

REPORTER DISPATCH

Journal of Old Allegheny History and Lore

BROWN CHAPEL AME

Congregation weathers the storms for over 100 years
by Michael Shealey

On Easter Sunday, March 31, 1902, during Easter services what was described as a cyclone or a great windstorm unroofed and effectively destroyed the c.1870 Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church located at the corner of Boyle and Hemlock streets in Allegheny City. At a time associated in the Christian faith with rebirth and celebration, the congregation of Brown Chapel was faced with the physical destruction of their church and the need to rebuild.

The initial stages of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church separation from its parent church, the Methodist Church, occurred in 1787 in Philadelphia. Some accounts vary as to the origins of the church, but all accounts agree that the church was founded in response to forced segregation by race within the Methodist Church. The story in

Philadelphia in 1787 was that congregants of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, the Africans, as they were called, were restricted to seating only in the balcony of the church. This and similar discriminatory actions in other Methodist churches in other cities led to the formation of the Free African Society followed with the full organization of a separate African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816.

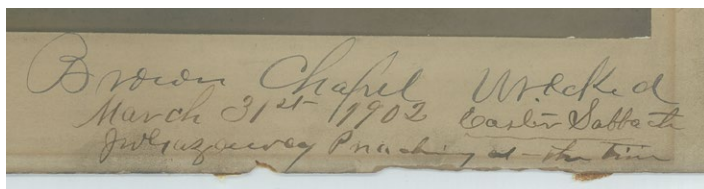
The African Methodist Episcopal church is unique in that its origins are found in sociological rather than theological differences with a mother church. The "African" in the A.M.E name refers only to the African descent of the founders of the church and does not indicate that those of non-African descent are excluded. The A.M.E church is a member of the family of Methodist churches and Episcopal simply refers to a church organization with bishops as elected administrative and executive officers.

The Brown Chapel A.M.E congregation is the second oldest A.M.E. congregation west of the Allegheny Mountains. The oldest such congregation, also of Pittsburgh region origins, is the Bethel A.M.E. church formed in 1808 and now located on Webster Avenue in Pittsburgh's Hill District.

Allegheny City's Brown Chapel congregation was formed in the winter of 1836–1837, initially meeting in the homes of communicants as well as in a blacksmith's shop. By 1856, the earliest available city directory listing for the church, shows Brown Chapel located on Allegheny City's East Commons. On Sunday, December 14, 1856, at this East Commons location, with the congregation present during a service this church was also unroofed during a violent windstorm, destroying the church, likely setting it on fire and leaving the congregation possibly housed in a stable for Christmas services in 1856. (The significance of this Christmas location for a Christian church should be noted.) From 1856 until about 1870, Brown Chapel seems to have moved a number of times always staying near the Allegheny Commons.

In 1863, for \$1200, the Brown Chapel congregation purchased their current lot on the corner of Boyle and Hemlock streets. Incorporation of the church followed in 1867. The incorporation likely indicates that the congregation was beginning to assemble funds to build a new church. By 1870, again according to a city directory, Brown Chapel had moved into a new church building at its present location. It was this 1870 building that was damaged beyond repair during the storm of

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The only known photo of the Brown Chapel A.M.E. c.1870 building, shown after the windstorm of March 31, 1902

Easter Sunday, 1902. (See photo of the damaged church on the previous page).

The cost of the 1870 church was \$20,000 with \$13,303 repaid by November 1872. Unfortunately, the financial Panic of 1873 left many church members unemployed, repayment of the remaining portion of the debt impossible and brought the church close to being in default on its mortgage. Beginning in late 1872 and continuing at least through 1876, the church was forced to solicit funds through newspaper ads and by Brown Chapel agents requesting one dollar donations from individual congregants during the services at other churches. By 1883, the debt was repaid and Brown Chapel was in a stable and solvent financial position.

Then came the cyclone of Easter Sunday, March 31, 1902, leaving the congregation once again without a home. Rebuilding was quick with a cornerstone for a new church laid on July 5, 1903 and the new church dedicated on March 27, 1904. This is the same church that now stands at the corner of Hemlock and

Boyle streets near Allegheny General Hospital. The chapel was designated an historic landmark by the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation in 1988.

After over 100 years of service, to both its congregation and the local community, this 1903 church is now in need of repair. The congregation has initiated a three-year plan to restore the roof and fascia of the building, rebuilding interior floors, repairing interior walls, restoring stained glass and removing over a century of accumulated grime on the exterior of the building. The history of Brown Chapel is a long story of struggle, rebirth after destruction and continuous service to its congregation and others. The church was a vital and central source of community in Allegheny City and remains so on Pittsburgh's North Side. The church is requesting assistance in its ongoing renovation efforts. If you would like to find out more about Brown Chapel; its current efforts to restore and maintain the building; and how you can help, please contact: Reverend Andrew Newberry ✉ «aknewb@aol.com».

MARY J. COWLEY SCHOOL

Cache of photos recently donated to the Society
by John Canning

Mary J. was Mary Junkin not Mary Jane. And, she was quite an advocate for the children of Allegheny City. Cowley played a major role in providing playground and educational opportunities for young children throughout many of our neighborhoods.

Prior to the consolidation of the Allegheny and Pittsburgh school systems, the Allegheny schools were simply identified by the wards in which they were located. After the consolidation the schools were "named." The magnificent Second Ward school, located on Sherman Avenue, was named to honor Mary J. (Junkin) Cowley.

Recently, the Allegheny City Society received a wonderful collection of photographs of the school and of each class attending there in the early years of the 20th century. This was quite a find. The importance of these images to North Side history is so important that the directors of the ACS believe they would be best preserved at the H.J. Heinz History Center. We have included here an image of the school that was among Allegheny's finest.



Alas the site is now a parking lot, but many of the ornamental iron work that as part of the interior décor of the school building can be found along the front steps of many houses in Allegheny City Central (Central North Side).

ST. NICHOLAS HISTORIC SITE

Dedication of site and memorial wall on June 20

by Janet Gunter

June 20, 2015, was a drizzly day but that didn't stop dozens of residents, former parishioners, local historians and a few elected officials from attending a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony at the Saint Nicholas Historic Site and Interpretive Memorial wall. The Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Croatia to the United States of America, Josko Paro, attended the ceremony and said, "A marker is a token of memory, I think it's a good reminder and I urge you to keep this memory alive."



Dignitaries and visitors at the Ribbon Cutting Ceremony for the Saint Nicholas Historic Site and Interpretive Memorial wall

In 1894 Croatians in Allegheny City and Pittsburgh brought the Reverend Dobros Josip Bozic to Pittsburgh from Croatia and plans for a new church building began. The Croatian Catholic parish of St. Nicholas was established that year and the church building was completed in 1904. It was the first Croatian Catholic parish in the United States. The parish named the church after Saint Nicolas, The Traveler, like many of them who had traveled so far from their home country. The church became the center of an active and industrious Croatian community that used the building for meetings, social events and English language lessons. The lower level of the church, the "lyceum," was a popular social hall used for weddings, banquets and served the bowlers of the neighborhood with two popular bowling lanes.

In 2000, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation introduced plans for the reconstruction of State Road Route 28, which would mean razing the church.

The parishioners, Pittsburgh City Council Representatives, various preservationists, local Croatians and local North Side leaders fought long and hard to preserve the noble building but in the end the Pittsburgh Catholic Diocese refused to sell the building and in 2013 the building was demolished.

PennDot, the Preserve Croatian Heritage Foundation, Preservation Pittsburgh and Troy Hill Citizens worked together to raise funds for the memorial wall, seating area, etched murals and several interpretive waysides at the site of the former St. Nicholas Church. The memory of Croatian immigrants and their contributions to the rich history of Allegheny City can still be seen and enjoyed.

ACS ANNUAL MEETING

Event held at the Rivers Casino Allegheny Room

by David McMunn

The Allegheny City Society held its Annual Dinner and Meeting on Thursday, April 23, 2015 at the Rivers Casino on Pittsburgh's North Side.

Following a delicious dinner in the Allegheny Room, an abbreviated business meeting was conducted in order to update the membership on the activities of the organization and to elect directors.

Ruth McCartan, Society president, reviewed the ACS year of tours, talks, projects and our representation in other nonprofits on the North Side.

Amelia Gehron, Society treasurer, reviewed the balance sheet and made the financial report for the year.

David McMunn reviewed the slate of directors whose term is completed and who will serve for another three years: Amelia Gehron, John Makar, Michael Shealey and Lois Yoedt. These four directors were unanimously re-elected to the Board of Directors. The present slate of Officers will remain the same for the new fiscal year: Ruth McCartan, President; John Canning, Vice President; David Grinnell, Secretary; and Amelia Gehron, Treasurer. Each of these folks continue to do a fine job in their roles with the Allegheny City Society.

Following the business meeting, a fascinating presentation was prepared and offered by Steve Mellon, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* staff photographer, on the Great Gas Tank Explosion of November 14, 1927. What an amazing and tragic story that occurred right here near the Rivers Casino.

Another successful year and another successful Annual Meeting. Thank you for attending and we look forward to seeing you all next year!

PITTSBURGH PHIL'S WINNING SMILE

Story of George Elsworth Smith of Allegheny
by Jude Wudarczyk

Of the many individuals buried in Uniondale Cemetery while it was part of Allegheny City, few had led as interesting a life as did George Elsworth Smith. Smith was born in Sewickley in 1862. His mother, Eliza (Elizabeth), appears in the city directories as a widow living in Allegheny City from 1863 to 1866 on East Lane, near First Street. Her occupation was a confectioner. According to Wikipedia, she is said to have remarried a grocer named Edward Downing; however, the city directories list only one Edward Downing, a molder, who also happened to live in Allegheny City. There was a William Downey, who was a grocer during that era. This man lived in Pittsburgh, not Allegheny City.

As a boy, George Smith found work in a cork company, which was most likely Armstrong Cork Company, as this author could find no other such manufacturer located in this area during this time. George quickly became bored with his work and sought entertainment by watching and later betting on the cockfights that were common in Pittsburgh during this period. Smith had an uncanny knack for picking winners. He soon began to raise and train his own cocks in nearby woods, because he knew his mother, a devout Roman Catholic, would never approve of his new hobby. He proved superior in this endeavor as well. He gave the majority of his winnings to his mother, telling her that they were bonuses or from pay raises, because of the good work he was doing.

Later, he bet on a baseball pool. His one-dollar wager won him seventy-three dollars, quite a sum of money in 1878. After that he began to hang around the pool halls that dotted Pittsburgh's landscape. He was fascinated by the way horse races were broadcast over telegraph wires to pool halls where men could place bets and collect if they won. He began to listen to and keep logs of the races. Some historians believe that he may have been the first gambler to do so, but there is no way to know for sure. In 1879, one year after he began to study horse racing, he made his first bet on a horse. His pick was Gabriel to win at the Brighton Beach Racetrack at Coney Island. Gabriel did win. Smith went home thirty-five dollars richer, but this was just the beginning. Just as he had the uncanny knack for picking win-

ners at cockfights, so he could consistently pick winners at the pool hall when it came to the ponies.

As his winnings began to mount, he quit his job at the cork factory, but did not tell his mother until she found five thousand dollars stuffed under his mattress. When she confronted him, he pointed out that he did not consider his actions as gambling, because he worked very hard at studying the horses and odds before placing his bets. His winnings, he felt, were his wages for his efforts. Her disapproval of his actions did nothing to deter

him. Instead his wagers began to increase and so did his winnings. By 1885, he had amassed a \$100,000 fortune. It was that year that he decided to see a horse race firsthand rather than just bet at the pool halls. The first race he attended was nothing less than the Kentucky Derby. George felt that Joe Cotton would win, and he did. Smith did not bet, because the horse was only offering four to five odds. During his lifetime, he rarely bet at odds of less than three to one.

George moved to Chicago where he wasn't known. He found Pittsburgh bookies would drop the odds as soon as he wanted to bet. It was here that William "Silver Haired" Riley, a noted pool hall owner, gave George the nickname "Pittsburgh Phil," because he was from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Philadelphia

was the other big city in Pennsylvania. Phil was short for Philadelphia. Silver Hair felt that George needed a nickname to distinguish his bets from a roomful of other Smiths. The new name stuck, and from that point forward, George Smith became known as Pittsburgh Phil.

Soon Pittsburgh Phil became known throughout Chicago as one of the biggest horse bettors in town. When he was twenty-five he pushed on to New York, where his skill at picking winners continued to build his fame and his fortune. His winnings at this point were already \$200,000. Here he began to purchase and race his own horses, using the name Pleasant Valley Stable.

Those who knew him, described Pittsburgh Phil as a solemn, shy man, who never showed emotion, seldom spoke, never smiled even when he won, or was sad or angry even when he lost. When he did speak it was most likely at the racetrack where he spent much of his time talking to stable hands, sports writers, jockeys, and others associated with racing. Here he gathered information to help him calculate his bets. He once won \$116,000 in a single race setting a record for that time.

In 1902, he was barred from the racetrack when his jockey



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began to lose some suspicious races. Phil was accused of throwing races, an accusation he strongly denied; however, this did not deter him from placing his bets. He would hire men, he dubbed “commissioners” to gather information and bet for him. Sometimes he would spend up to one thousand dollars per day on this practice. Pinkerton detectives were hired by the racetracks to follow Pittsburgh Phil and his commissioners, who would have to disguise themselves. Sometimes his commissioners were called “beards,” because of these disguises.

Pittsburgh Phil did not enjoy being in the spotlight, but reporters followed him around. His name frequently appeared in newspapers across the United States and at least once in Canada.

In late 1904, Smith went to a sanitarium for tuberculosis in Asheville, North Carolina, where he would live out his remaining days. Here he never complained or showed any kind of emotion. On January 31, 1905, Pittsburgh Phil asked his doctor to be honest and tell him how things looked. The doctor responded that within twenty-four hours he would be dead. Knowing that the doctor was a gambler, Phil offered him a bet. If the doctor would write a check for \$5,000, he would give two to one odds that he would still be alive after twenty-four hours. Seeing that it meant so much to Phil, the doctor took the bet. Each man placed his check on the night stand next to Phil’s bed. Twenty-four and one half hours later Phil died clutching the two checks and wearing a smile that stretched from ear to ear. It was the only time he was known to smile.



NEIGHBORHOODS IN THE WINGS

City Society highlights CASGED neighborhoods

by John Canning

With support from the Buhl Foundation and a crowd-sourcing program of the SPROUT Fund, the Allegheny City Society conducted two tours of the Community Alliance of Spring Garden and East Deutschtown (CASGED) neighborhood. This is the Society’s first program focusing on those communities of the North Side that have a great history but are often not the location of “house tours.”

On Saturday, June 6, morning and afternoon tour groups looked at the history and the potential for future development in the Spring Garden Valley and East Deutschtown. After gathering at St. Michael’s and All Angels Church in Spring Garden, the tours moved through all sections of this very historic section of Old Allegheny City.

Stopping at the Neu Kirche arts center on Madison Avenue, Wigle Whiskey in Spring Garden, and the Heinz Lofts, formerly parts of the Heinz plant, participants saw several wonderful examples of adaptive reuse of historic structures. Many thanks to those who took part in this first venture of our “Neighborhoods in the Wings” series and to those who supported this event in our first crowd-sourcing endeavor.



G.E. Smith’s mausoleum in Uniondale Cemetery. The statue atop of the mausoleum shows him holding a racing form in his right hand.



2015 CASSATT ART AWARD

Program at the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild
by Amelia Gehron

On May 6, the 2015 Mary Cassatt art award was presented to two North Side art students at the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild theatre. The award was announced live during the award ceremony. The Allegheny City Society gives two \$50.00 checks to talented art students selected by their instructors. This year awardees are Emma Kennedy from Brighton Rd. and Breanna Stanton from N. Fairmont Street. We wish the awardees the best of luck with their future schooling plans.

EVENT AT WIGLE'S

An Old Fashioned Evening in Spring Garden

Over the past year or so the former Ballestrairi Produce building on Spring Garden Avenue has changed into the warehouse and production center of Wigle Whiskey. Wigle, named for one of the distillers arrested in the Whiskey Rebellion of the 1790s, is not only making a name for itself as a local distiller, but is also producing some fine flavored bitters, the distinct flavor for any Old Fashioned or Manhattan.

A century ago, one David Hostetter, who lived at the corner of Western Avenue and Bidwell Street, produced, from his secret recipe, great quantities of his famous bitters that were advertised and sold throughout the country. Hostetter's Bitters business enabled the man to become one of Allegheny City's multi-millionaires.

On Wednesday the September 2, the Allegheny City Society will host a celebratory event at Wigle's Spring Garden location. There will be an opportunity for folks to learn about Wigle and David Hostetter, make their own bottle of bitters, and enjoy some great music and snacks.

Look for a special mailing about this early September event, but circle it on your calendar now.

