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# *The Allegheny City Society* **REPORTER DISPATCH**

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## **THE HIPWELL STORY**

*By Doug Lucas*

Sometime in the 1880's, a young entrepreneur by the name of Harry Hipwell came from Philadelphia to establish a business in Allegheny City in partnership with his brother Thomas.

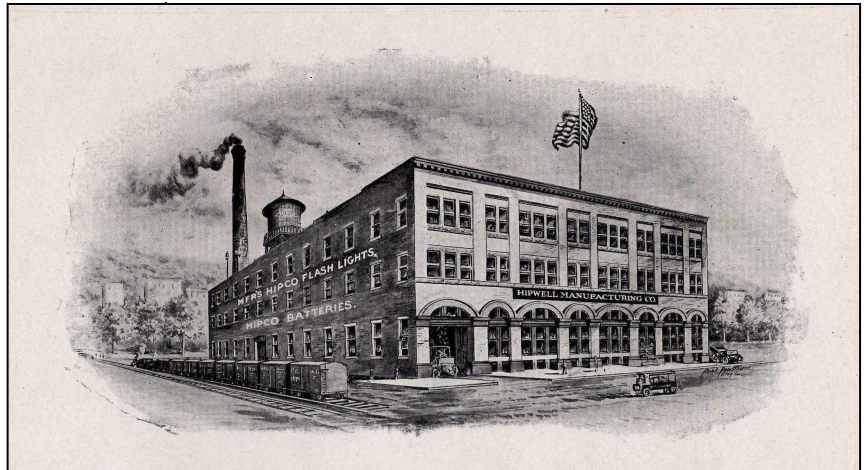
In 1887, they set up shop at what was then 100 – 102 North Avenue. An early letterhead advertised that they were “manufacturers of every variety of sheet metal and wire goods” as well as “lamps, lamp goods and electric supplies – tel. 494.” The telephone number would indicate that they were the 494th telephone in the city. At a time when such a device was considered by most to be a “novelty”, the Hipwell brothers were visionaries. Such forward thinking became the hallmark of the company.

It is unclear just as to when or why Thomas left the firm, making Harry the sole proprietor. Harry wasted no time in exploring the possibilities of new inventions. The Industrial Revolution had forever changed the world, and invention and innovation were the order of the day.

Edison's creation of the electric light in 1879 opened a whole new world of possibilities. One thing in particular captured Harry's imagination – a metal tube with a light bulb and a dry cell battery, known as the flash-light. Introduced in 1898 at an electrical show in New York City, it weighed an incredible 6+ pounds and its battery was over 6" long. The American Electrical Novelty and Manufacturing Co. received patents for the device in the 1890's, but no individual had established a clear claim as to its invention, though several tried.

Joshua Lionel Cowen, the inventor of the electric toy train (the Lionel Co.), built a prototype flash-light and marketed it as a device for illuminating the potted plants so popular in Victorian parlors. They were considered to be mere novelties and were known as flash-lights because they would not give off a steady stream of light without flashing.

By 1898, things were rapidly changing – Edison was no longer a player – Westinghouse and General Electric dominated the market. Edison had championed direct current, while Westinghouse favored alternating current – alternating current won out. The World's Fair of 1892 was to be the first one illuminated electrically and there was a



great competition between the two men to get the contract. Westinghouse won it and it was at his plant in Allegheny City that the light bulbs were produced.

In the same year, the first D-cell battery was introduced and suddenly this novelty device became a household necessity. Those of us of a “certain age” remember that flashlights, in addition to having a sliding on and off switch, also had a button to activate the light. Originally this was so that it could be used for sending Morse code signals.

Harry Hipwell had struck gold! But the flashlight was only one of many products his company offered. Their early products included brass and onyx parlor stands, metal picture frames and mirrors, as well as a variety of kerosene parlor lamps. These lamps are known as “Gone With The Wind” lamps because of their prominence in the movie of that name. But the truth is that such lamps did not exist during the Civil War. They did not appear until the 1890's!

Other products were early crank-style telephones, gas and electric lights, figural Art-Deco lamps, fire extinguishers, dry cell batteries, arc lights, electric heaters, heat lamps, crystal set headphones, radio batteries, early pay phones, safety seats for window washers, and flash attachments for cameras. They also had an early car rental service, and provided maintenance and storage for autos.

In the 1950's, Hipwell began making plastic flashlights while continuing to produce metal ones. At their peak, they sold between 1.5 and 2 million flashlights annually. Foreign competition began to take its toll and in 2001 the company was sold. In 2005, the company closed their doors for good, thus bringing to an end a company that had operated in the

same location for over 100 years. A rare remnant of old Allegheny City gone forever!

But the good news is that the building is attracting interest from developers who want to give it a new life as inner-city lofts! The Allegheny West Civic Council is committed to making this a reality, by working with the City and the developers so that this historic site will survive and remain viable in the the Twenty First Century!

## **Upcoming Events**

### **Save This Date—November 15th**

The Allegheny City Society will present a program on the life and artistic works of John Adam Hermann Jr. on Saturday, November 18th, from 11:00 to 2:30. Hermann was born in Allegheny City in 1858. A successful businessman, Hermann' great love was art. He was a neighbor and friend of George Hetzel and participated in the group of painters who were part of the Scalp Level school. A member of the St. John's Church, the oldest Lutheran congregation in Allegheny City, Hermann gave considerable support for that congregation in his will. Herman moved from Allegheny, then the North Side, to the magnificent Dewar mansion in Bellevue. Here he exhibited and stored his paintings and other collections. A number of his works focus on scenes in the Allegheny Commons and they will be on display for this event.

The Allegheny City Society will present a program about Hermann in Emanuel's Lutheran Church located at Fremont Street in Bellevue. Following this program there will be a box lunch for all those who register.

Emanuel's church was founded in the mid 19th century in Manchester by the renowned pastor and humanitarian W.A. Passavant. In 1907 the congregation "moved" to Bellevue. After lunch we will walk around the corner for a private visit of the John A. Hermann Museum on Lincoln Ave. The price for this program, including lunch, is \$15.

To make a reservation for the program, please call John Canning 412-322-3974. Please call before November 15th.

### **State Historical Marker Approved for Martha Graham (1894-1991) Innovative Dancer and Choreographer** *By David R. Grinnell*

Earlier this year we were delighted to received word that the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission approved the application submitted by ACS to commemorated Allegheny native Martha Graham with a

historical marker. Plans are now in progress to raise funds for the marker dedication ceremony, the creation of the marker, and for a program focusing on Graham's life.

Martha Graham was born on May 11, 1894 in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania to Dr. George Greenfield Graham and Jennie Beers Graham. The eldest of four children, her father was a prominent physician who specialized in the treatment of the mentally ill and was employed at Dixmont Hospital. Martha grew up in Allegheny City surrounded by her grandparents and great-grandmother. The family moved to Santa Barbara, California in 1908, when Martha was fourteen years of age. In her autobiography, Graham wrote of vivid memories of her life in the Pittsburgh area, her family, and their activities.

After seeing Ruth St. Denis perform in the Mason Opera House in Los Angeles in 1911, Martha Graham enrolled in Cumnock School and later in the Denishawn school, organized by St. Denis. This began her lifelong career as a dancer and choreographer. As a dancer she has been compared to what Picasso is to fine art and Stravinsky is to music, for transforming dance from traditional ballet to a modern movement. American composers Samuel Barber and Aaron Copland both wrote scores for Graham. During her career, American themes, as well as those of ancient mythology, inspired her works.

In 1927, Graham created the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance in New York City, where she adopted a training program now know as the Graham technique. The company traveled worldwide, performing some 190 works choreographed by Graham, including "Appalachian Spring," "Errand Into the Maze," "Herodiade," "Frontier," and "Maple Leaf Rag." Graham was often the lead performer for the company until her last dance performance in 1969 at the age of 75.

Graham was the recipient of numerous honors and awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Kennedy Center Honors, the National Medal of the Arts, the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1976 from President Gerald R. Ford, the Legion of Honor from the French Government in 1984, and the *Ignenio et Arti* Medal from Queen Margaret the II of Denmark. Graham died on April 1, 1991 in New York City. She is remembered for her revolutionary performances and as the first choreographer to regularly employ both Asian- and African-American dancers.

ACS is also continuing an emphasis of highlighting the lives of the significant Allegheny women who have had a great impacted our society through the arts with the placement of the Martha Graham marker. We are proud to participate in the states Historical Marker Program by continuing to identify significant individuals and events that deserve long lasting recognition with the placement of the easily recognizable blue markers with yellow lettering scattered

throughout our state and city. Stay tuned for further developments concerning the Martha Graham marker!



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## **National Trust to Tour Allegheny West and the Mexican War Streets**

Members of the National Trust for Historic Preservation will be visiting the North Side on their Candlelight tour of Allegheny West and the Mexican War Streets. There are a limited number of tickets available for sale at \$20 for the tour beginning at 7:00 PM. Tickets may be reserved in advance at [www.mexicanwarstreets.org](http://www.mexicanwarstreets.org) (click on "calendar of events") or on the evening of the tour at The Inn on the Mexican War Streets, 604 W. North Avenue or at Jones Hall, 808 Ridge Avenue. Shuttles will run and refreshments will be served at both locations. For further information, call 412-323-9030.