

# REPORTER DISPATCH

Journal of Old Allegheny History and Lore

## STREETCARS AND BLACKSMITHS

The story of Allegheny's William Powell

by Tom Wilson

Myrna Loy described the great actor William Powell as: "... a brilliant actor, a delightful companion, a great friend, and, above all, a true gentleman." His years spent growing up in Allegheny City no doubt influenced Ms. Loy's experience. That's right: William Powell was from Allegheny City! William Horatio Powell was born July 29, 1892 to Horatio Warren Powell and Nettie Manilla Powell. His mother was originally a Brady.

We have reason to believe that he was born in Allegheny. According to an interview with William Powell in the *Pittsburgh Press/Post-Gazette* from 1931, the reporter claims that Powell was born on Federal Street, but there are no listings in the Allegheny and Pittsburgh Directories for the Powells until 1893. These first listings are only for the places that father Horatio Powell worked.

Horatio Warren Powell must have been good with numbers. Our research into the Allegheny and Pittsburgh Directories has him listed as bookkeeper, salesman, clerk, manager, secretary and accountant through various years from 1893 to 1907. John Canning has established that in 1900 a guy named John E. Powell was living at 516 W. North Avenue, the house across Monterey from the YMCA. This was the home of the Pfeiffer family, who were the owners of the Allegheny Steam Laundry. John E. must have been a brother or a cousin of Horatio's. John E. became manager of the Allegheny Steam Laundry around 1900, and got Horatio a nice job as bookkeeper. We see that Horatio is listed in the 1900 Directory as living at 1312 Allegheny Avenue. In 1903 we find his home listed as 1500 Chartiers. (Chartiers is now Chateau.) That would sit it on the corner of Locust (Locust is now Liverpool) and Chateau.

This almost jibes with a February 14, 1985 *Post-Gazette* newspaper article claiming that the Powells lived at the corner of Franklin and Chateau Streets (which is a block away).

The February 9, 1931 *Pittsburgh Press* article, part of a series called: *Pittsburgh's Own Movie Stars—True Stories of*

*How They Got Their Start* goes into some good detail of Bill Powell's early days in Allegheny:

"From the day he was born in a little frame house in Federal Street, his father believed Billy would become a great lawyer, because of his lusty cries. But during the next 12 years of his life, he had very little time to think about a career. There were all sorts of games, such as Run-Sheep-Run and Palm-Palm-Pullaway which the neighborhood boys played in the yard

back of the Sixth Ward School. Mrs. Powell had many a heartache in these years. She sent

William to school spick and span in new stockings and freshly pressed suit, but he came home with the knees out of his stockings and his clothes rumped into bunches after a fight or an excursion down to the Ohio River with his two closest friends, Oscar and William Demmler, whose father was a proprietor of the Demmler and Schenck Hardware store on the North Side.

Billy's hobbies were streetcars and blacksmiths. He was a slim little youngster with startled blue eyes; serious eyes they were, even then. He made a habit of disappearing from the house any time during

the day and usually could usually be found at the blacksmith shop three blocks away. He might be successful at borrowing a nickel from the smithy, and then it meant he had gone for a streetcar ride.

Occasionally Billy's mother would take him to a matinee at the Bijou, Alvin or the Grand Old Opera House. He came home feeling very mysterious and 'actorish'. He stood in front of the hall mirror for several minutes making faces, scowling, smiling and mimicking the actors he had seen."

The *Press* then got Powell to write his own story in 1935, while the *Press* Hollywood correspondent was on vacation: "Once upon a time, a son was born to a charming young couple. The son was I. The charming young couple were my father, H.W. Powell, and my mother, Nettie.



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As to the momentous occasion, I am decidedly hazy. My mother told me that she plucked me from a cabbage—a likely enough story that I had no reason to question until some years later, when I discovered that Pittsburgh, where I was born on a hottish July 29, was cabbageless.

The legal bacillus was injected into my life at the age of 1½ when I stood up in my highchair and delivered a scathing denunciation of my nurse, with my beaming and applauding parents as judge and jury. It was cute at the time. Later I have reason to believe that I was something of a trial to them, myself. I was burning with the ambition to be a lawyer.”

A reminiscence by Harold Cohen related by Vince Leonard in the *Post-Gazette* in 1981 cites that: “Powell was in the 1907 class of the Sixth Ward School on the North Side, where he lived at 1500 Franklin Street. He said: “I used to go straight from school to my job as a delivery boy for Pfeiffer’s Laundry on Chateau Street, where my father worked as an accountant.”

As far as the actual location of William Powell’s birth, Nettie’s cabbage story might still hold some water. Ed Blank wrote in 1982 in the *Press* after a telephone interview that Powell said: “... he hadn’t returned to Pittsburgh in many years and that he wasn’t sure himself in just which section of the city he’d been born. Although it’s not known what Pittsburgh neighborhood he was born in, he was 10 when his family moved to Allegheny in 1902.”

Until proven otherwise, let’s go with the frame house birth-place on Federal Street.

## ACS WINTER FILM SERIES

Please mark your calendars and join us at the Allegheny Unitarian Universalist Church for the Allegheny City Society’s Winter Film Series, this year featuring some of William Powell’s greatest films. Tuesdays at 7:00 PM.

- » February 11 – *The Thin Man* (1934) starring William Powell and Myrna Loy as Nick and Nora Charles
- » March 4 – *My Man Godfrey* (1936) starring William Powell and Carole Lombard
- » March 25 – *After the Thin Man* (1936) starring William Powell and Myrna Loy
- » April 15 – *Life With Father* (1947) starring William Powell, Irene Dunne and Elizabeth Taylor

Father Horatio moved the family to Kansas City in 1907 to take a job, ending the Allegheny portion of William Powell’s story. —*Thanks to John Makar and John Canning for additional research.*

The Allegheny City Society will take a much closer look at William Powell’s life and films during its third annual Winter Film Series.

## NEWS & NOTES

### NEW ARCADIA TITLES

The Society has just received a shipment of Arcadia books with a Pittsburgh or Allegheny connection. New titles are:

*Brewing in Greater Pittsburgh*

*H.J. Heinz Company*

*Irish Pittsburgh*

*Pittsburgh Mansions*

*Ukrainians of Western Pennsylvania*

*Troy Hill*

If you would like to order one or a few of these titles check out the Society’s website for the order form.

### ABANDONED LOT IMPROVED

Residents of Fineview and Perry Hilltop joined to make much needed improvements to an eyesore at an abandoned lot at Federal Street Extension and Lafayette Avenue on September 28.

Thirty volunteers showed up to move earth, build a wall and dig homes for plants. In one day, this formerly aban-



doned lot was adopted and nurtured into a pleasing site for the many people who pass up and down Federal Street Extension.

# IVY COVERED CHURCH

Brief history of Allegheny's First Presbyterian Church  
by Ruth McCartan

Reverend Joseph Stockton would take the ferry and later the bridge from Pittsburgh to Allegheny to hold services for the Scotch and Scotch Irish Presbyterians in the early 1800s. His first religious service, as the story is told was under a large shade tree covered with grape vines in the common land of Allegheny. The eminent Reverend Stockton, a preacher and teacher would be a supply pastor for the church for many years. A frame church building was constructed at the southeast corner of the burying grounds in the commons and later a brick building was added as a school room. When the congregants were ready to formalize their request to establish the First Presbyterian Church of Allegheny, Rev. Stockton signed their application which was sent to the Presbytery in 1830.

As Allegheny town grew, a larger church building was needed and slowly the money was raised. Construction was proceeding nicely until the authorities presented the laborers with a writ to cease. The new building it was determined could not be built in the commons as the area was to be used by everyone to graze their animals. The elders met and solved this problem by buying a piece of land on Arch Street for the new church. The church was built at a cost of \$9,424. In 1832 the church was dedicated by the new pastor Rev. Job Halsey who served the congregation for four years. The list of early elders reads like a Who's Who of early Allegheny history: Theodore Nevin, James Park, John Irwin, Drs. Robert Mowry and Hugh Campbell to name a few.

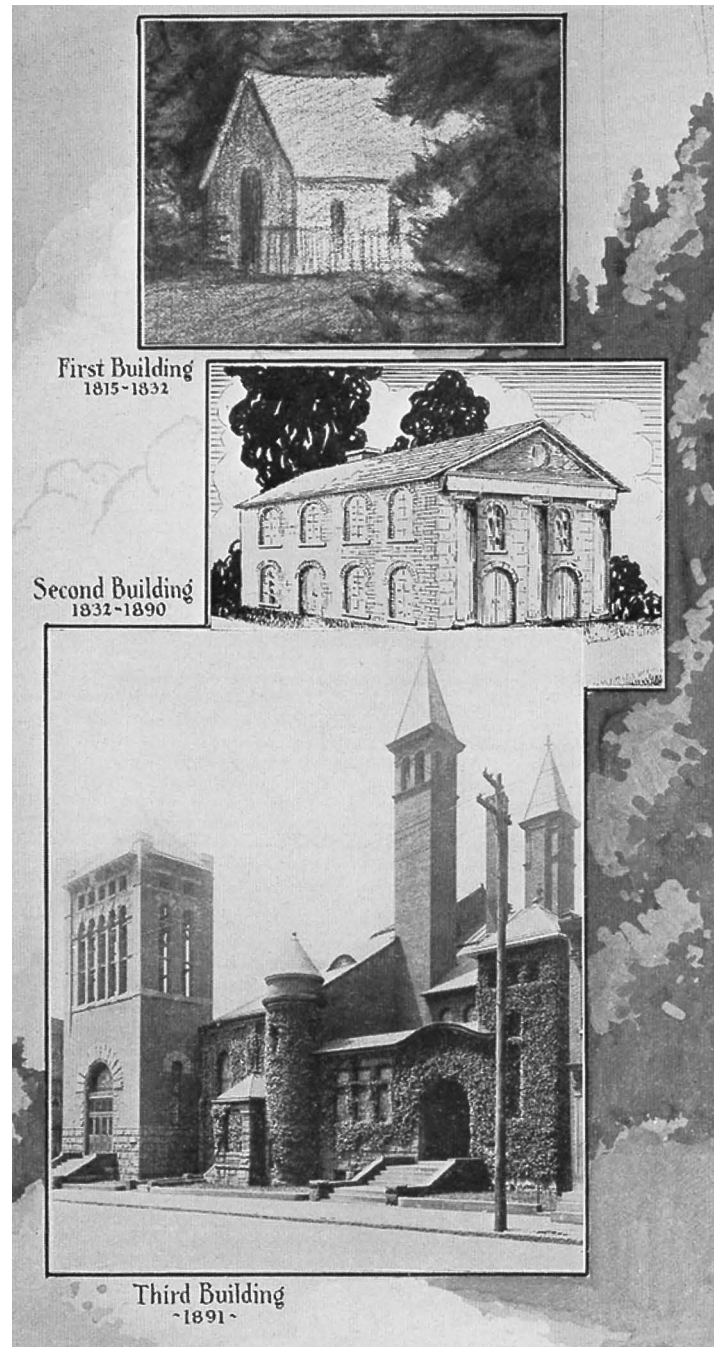
The growing church received Rev. Elisha Swift in 1835 as their new pastor, and with his arrival began the golden years of the church. The town was growing and First Presbyterian became the mother church of various Presbyterian congregations, Second, Third, Central to name only a few. Rev. Swift's health was delicate and he could not serve the church as was needed. The Elders not wanting to lose the senior Rev. Swift decided to call his son Rev. Elliot E. Swift to be their pastor, with his father preaching as his health allowed. This arrangement served the church well—the son was a great originator and writer, the father a knowledgeable and effective preacher. The younger Rev. Swift helped established the famous Swift Mission Brigade in 1887 (a subject for another time). The family Swift was identified with the church so much that many called it the "Swift Church" for many years.

The Swift family guided the church for over 50 years until the death of Elliot Swift in 1887. Rev. Dr. David S. Kennedy assumed the leadership of the church. As the new century was approaching the congregation needed a larger worship site so plans were started for construction of a new building on

Arch Street. The third church building, in the Richardsonian Romanesque style, was dedicated in 1891 with a whole day of praise and celebration.

The neighborhood was becoming more commercial and industrial, influential and wealthy parishioners were moving out to the suburbs for a cleaner and healthier life. With shrinking membership plans were proposed to combine congregations and in 1931 the First and Central Presbyterian church joined together using the church on Arch as their wor-

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THE CHURCH BUILDINGS erected by the First Presbyterian Church of Allegheny over its long history, plate from *The work of a century: History of the First Presbyterian Church of Allegheny*, 1930



INTERIOR of the First Presbyterian Church of Allegheny, from the records of the Estey Organ Company

ship site. After World War II the exodus of families to the suburbs began in earnest, greatly affecting the viability of First Presbyterian Church of Allegheny. The planners for the great renaissance of the North Side, The New Allegheny Center, needed the church's property. The site became part of a 2.5-acre tract of land known as Allegheny Towne Community (and now known as Foster Square) that was adjacent to the redevelopment area. The few church members remaining found other locations to worship and the ivy covered church on Arch Street was no more.

–History of the First Presbyterian Church of Allegheny: Read on July 2d and 9th, 1876; Swift, Elliot E. (Elliot Elisha); 1876  
 –The work of a century: History of the First Presbyterian Church of Allegheny; 1930

## ALLEGHENY AND PITTSBURGH

Opposite Views of the Annexation of Allegheny City  
 by Michael Shealey

From well before the time of Allegheny City's Mayor Gourley's 1890 anti annexation speech during Allegheny's Semi-Centennial Anniversary celebration, until Allegheny City's eventual annexation into Pittsburgh on December 7, 1907, Pittsburgh newspapers were the scene of the ongoing, often acrimonious, debate between annexation proponents and opponents. Let's listen in on the debate beginning with Mayor Gourley and continuing with the pro-annexation views of Pittsburgh (then spelled Pittsburg) fifteen years later in the *Pittsburg Dispatch* of 1905.

Note the reference to the "rotten politicians" controlling Pittsburgh in Mayor Gourley's 1890 speech.

From Allegheny City Mayor Gourley's Speech at the Semi-Centennial Anniversary Celebration of Allegheny City, *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette* July 18, 1890—

"After fifty years of corporate life, we have lower taxes, less debt and better credit than Pittsburgh. Since the present census has shown us to be entitled to the grade of a second-class city the proposition of annexation has been renewed.

Wants No Wedding

Pittsburgh is again flirting with us, but I do not think the time for a wedding has come. It may be that the time will come when Pittsburgh and Allegheny can with mutual profit give up their corporate identity and become one city, but in my judgment that time has not yet arrived. Before we will be annexed Pittsburgh will have to pay her debts, make more and better public improvements, decrease taxation and get rid of the rotten politicians who are controlling and corrupting her."

One of the most rotten of the Pittsburgh politicians referred to by Mayor Gourley in 1890, William Flinn (1851–1924) remained in power in 1905 as seen in the *Pittsburg Leader* cartoon of that year. Flinn, originally as part of the Magee-Flinn Republican political ring and, later, after Magee's death in 1901, politically controlled the City of Pittsburgh for over 30 years. The gentleman to the right in the cartoon wearing the "Same Old Ring" top hat holds the 25 years of loot Flinn and the ring had accumulated up to 1905.



Pittsburgh "Rotten Politician" William Flinn, *Pittsburg Leader* Feb 20, 1905

The excerpts of newspaper clippings from the January 14, 1905 *Pittsburgh Dispatch* came from a collection of William Flinn scrapbooks in the University of Pittsburgh archives. These scrapbooks, covering the years 1898–1921, include clippings from every newspaper in Pittsburgh that mentioned Flinn in these years as well as those topics of particular interest, especially business interest, to Flinn. The annexation of Allegheny was one of those topics.

The Pittsburg Point of View, The Annexation of Allegheny  
*Pittsburg Dispatch*, January 14, 1905—

continued

## Business Men Want Annexed

“Nearly all Allegheny merchants or manufacturers who have been approached on the Greater Pittsburg enterprise are heartily in accord with the proposition. Real estate holders of Allegheny are almost a unit in declaring that when the 15 Northside wards become part of Pittsburg values will increase generally throughout the city. They see in the future a much better for their town. They believe that the fire departments of the two cities consolidated can be better organized for the protection.

It is felt that the water improvements being made in Pittsburg for the protection of the public’s health is one argument sufficient to carry conviction to the mind of any opponent of annexation. They recall that if Greater Pittsburg ever exists the toll on all Allegheny Bridges will be abolished.

### Northside Public Buildings

The Allegheny public buildings include a city hall, which will have to be torn down soon; a market house, which is an eyesore to people who pass near the intersection of Federal

and Ohio streets; a Carnegie library, 15 engine houses, 24 school houses, including high school; municipal hospital, three patrol stables, city stables, electric light and power plant and three park shelter houses. The total valuation of Allegheny city property is estimated at \$8,000,000, including parks, real estate and public buildings.

## What Pittsburg Offers Allegheny

Pittsburg has provided for a filtered water supply, it has better police and better fire protection, free bridges, larger and finer parks, more paved streets, superior public buildings and improved public service of all kinds. With annexation, for instance, Allegheny will lose the unenviable repute as the Canada of the underworld. It will be included within the deadline established by the Pittsburg Safety Department for the protection of the public. And it will gain all these advantages at a much smaller proportionate cost since the centralized administration of the cities under one government will insure all the economies of the combination.”

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## WINTER TRIP TO THE FRICK

Tour the mansion and see the exhibit at the museum

by **Ruth McCartan**

Don’t let the after-Christmas let-down stop you from coming to the Society’s winter trip to the Frick Art and Historical Center in Point Breeze on Sunday, January 12. We will be hosting this event with Greater Pittsburgh Civil War Roundtable. This is the opening trip of the tour season.

We will meet at 11:30 in the adjacent parking lot at the Art Museum (parking is free) for our noon tour of Henry Clay Frick’s Chateau style mansion, Clayton. The cost is \$12 for adults and \$10 for seniors. The guided tour is about an hour long. We will learn about the Frick family and how they lived during Pittsburgh’s Gilded Age. We owe a debt of gratitude to Helen Clay Frick for saving this architectural masterpiece for the city to enjoy. Too bad Andrew Carnegie ran off to New York City so fast. You will have time after the tour to explore the Car and Carriage Museum and the greenhouse before we meet at the Café at the Frick for a late lunch or tea & scones. Luncheon menu items range in price from \$8 to \$20 with tea & scones starting at \$10. The food is on your own and the Café’s menu is online.

After we have refueled it will be off to a guided tour of the new exhibit at the Art Museum entitled *Civil War Era Drawings from the Becker Collection*. If you wanted visual images from the civil war battlefield of 150 years ago you had

to rely on the battlefield artists. These artists such as Henri Lovie or Joseph Becker were imbedded with the troops and were there when the actions of the war occurred. Drawing sketches of the sieges, battles, and everyday life of the soldier. These special drawings were sent back to the prominent newspapers of the day Harper’s Weekly and Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper to be turned into engravings which then could be published as illustrations. Many of the sketches are even better than the photographs of the day. Remember photography at that time could not capture motion or events in limited lighting. Many of the drawings are very lifelike, showing the real essence of the men and the tragedy of war.

The exhibit shows the battlefield sketches along side the newspaper illustration so you see the finished product as it was published for mass distribution. Cost of the formal guided tour is \$5. If you just want to see the exhibit we hope to tour at 3:00.

If you are still up for more fun times, after a long day of touring we can head out for drinks and dinner enjoying any one of the restaurants in the Point Breeze environs. The Fricks are out of town that Sunday, have not seen much of them lately or I know they would invite us for dinner.

For more information please e-mail Ruth McCartan at «theruthso3@yahoo.com». We have a limited number of spaces for the mansion tour so e-mail your name right away.

Maybe ask Santa for a little cash to cover the expenses.

## VISIT TO ARCHEOLOGICAL DISPLAY

Seeing the Fairmont Hotel artifacts

by Ruth McCartan

After a few unforeseen events the tour of the archeological artifacts found while building the Fairmont Pittsburgh Hotel located at 510 Market Street in downtown Pittsburgh is scheduled for Sunday January 26, starting at 11:00. Please meet at the fireplace area near the hotel's registration desk before 11:00. We will learn about the discoveries and the hotels decision to incorporate the objects found on-site into the design and decoration of the hotel. Christine Davis, of Christine Davis Consultants the archeological firm responsible for the investigation of the hotel site will give a brief talk on the project. Julia, of the Fairmont staff will take us to the display exhibits on the upper floors that only hotel guests get to see.

Lunch will be at the Habitat. You will be able to order from the menu with prices ranging from \$10 to \$20. See the Habitat website for information. Lunch is on you.

Cost of the tour is a mere \$5 payable on the day of the event. We can only take 18 people on this tour ,so let me know if you want to attend. RSVP and questions to Ruth McCartan at «theruths03@yahoo.com» (412) 364-6132.

## RESTORING A TOWN HOUSE

An Allegheny town house undergoes renovation

by John Canning

The title of this article might be a bit deceiving in that in present day parlance the term *townhouse* conjures up a complex or row of new houses designed to look as if they were built in the 19th century. The house that is presently undergoing a massive restoration is indeed a house that was possibly built when the present-day North Side was the small rustic village of Alleghenytown. In those pre-Allegheny City years Foreland Street was called First Street. The double-house, at 406 and 408 Foreland (originally 5 and 7 First ), was built on property leased from Mary Schenley. This small frame structure is being restored by a couple who have recently moved here from New York City. Over more than a century and a half many families considered one side or the other of this "duplex" as their home. One such resident in the early 1880s was Conrad Stern, a tailor whose shop was on East Ohio Street. It is exciting to watch the restoration of this building along with the property across the street, which, at one time was used as a morgue as well as the home for Allegheny City undertaker Elmer Herman and his family.

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