
The Allegheny City Society **REPORTER DISPATCH**

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Christmas In Old Allegheny

By Doug Lucas

Allegheny City's main business districts along East Ohio and Federal streets were swarming with activity in the days preceding Christmas. Prestigious establishments such as Reizenstein's and Boggs and Buhl's catered to the upper class that came shopping in their chauffer driven carriages. Thus, the term "carriage trade".

To the well-to-do Victorians, Christmas was a religious and social celebration that began on Advent (the fourth Sunday before Christmas). On December 25th, the twelve days of Christmas commenced, ending on Epiphany (January 6), also known as Twelfth Night. The Advent season was one of religious observation and preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth.

For Christmas dinner, the family sat down to a lavish holiday feast and then exchanged a few presents. Gifts for the children usually consisted of a toy or two with nuts, sweets and fruits in their stockings. Adults received clothing, books or jewelry. The idea was to commemorate the gifts of the Magi to the Christ Child. The focus was on the religious meaning of the holiday, and not materialistic gain. The next twelve days were ones of socializing and celebrating, culminating in one grand celebration on the twelfth night. The day after Christmas was known as "boxing day". It was spent delivering boxes of food, fuel, and necessities to the less fortunate.

Life for many of the working-class poor was quite different. Christmas was treated as just another day and everyone was expected to work. Their holiday meal had to wait until the workday was over. Eventually, Christmas did become a legal holiday on a state-by-state basis.

Many holiday traditions had roots in pagan practices revolving around the winter solstice, especially the use of mistletoe, which was strictly forbidden inside a church. Victorians rediscovered many old English and German traditions that had been abandoned by the

Puritans, and blended them with modern practices to create a festive holiday celebration.



England's Queen Victoria was hailed as the arbitrator of manners and good taste. And when she married Prince Albert of Germany, he brought with him the practice of decorating an evergreen to celebrate the season, and the idea quickly found widespread popularity. Early trees were rather simple affairs, having homemade decorations, candies and small toys, all illuminated with candles. Such a practice often had disastrous consequences, as many a tree caught fire. The dismantling of the tree on

January 6th was a much-anticipated event when the decorative sweets could be eaten and the toys distributed.

By the 1890's, F.W. Woolworth was importing huge quantities of blown glass ornaments from Germany, and in typical Victorian fashion, trees became sumptuous affairs with all manner of glittering decorations. Elaborate miniature villages surrounded the base of the tree. Homes were decorated with pine boughs, holly, ivy and a kissing ball of mistletoe was hung in prominent place. In 1895, First Lady Francis Folsom had the White House tree decorated with electric lights, and a national trend soon followed.

Food and lots of it highlighted the celebration of the season. Goose, rather than turkey, was preferred as the main course, and many poor people saved all year to purchase one. The "groaning board" featured many holiday delicacies: sage stuffing, cranberries, rutabagas, parsnips, potatoes, gravy, pickles, cheeses, nuts and celery. Desserts included plum pudding, mince and pumpkin pies, gingerbread, cookies and

other sweets. Fine whiskies and wines, mulled cider, hot buttered rum, eggnog and wassail were popular beverages. The term “to toast” someone originated from the use of toasted bread in the wassail. Of course such gustatory delights varied with one’s ethnic background. Due to a lack of refrigeration, most food was either salted or preserved, so variety was necessarily limited.

Entertainment usually consisted of parlor games such as blind man’s bluff or musical chairs. There was caroling, plays, and singing societies such as the Teutonia Mannerchor Club to add to the festivities.

Some of these holiday traditions survive, but sadly, many have disappeared, and others are quickly fading away. Today, we seek to relive the memories of those days gone by through the Allegheny West Christmas Candlelight tours, when over one thousand people come to capture a glimpse of what life was like long ago in old Allegheny.

National Trust for Historic Preservation Tours “Old Allegheny”

By Ruth McCartan

November 2nd was a cold autumn night, but four hundred people braved the weather to tour two national and city-designated historic districts of Allegheny City: Allegheny West and the Mexican War Streets. It was a night for the two neighborhoods to show off their beautifully preserved architecture to a group of nation-wide preservationists.

The Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation hosted this candlelight tour event for attendees of the 2006 National Conference of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Allegheny City Society volunteered to host a reception for the attendees at Jones Hall on the campus of Allegheny Community College.

Members of the Board of Directors of the ACS developed a display of photographic images entitled “A Celebration of Allegheny”, showcasing Allegheny City and what made it great. (The images were arranged into three major groups: the famous people, homes, and fountains/monuments. The photographs were a great introduction to the area and a major topic of discussion for all who viewed them. The society hopes to present this collection of photographic images of Allegheny City at our next annual meeting for all to view and enjoy.

Most of the attendees were from out of town and couldn’t believe all the beautiful homes and buildings in the neighborhoods of Allegheny City. Hot cider and delicious cookies were served to energize and keep the groups warm waiting for the buses and trolleys. It was a fabulous night for everyone who attended.

Robert Munroe – Allegheny’s Premier Daguerreian

By Tom Weprich

The daguerreotype, the most popular of the early photographic processes (photography on paper was invented in England at the same time), was named after its inventor, the Frenchman Louis Daguerre. A picture was produced when a sensitized silver plated sheet of copper was exposed in a camera. Daguerreotypy was introduced to the citizens of France, indeed, to the world, in August 1839. Instructions for making daguerreotypes were printed, and immediately translated in many languages and sent to countries all over the world, including America. By September those instructions were published in newspapers of western Pennsylvania.

The new photographic process opened a new artistic medium, as well as an industry that presented an opportunity to any industrious individual with the capital to buy the equipment and a room or two for a studio and darkroom. Because natural light was needed, most studios were on the uppermost floors of office buildings, or rooms in boarding houses or other structures, that afforded good light.

Daguerreians were working in the City of Pittsburgh as early as 1840. Although the Great Fire of 1845 destroyed some of the early studios and put an economic burden on the citizens of the City and Allegheny, daguerreians returned and prospered.

Although daguerreians were working in Pittsburgh since 1841, Allegheny did not have a studio until 1850. This may have been because there were so many studios in Pittsburgh. Nevertheless studios did eventually open and were successful. Among them was a gentleman named Robert Munroe (active in Allegheny from 1854 until 1859).

Munroe (aka Monroe) opened his gallery in November of 1854, in rooms that he renovated with special

skylights over the Post Office on Water Street. His earliest advertisements announced that he was particularly adept at taking pictures of children. He cited that his skylights enabled him to take quicker pictures, thus rambunctious children, a challenge to photographers even today, were not a problem in his establishment.

Daguerreotypists were quick to seize upon the idea that pictures would make perfect gifts. Indeed, daguerreotypes were touted as special gifts for family or friends, especially for Christmas. One of Munroe's first advertisements did exactly that, noting particularly that his were not ordinary: *"What can you get that is more acceptable as a Christmas present than a Daguerreotype, if taken in a superior manner. To get*



a superior picture call at Munroe's Skylight Gallery."

The portrait of the young woman, with "Munroe" stamped on the brass matte in the 2 ½" by 3" daguerreotype is the only known extant daguerreotype by Robert Munroe. Perhaps it was taken for a special person on New Years Day. The reverse is inscribed onto the copper plate:

**"Jany 1st 1855
Allegheny City, Pa."**

Although many daguerreian portraits depicted subjects seated, looking straight at the camera, the more competent daguerreians followed the precedents set by portrait painters, including Munroe. He considered himself an artist and accordingly, had "Artist" stamped on the matte on the lower right side. Munroe sat his

unidentified subject at a table, her body turned to one side, and one arm rests upon the table. The young woman appears to be a member of the working middle class, wearing a dark dress; a broach is pinned upon the white lace collar.

Prices for a daguerreotype in both Allegheny and Pittsburgh during the mid 1850s ranged from fifty cents to a couple of dollars for the common sixth plate, but daguerreotypes could cost up to \$20.00 at the more fashionable establishments, depending upon the size of the image and what kind of case or frame was used. Munroe offered pictures at "moderate prices," although he didn't provide specific prices in his advertisements.

Photography during this early era depended entirely upon natural light, and Munroe had special skylight windows built to accommodate that need. This is evident in this daguerreotype, as the light falling upon the woman is evenly distributed, without any hard shadows or bright spots. In addition, the environment was potentially severe on the sensitive silver surface of the daguerreotype. The tarnish that encompasses the image was caused by air coming in between the protection of the glass and matt.

Not long after this daguerreotype was taken, a new photographic process called the ambrotype was introduced. Munroe was among the first operators in either city to adopt the ambrotype. Not only did he embrace the new process, unlike some of the other operators, Munroe immediately abandoned the daguerreotype completely for the ambrotype and, in the following years, he received high praise from editors of various newspapers, as well as winning awards for best ambrotypes at the county and state fairs.

Perhaps the years of exposure to darkroom chemicals had dampened his enthusiasm in his work. In 1859, Munroe announced that he was quitting photography because he wished "to turn his whole attention to an outdoor business." It is unknown what business he pursued, but he did not return to the career in which he had known so much success.

For more information, contact:
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Driving past the Hermann Art Museum on Lincoln Avenue in Bellevue, you would never realize the wealth of paintings, bronzes and jades contained there. Members of the Allegheny City Society toured this private museum on November 18, which is dedicated to the artwork of Allegheny City artist John Hermann Jr.

It was an afternoon of Allegheny history and art. Starting at Emanuel Lutheran Church in Bellevue on North Fremont Street, which can trace its roots back to its first church location on Juanita Street in Manchester, John Canning gave a short history of various Lutheran churches, both the German speaking and the English speaking, found in Old Allegheny. John then informed the group of the strong ties of the Hermann family and the Lutheran faith. The John Hermann estate even to this day is supporting the Lutheran faith in the area.

Before a box lunch was served, the attendees learned about John Hermann Jr. (1858-1942) and his private art museum. The Hermann family made their money in

the tanning business and invested their profits in real estate and insurance. John managed the family fortune until into his 50's and then decided to retire to travel and paint. He learned to draw and paint by studying the masters and copying them.

After lunch, the group walked the two blocks to the art museum dedicated to the art works of John Hermann. The two floors contain a diverse collection of the artists' life work. The tour booklet states that there is "a wide series of Pittsburgh paintings that evoke warm memories of past events and neighborhoods that are an integral part of our local history." The rare find for the Allegheny history lover is a complete collection done, in watercolor, of the monuments and fountains found in the Commons. How wonderful it was to see the lost Allegheny fountains in color and with the surrounding streetscape included.

If you missed this private tour the museum is open every Friday, Saturday and Sunday 12:00 to 4:00 and admission is free.

