry who was born in Shenandoah in 1870, the son of an Irish immigrant coal miner, John Conry and his wife Bridget Clark Conry. A breaker boy at the age of eight, young Michael continued to work in the mines for ten to eleven hours a day for five years before sustaining an injury which crushed his ankles and left him lame with life-long pain.



While in the hospital a fellow patient sent for books and taught Conry to read. With the assistance of family and friends he attended night school while working during the day. His educational progress amazed everyone and by the age of sixteen he was given a position as a grade school teacher. At the age of 20 he was made principal of the Shenandoah high school; a position in which he held for three years. At the same time he did reporting for three different newspapers.

In 1896 he graduated from the University of Michigan's law school and began a law practice in Scranton. At the age of thirty he ran for Congress against a multi-millionaire coal operator. During that exhausting campaign he gave over one hundred speeches. The results were close but Conry was defeated and soon relocated to New York City where he was appointed as assistant corporation counsel for the city. In 1908 he was elected to Congress and served until his death at the age of 47 on March 2, 1917, following a six week illness. While in Congress he championed the cause of the postal workers. His fellow congressmen remembered him as having "a voice as clear as a bell and a heart as tender as a child's" as he was known to sing or hum the refrains of "Mother Machree" or other tunes as he sought to ease the pain while walking the corridors of Capitol Hill as he attempted to hurry along in the performance of his duty. Over four hundred postal workers attended his funeral. He was survived by a widow and three daughters; his remains are buried in Calvary Cemetery, NYC.

## Memorial Donations

Looking for a meaningful charity to honor or remember a departed loved one? Look no farther. Memorial contributions to the Schuylkill County Historical Society is one way for families to keep their loved one's memory alive by helping the Society achieve its mission of honoring and promoting Schuylkill County's history. We will notify you of each gift made in your loved one's name, and acknowledge each person who makes a contribution. Donors will be mentioned in our newsletter and information given to the Republican Herald newspaper.

## Letters: continued from page one

fighting all day and fighting hard and I have been kept busy from daylight until now and even now I may be called at any moment to receive messages. At daylight we, that is the navy, commenced shelling the Fort and after a vigorous shelling until about two o'clock the troops as well as a force of sailors and marines made an assault upon the works. The advance was badly cut up whilst the sailors and marines were driven back with heavy loss but the soldiers kept steadily forward gaining traverse after traverse of the Fort until finally at eleven p.m. the signal was made to me 'Cease firing on the Fort as we have possession.' The fighting has been severe and hard and many a poor fellow has gone to his last home but we have possession of Fort Fisher but I can not say anything about the balance of the works beyond although it is natural to suppose that it is all a victory."

"There were four men who guarded Lincoln when he went into Richmond to sign the treaty. And he was one of them," Pelham said.

"I didn't know that," Drogalis said.

While carefully examining letters, Drogalis discovered one concerning Lincoln's assassination in April 1865.

"Here it is! Here it is! 'I can hardly realize the fact that the president is dead, as it has only been a few days since I had the pleasure of entering Richmond with him and passing as he did safely through the city without any protection whatever,'" Drogalis said, attempting to read Clemens's handwriting.

"It's a valuable letter," Pelham said.

"I can't believe I just read that," Drogalis said.

After the war, Clemens became a bookkeeper for the Lehigh Valley Coal Co. He died June 2, 1894, in Pottsville.

According to [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com), Maj. William W. Clemens was buried in Church of Brethren Cemetery, Germantown, Philadelphia County.

The letters Clemens wrote during the war ended up at a home of one of his relatives in Great Neck, New York. That was his niece, Miriam Robertson.

"William Clemens is my husband Donald Pelham's great-uncle. Donald's maternal

grandfather was Frank Gillingham Clemens, brother of William Clemens and father of Miriam Robertson Clemens Pelham. Miriam was my mother-in-law," Pelham said.

In 1977, Pelham transcribed the letters by typing up copies. She presented those typed copies to the Schuylkill County Historical Society previously.

"How will you store these?" Pelham asked.

"We have acid-free protective sleeves. And we want to consult some other museums who are more accustomed to doing this kind of thing. They won't be handled by the public," Drogalis said as he examined them with protective gloves.

"We'd like to scan them, but what we have to figure out is what is the best way to digitally scan and contain these," Drogalis said.

Drogalis said he will talk to some local experts before starting that project.

Once those scans are done, the public will be able to view those images.

The binder filled with Pelham's transcriptions is on file for the public to view, Drogalis said.

# WELCOME

**The Schuylkill County  
Historical Society welcomes  
the following new members:**



Jamie Drake

John Matz

Dale Freudendberger

Bernard Bernatonis

Michael Kramer

Lisa Jack

Donna & Larry

Josefowski

Lisa D. Campbell

Justice Demitru

Ed Curvey

Peggy A. Light

Ellen Lodwick

Ronald McAvoy

Roberta Schwenk

Michael Bann

Tian Yaworsky

F. Allen Artz

George Stralkus

Cheryl Wagner

David Ward

Steve & Kerry Geist

Jamie Vesay

Sharon E. Wilhelm

MaKenna Copeland

Michael Flynn

George A. Knittle

Lynne Medley

Tom Schreffler

John Brennenman

## The Molly Maguires - Men of Mystery

The convicted stood tall upon the unforgiving wooden planks. His eyes peered out at the crowd. His hands securely tied behind his back. His feet bound tightly with rope. His future sealed by those who had come to see him hang from the gallows.

The story of the Molly Maguires is far from a black and white narrative. Instead, it has many shades of gray depending on those telling the story. There is no question, a movement was carried out with violence within the Anthracite Coal region during the 1860's and the 1870's. This movement is said to have focused upon improving working and living conditions for the miners and their families. Through the art of oral tradition, numerous books, and even a movie, the story of the Molly

Maguires has been passed down for generations within Schuylkill County. However, the truth about the Molly Maguires has been shrouded in mystery since the events occurred. There are three predominant theories which most individuals in our neighboring communities favor in regards to the Molly Maguires.

The first theory favors a standpoint in which Franklin Gowen hired the Pinkerton agency, in particular James McParland, to infiltrate the secret society known as the Molly Maguires. The goal was to put an end to the carnage and psychological horror they were the cause of. Gowen believed the miners and mine bosses of the area were being terrorized by the organization and wanted



**This statue of a convicted member of the Molly Maguires is located in Mahanoy City, PA**

an end to be put to it. McParland infiltrated the Mollies over two years. The evidence which he supplied was used to convict the members of the organization and caused twenty guilty men to be lead to the gallows. The

See Molly Maguires on page 5

## *Thanks* Recent Acquisitions

- Buble records donated by Dorothy M (Saylor) Aderson, Turnersville, NJ
- Map of Pottsville, donated by Ann P. DiSarro, Minersville, PA
- 150th Sesquicentennial 50 cent coin from 1956, donated by Michael J. Miller, Pottsville
- Two female mannequins donated by Lori Quinn, Pottsville, PA
- Commemorative Plate, map of Minersville, Pottsville Catholic year book, donated by Bernard Bernatones, Cascade, MT
- 3 Minersville High School year books (1928, 29, and 30) donated by the Tropp, Pelock, and Kern families of Pottsville, PA
- Assorted land deeds and stock certificates from the Leigh Coal and Navigation Company donated by Spencer Pope of Pottsville, PA
- Cressona High School year books, Cressona Aluminum collectibles, US Navy Navigators case, ration books, WWII observers armbands, donated by Susan Pichini, Wyomissing PA
- Merry Christmas bowl, Wildermuth Dairy Milk bottles, political logo letter openers, money bag from 1st National Bank of Auburn, PA donated by the Auburn Area Historical Society
- Scrap books, Coaldale Victory Band Patch, donated by Anna Miller, Royersford, PA
- Post Card collection, donated by Catherine Zimmerman, Pottsville, PA
- Military uniforms from the 1950's donated by Frances Chareny, Pottsville, PA
- 1992 Calendar with photo of WWII aircraft, train newsletters, donated by Leah Brokhoff, Pottsville, PA

## Molly Maguires

continued from page four

extermination of the Molly Maguires caused order to come back to the coal mines.

A second theory is the Molly Maguires were an organization which turned to violence for the sake and well-being of the miners in the area. The lives of miners and their families were well short of ideal. Miners toiled for long hours down in the blackness and were paid small amounts. The pay often was lessened due to bills owed to the coal company. The coal company very often owned the miners' homes and all the supplies and food were purchased from a coal-owned store. The Mollies viewed this life as indentured servitude and took a stand to further unionize the area. Many individuals who support this theory see the Mollies as heroes of the mines attempting to make lives better for those who resided in the mining communities.

A final theory, although not widely accepted by many, is the notion the Molly Magu-

Schuylkill County Historical Society's  
7th annual  
*Holiday Market*  
Saturday, November 12  
❧ 10 10 4 ❧  
Travel back in time  
and shop our bazaar  
of treasures crafted by  
the region's foremost  
artists and artisans.  
*follow us:*  
[facebook.com/schsfaire](https://facebook.com/schsfaire)

ires were used as a front by Gowen to eliminate the unions. Franklin Gowen believed he could make more profit with the breaking of the unions. It is said crimes were plotted and committed by individuals associated with the mine baron. Evidence was accumulated by the indi-

viduals to use against the Mollies for their conviction.

Although there is no clear cut answer as to which theory is true, it seems a combination of the first and second are most feasible. No matter, the impact of the Molly Maguires is still felt to this day in Schuylkill

County.

A white shroud placed over the convicted's head, shielding his eyes from the viewing spectators. A noose slowly tightened around his neck. In a blink of the eye, the door was dropped and his fate sealed.

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

Non-profit org.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
Pottsville, PA 17901  
Permit # 485

# LOOK

at what's inside

Thoughts from War ..... 1  
2017 Appeal Campaign . 1  
Michael F. Conry ..... 2  
Welcome New Members .... 3  
Men of Mystery ..... 4  
Thanks ..... 4  
Holiday Market ..... 5  
Great Gifts for all ..... 6

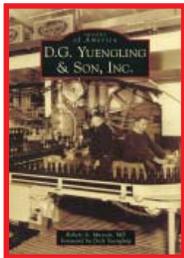
Or current resident



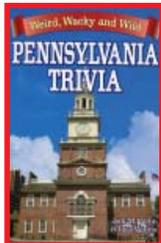
## GIFT SHOP specials for the Holidays



“Special Holiday Pricing on many items”



Books covering all aspects of Schuylkill County life make for a unique gift.



A large variety of prints, photos and handcrafted items are available in our gift shop.



Tee shirts with various logos make great gifts.

Boilo mugs and shot glasses.



Skook items are popular

