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William H. Artzberger

Allegheny Artist and Automaker

by **Emilia S. Boehm**

Many artists made their home and living in Allegheny, and the stories of these men and women contribute greatly to the city's history. One such figure is William H. Artzberger (1852–1936), an award-winning fresco artist who operated a large painting business in Allegheny and later ran an art school from his home. Artzberger's story involves more than his artistic pursuits, however. Like countless other enterprising gentlemen around the world, Artzberger took an interest in automobiles in the early 1900s. Though his venture into automobile production was shortlived, some of it took place here in Allegheny. His life and work warrant much more examination, but a brief look at William Henry Artzberger follows here.

Born in 1852 in Beaver County, Artzberger moved to Allegheny as a youth. He was working as a painter as early as 1875–76, when the city directory lists him on Woods Run Avenue in the 11th ward. By 1878–79 he had moved to 121 Federal Street and in the years that followed, his occupation was listed alternately as an artist, fresco painter, and (maybe by accident, in 1881–82) a photographer. His address changed to various locations on Lacock Street from 1882 to 1885, during which time he became the principal of W. H. Artzberger & Company. The firm offered “fresco painters and kalsominers,” kalsomine being a white or tinted paint used as a wash for walls or ceilings. The company advertised that they would decorate churches and parlors “in the Latest Styles of Art,” and was awarded the “Gold Medal of Chicago Art Academy 1878, First Premium and Silver Medal at Pittsburgh Exposition, 1881, and First Premium and Bronze Medal 1882.” (Both of those “Pittsburgh” Expositions would have presumably been held in Allegheny City, at the building constructed in 1875 by the Tradesmen's Industrial Institute.) In a cabinet card made around 1886, a dapper Artzberger wears a long coat decorated with some of his awards and holds an artist's pallet that bears the name and address of his firm (see photo).



William H. Artzberger, pictured with his award medals, on an advertising cabinet card, the back of which is pictured on page 2

By 1886, W. H. Artzberger & Company relocated to 40 Cedar Avenue, which was also Artzberger's home. (The house was renumbered to 712 Cedar in 1900 and still stands today.) Around the corner from Artzberger's home and shop, his brother George sold boots and shoes on East Ohio Street, as he had done since the 1870s. Artzberger's Shoe Store continued after George's death in the early 1920s. Shortly after Artzberger divorced his first wife in 1899 he married his second wife, the former Mary E. Ermshausen (1879–1961). They had two children, William Henry, Jr. and Thelma (1902–1982). According to his family, the story of Artzberger's automo-

continued on page 2

tive venture began sometime around 1902, in Rochester, New York. While he was working on a painting job there, William Artzberger became acquainted with cars produced by the Foster Automobile Manufacturing Company. He invested in the Foster Company, but with unfortunate timing—after producing some 167 vehicles in a five-year period, Foster went bankrupt in 1903. Hoping to recoup some of his losses, Artzberger brought the remainder of the business home to Allegheny.

Artzberger assembled and made alterations to the Foster vehicles with a company called the Artzberger Automobile Company. He entered the improved Fosters in races in Pittsburgh and around the country, and the cars won several speed, hill-climbing, and distance contests, often beating more well-known steam vehicles like the Stanley. On one occasion, an Artzberger Steam Car won a race on nearby Washington Boulevard, reaching an amazing 59.5 miles per hour. Of the vehicles' many successes, an Artzberger sales brochure boasted, "no machine in the world ever accomplished such wonderful power. Think of it, a 5-horsepower machine defeating a 30-horsepower machine while carrying the same weight; this was done everywhere, on the hill, on the level, and on the long run."

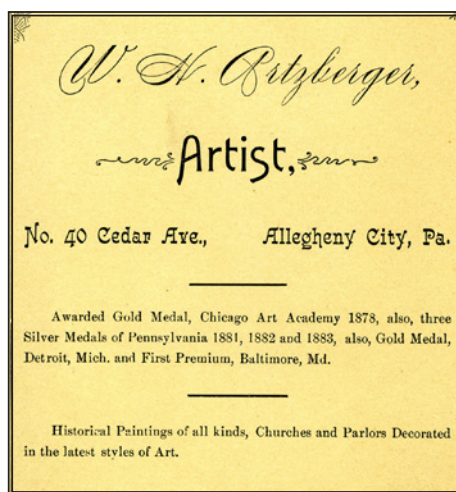
With its compact, stout body, the Artzberger looked much like a horse-drawn buggy. Made before gears and transmission were widely used, the 30-inch wire wheels on the car spun by a chain similar to a bicycle chain, and the car was steered with the tiller at the front right. Though the company claimed that their Steam Wagons were "always ready" and could produce the necessary steam in only five minutes, it probably took about 20 minutes to heat the boiler enough to produce the 250 pounds of steam pressure needed to power the car. A rare Foster-Artzberger Steam Surrey, made around 1904, is now on view at the Frick Art & Historical Center's Car and Carriage Museum. The car is one of only three of these vehicles known to exist. It was owned by collectors in Texas and Michigan before the present owner, a grandson of the automaker also named William Artzberger, brought it home to western Pennsylvania.

Despite these victories, the Artzberger Automobile Company, like its Foster predecessor, was not destined to survive. Formal production and sales did not continue past 1905. Immediately after the close of the auto business, William Artzberger returned to his career as an artist.

The historical record contains a number of interesting mentions of William H. Artzberger's life and work in Allegheny. In keeping with his role as an active businessman (or perhaps, in keeping with an artistic temperament), many of these notices involve lawsuits in which Artzberger was the plaintiff. In 1890, for example, a lawsuit initiated by Artzberger earned a mention in *The New York Times*. Under *Art Notes* of March 3, it was reported that "A painter of frescoes and scenery named W.H. Artzberger has begun suit for \$20,000 damages against an evening paper of Pittsburg." The suit concerned a large painting titled *Christ Before the Doctors* that Artzberger had "painted or caused to be painted by his assistants." The unnamed Pittsburgh paper stated that the work was made by one of Artzberger's employees, Joseph Barth. Artzberger "did not deny that he has many assistants," the report continued, but "as to this particular picture, he swears that it was wholly painted by him." The artist's main grievance was that someone who had offered to purchase the painting (for the significant price of \$1,200) had withdrawn their bid since the appearance of the Pittsburgh paper's article. According to the artist's grandson, the painting remained in Artzberger's possession and was later installed in the art studio of his home on Milroy Avenue.

Artzberger's name also appears in Allegheny City's annual municipal reports on several occasions. In the report for 1878, he is listed as receiving \$35 from the city for "nursing small pox patients." The 1905/06 report notes that a fire (with no loss) took place at 2721 Perrysville Avenue, a two-story frame building owned by Artzberger. One of the more intriguing entries comes in the municipal report for 1904/05. The Department of Public Safety's report reveals that on October 16, 1904, "Frank Funfar of Sandusky street was arrested by Officer Hugh Hutton for malicious mischief, by breaking the machinery and other parts of an automobile, belonging to W. H. Artzberger of No. 702 Cedar avenue." It is not known if Funfar knew or worked for William Artzberger, but he may be the same Frank Funfar listed in the 1903 directory as an engineer living at 17 E. Erie. The automobile subjected to that "malicious mischief" was almost certainly one of the products of Artzberger's brief involvement with the auto industry.

Around 1907, Artzberger left Cedar Avenue and moved to what is now the Perry Hilltop neighborhood. (Artzberger



owned property in that area as early as the mid-1890s.) Beginning in 1907 he is listed at 106 Milroy Avenue, near where he had previously owned property. It is unclear why he made this move, but financial concerns following the automobile venture certainly may have been a factor. In a conversation with the author, Artzberger's grandson has suggested that the move may have centered on the artist's concern about his health—he reportedly had persistent stomach issues and was always in search of good water, and the Milroy property may have had a spring on it. Artzberger continued to paint and also taught art, running the Artzberger Art School out of his home from 1927 until shortly before his death.

William Artzberger died on June 25, 1936, at the age of 84. He is buried in Mount Royal Cemetery, along with his wife Mary and daughter Thelma (photo at right).



Thanks to John Canning and Mike Shealey for their assistance



Riverview Presbyterian Church Designated Historic

Church received PH&LF historic landmark plaque

Watson Memorial Presbyterian Church, now Riverview Presbyterian Church at 3505 Perrysville Avenue, received one of the 20 new Historic Landmark plaques from The Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation. Riverview is a combination of various Presbyterian congregations from the Perry Hilltop area. In 1977 the congregations of North End U.P. (at Perrysville Avenue and Vinceton), the Eighth U.P. (destroyed by fire in 1976 which was in the 2400 block of Perrysville), and Watson U.P., combined. The combined churches took the new name of Riverview U.P., meeting in the former Watson church building. The Watson church was constructed in 1907 and designed by the architectural firm of Allison and Allison.

PH&LF Trustee Richard M. Scaife, chair of the Historic Plaque Designation Committee awarded the 20 plaques during their October 22, 2009 meeting. The plaque program was created to identify architecturally significant structures and designed landscapes throughout Allegheny County. Only 546 plaques have been awarded since the creation of the committee in 1968.

Riverview Presbyterian church joins other North Side buildings such as the Carnegie Library, Buhl Science Center, St. Peters Roman Catholic Church and many others as architectural and historic landmarks.

The Veterans Names Project

Effort to record names is nearing completion

by Ruth McCartan

After a hot summer taking photographs of the various veteran monuments on the North Side, the images are being copied and the names transcribed. Thanks to a grant from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) the Allegheny City Society will be able to give to various historical and genealogical organizations a CD with all the veterans names contained on the local monuments.

The 27th Ward World War II memorial located in Legion Park in Brighton Heights has many thousand names compared to the Overbeck Street Memorial with far fewer but all will be contained in the CD. Current views of the various memorials with map location and some historic pictures will also be contained.

We need our members help in finding war memorials listing veterans names in non-public locations such as schools, churches, service groups and veteran organizations. Thanks to our spring architectural tour a plaque of names honoring World War II service personnel was discovered in the first floor stairwell at the Sarah Heinz House. This is an example of the locations we need to document to make the project complete. If you know of any location that we need to look at email me Ruth McCartan at theruthso3@yahoo.com.



The Overbrook Veterans Monument above, and the 27th Ward World War II memorial located in Legion Park, Brighton Heights, left

John Alfred Brashear

"A Man Who Loved the Stars" Part 1

by Janet Gunter

The beginning of John Brashear's stellar career started with a bit of dumpster diving.

The great Pittsburgh fire of April 1845 caused great devastation to downtown and at least a thousand buildings were burned to the ground. One of these buildings was of special interest to 'Squire' Joseph P. Wampler, an amateur astronomer from McKeesport. Like many other locals he went to town to see the fire. Unlike them, Squire Wampler poked through the ashes of the renowned Bakewell Glass Works and found exactly what he was hoping for, a bit of fire-hardened flint glass.

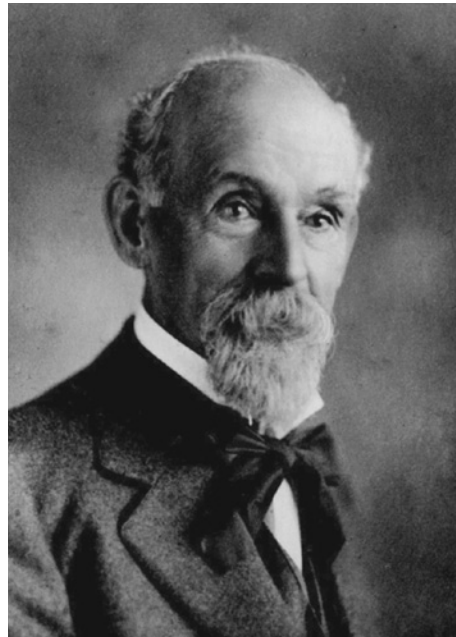
Squire Wampler joined this flint glass with a piece of French plate glass to form a telescope, the first west of the Alleghenies. He toured up and down the river towns with his telescope and charged curious citizens five cents a look.

When the Squire's tour landed him in Brownsville, Nathaniel Brashear paid for grandson John's first sight of Saturn, and this sight left an indelible impression on the young boy.

John Brashear was born in Brownsville on November 24, 1840, the son of a saddler and a schoolteacher. A public education led to an apprenticeship as a machinist and 'pattern maker' (producing blueprints) at John Snowdon and Sons in 1856. Snowdon and Sons was one of several steamboat-building businesses in Brownsville and Pittsburgh at the time. After a three-year apprenticeship, in 1859 John took a position in Louisville, Kentucky with the Dennis Long Company. There he helped build the engines for the City's waterworks, erected in 1861.

With the outbreak of the Civil War John was out of a job. He had sent most of his income to his parents back in Brownsville and in desperation accepted a woodworking job building coffins. "...I soon became quite expert at the job, gruesome as it seemed at first."

John soon headed home to Brownsville and shortly after moved to Pittsburgh and began his career as a millwright at Zug and Painter's, a rolling mill where he worked until the great ironworkers strike of 1867. Needing an income, he accepted a position at McKnight, Duncan and Company, another South Side rolling mill, where he so impressed the owners that he was soon earning three hundred dollars a year. Mr. McKnight himself came to the mill, handed John a check for one hundred dollars, and told him to take a vacation with his wife Phoebe!



John A. Brashear
in later life

In 1862 John had married a Sunday school teacher, Phoebe Stewart. After ten years shuttling among rented spaces the couple was able to move into their own home on the South Side slopes, high above the mills on the flats. Phoebe shared John's fascination with the stars, and the couple enjoyed sharing their interest in astronomy with friends and neighbors. Many evenings were spent at their home on Holt Street chatting about the wonders overhead.

John Brashear would return home from the mill every evening, and after dinner, Phoebe would help him with his self-taught lens grinding and telescope building.

After three long years of failed attempts at fabricating their own telescope, in 1875 they were able to point a nine-foot-long telescope nose out their bedroom window. Much was made in the neighborhood of the hole soon cut into the Brashear's roof so visiting crowds could more readily see the stars.

At that time in the city of Allegheny, Professor Samuel Pierpont Langley was Director of the Allegheny Observatory as well as professor of Physics and Astronomy at the Western University of Pennsylvania. Both were located above the Perrysville Plank Road, in the present day Perry Hilltop neighborhood

John Brashear had written several letters to Professor Langley in hopes that the famous man would give him advice and direction with lens making.

In the spring of 1876 Brashear made the long trip up the Perrysville Plank Road to meet the great Professor, and his life changed forever.

(to be continued in the Winter issue)



Lincoln in Allegheny City

Trolly tour of the Lincoln visit sites scheduled

2011 marks the start of the 150 anniversary of the great American Civil War. The Allegheny City Society will celebrate this event with a trolley tour of the sites that relate to the visit of the newly elected president, Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln arrived at the old Fort Wayne Railroad station on Federal Street in Allegheny City on February 14, 1861 for an overnight on his way to his inauguration in Washington City.

Visit the vanished site locations relating to Lincoln and learn about his last visit to the area. Step back into time and experience 1861 in Allegheny City and its neighbor, Pittsburgh. The date for this event is February 12, 2011. Watch for more information on this tour to be published in the winter *Reporter Dispatch*.

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