

THE ALLEGHENY CITY SOCIETY

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# REPORTER DISPATCH

Journal of Old Allegheny History and Lore

## Celebrating 175th Year

### Allegheny's Calvary United Methodist Church

David Grinnell

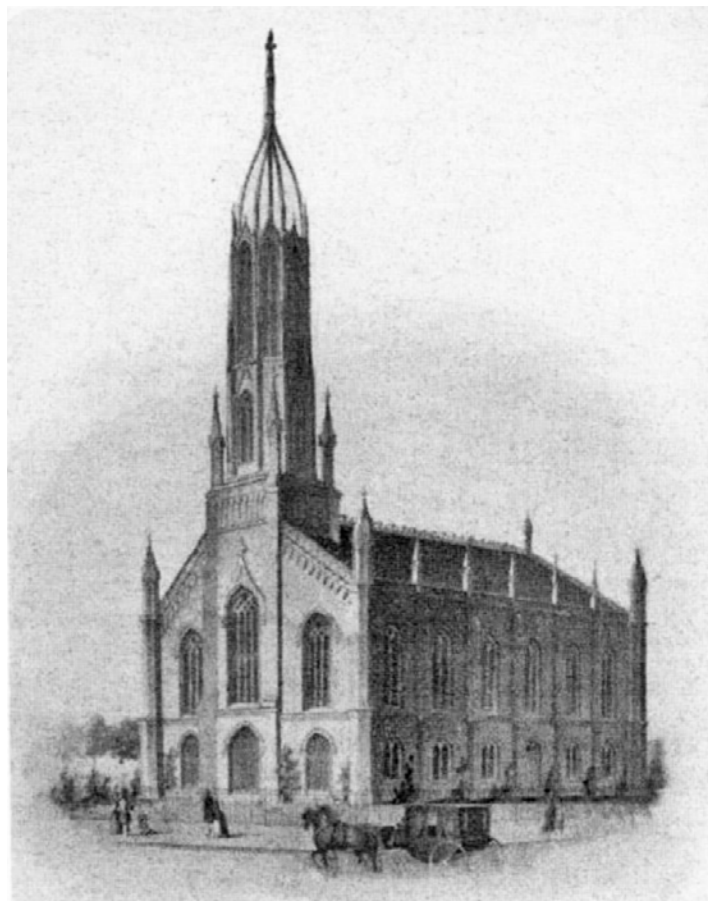
It was a great fire that destroyed the block along Penn Avenue between 7th and 8th Streets in the late evening of May 5, 1891. It started at the Grocers Supply and Storage Company's seven-story building on 7th Street, and spread down the block destroying the impressive Christ Methodist Episcopal Church and causing major damage to the Pittsburgh Female College, located directly behind the church. The brick walls of the Grocers Supply tumbled dangerously to the street, as did the tower and massive bell from old Christ M. E. Church. Many more commercial structures were destroyed, as were six dwelling houses along 8th Street—even the Second Presbyterian Church was in jeopardy. Thousands crowded the streets to witness the destruction throughout the night and into the next morning. How many became homeless is not recorded in the newspaper accounts, but needless to say, the fire affected the whole city.

Built in 1853, Christ M. E. Church was a magnificent structure—a single-spired Gothic styled church that looked like a new Methodist “cathedral” compared to the small “back woods” Methodist meeting houses typically found throughout the American frontier and in its urban centers. The congregation's organizers included prominent commercial and professional leaders of Pittsburgh. Christ Church was a “pewed” church in which numbered pews were sold or rented to members of the church at an established price, depending on their location in the sanctuary! The seeds for the creation of this grand edifice, filled with members of the growing entrepreneurial families of this growing urban city, were planted by Bishop Matthew Simpson.

At its first worship service following the fire, the pastor, Dr. G. W. Izer, said, “We are met this morning amid unfamiliar scenes, yet, by the grace of God, we are met, and our meeting

with such good courage is proof that though in distress we are not in despair. Christ Church cannot be burned down; the edifice is not the church, but the living membership is the church.”

Following the destruction of Christ Church decisions needed to be made. The question of whether to rebuild on the Penn Avenue site or relocate to a new site was quickly resolved. An expanding business district around the Penn Avenue site was an important consideration. Just three weeks after the fire,



The original Christ Methodist Episcopal Church at the corner of Penn Avenue and Hancock Street (now Eighth Street) in Pittsburgh



The church was designed by the Kansas City firm of Vrydaugh & Shepherd in 1892. Martin Vrydaugh, the son of an immigrant Flemish architect and the chief designer of the church, eventually came to Pittsburgh and went into partnership locally with T.B. Wolfe, who had been the supervising architect on Calvary while it was building...

Basically, judged by any standards, the design of Calvary has neither integrity nor coherence; it is actually a pastiche of medieval features. However, it is pre-eminently a document of its own day, and it seems to be the religious counterpart of the millionaire mansions that once were its near neighbours....

Calvary is the standard Protestant auditorium church, such as might be found in any large American city, but its elegance of execution lifts it to a higher plane. It is, as it were, the apotheosis of the type. There is nothing else quite like it in Pittsburgh....

James D. Van Trump, "Texas-Gargoyles and Preservation: Calvary Methodist Church on Pittsburgh's North Side," in *Life and Architecture in Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: PH&LF 1983).

the Board of Trustees decided that the proceeds of the sale of the real estate, and the insurance, be held in two equal parts for the purpose of forming two new congregations to serve two of the area's most dynamically growing residential communities: one in the East End of the City of Pittsburgh and the second in the City of Allegheny.

Thus, on May 18, 1893 the cornerstones were laid for both Christ Methodist Episcopal Church (now First United Methodist Church) in the Pittsburgh's East End, and Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church in Allegheny City. Out of the ashes of the disastrous fire of 1891 there arose two great churches.

Bishop Charles H. Fowler officiated at the ceremonies; Calvary's beginning at 8 pm, featuring the singing of hymns, prayers, an address by Rev. Charles A. Holmes (of the Arch Street M.E. Church in Allegheny), followed by a message from Bishop Fowler who then laid the cornerstone. More than 500 attended the service and by the time the construction of Calvary Church was finished it was to have cost \$250,000.

Calvary United Methodist Church today has experienced many congregational mergers. In 1893, when Calvary was born out of the ashes of Christ Church, Allegheny City counted ten Methodist Episcopal congregations: Arch Street, North Avenue, Buena Vista Street, Union, Ohio Street (German), Simpson Chapel, Riverside (later California Avenue), Linden Street (later Perrysville Avenue), Merrill (African-American in Manchester), and North End (on Bonvue Street).

Calvary was located in the center of a thriving neighborhood that counted many Gilded Age industrialists as its neighbors and members. While members of the family of Joseph Horne and his first wife, Mary Elizabeth Shea, would hold memberships between both the Christ and Calvary congregations, some families, like those of Charles Cooke Scaife and his wife Priscilla Verner, would make Calvary their new church home.

In 1919, The Union M.E. Congregation from the Manchester neighborhood merged with Calvary. Union congregation traces its founding back to 1846 when the Borough of Manchester was still a municipality separate from Allegheny City. The building that housed the Union Congregation still stands today at Manhattan Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, where it remains an architecturally significant centerpiece to the surrounding neighborhood.

In 1931 the original Buena Vista Street M.E. Congregation merged with Calvary. That Congregation originated from the founding of the South Commons M.E. Church (1838), which was located adjacent to the Pennsylvania Canal. By 1885, this location had become densely populated with industrial and transportation facilities, inhibiting the congregation's growth. They constructed a new church edifice on Buena Vista Street. Following the merger with Calvary, the Buena Vista Street building was sold to the African-American M.E. congregation that had formed in the Charles Street Valley and was part of the segregated Washington Annual Conference of the Central



Jurisdiction of the M.E. denomination. Thus, a second congregation known as Buena Vista Street M.E. Church was born.

During the decades of the 1960s–1980s, inner-city neighborhoods experienced tremendous tensions and instability. Fortunately, Calvary Church, lead by Rev. William Burdick (1967–1971) and Rev. John Garvin (1971–1975), focused its ministry to the needs of the neighborhood and created energetic programs that were headquarter at the Community House located next to the church. They purchased a deteriorating house across the street and helped to restore it, leading to more revitalization of the immediate neighborhood. Likewise, following the construction of North View Heights, Calvary’s leadership helped to establish a congregation within the housing development to serve the needs of its residence. During this time, the small congregation at Calvary continued to focus on neighborhood social issues and was able to keep the doors of the church open. Since 1988, the Allegheny Historic Preservation Society

(AHPS) has partnered with Calvary Church to preserve the historic structure that has been home to the congregation since 1893. AHPS raised funds to restore the ceilings, historic lighting, and the magnificent Tiffany and other stained glassed windows throughout the building. Thus, today Calvary has become a destination for those interested in the preservation of sacred places, those looking for a historic venue to celebrate weddings, and for visitors from around the world seeking to experience the sacred music and worship that a historic church provides.

On April 14, 2019, Calvary joined the members of First Methodist Church to celebrate the 125th Anniversary of their common heritage in recognition of their cornerstone laying. These two sister churches, Calvary United Methodist Church and First United Methodist Church, both are remarkable masterpieces of church architecture. As official “Reconciling congregations,” they are a vital part of the United Methodist urban ministry in Pittsburgh. Let the celebrations continue!

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## ACS Annual Meeting

### Members and friends gather for yearly event

John Canning

It was on April 13, 1840 that the City of Allegheny was established in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. To honor that founding, the Allegheny City Society holds its annual meeting as close to that date as possible. The 2019 Annual Meeting of the Society was held on the evening of April 16 at the Byzantine Catholic Seminary of Saints Cyril and Methodius on Perrysville Avenue. Prior to the beginning of the evening program, Rev. Robert Pipta, Rector of the Seminary, shared with us a short history of the seminary and invited us to visit their magnificent chapel following our program.

As part of the brief business meeting of the Society, several new members to the Board of Directors were welcomed and elected: Carole Ashbridge, Craig Britcher, and Jon Klosinski.

President Ruth McCartan gave a brief report on recent “walk and talk” programs sponsored by the Society, as well as a preview of plans for upcoming events to round out 2019. She also reported on the work that new Board member, Jon Klosinski, has undertaken to preserve the hundreds of personal letters and notes sent by North Side WWII service men and women that were placed in the ACS archives several years ago.

Over 40 members and guests shared in a delightful presentation by Todd Wilson PE on the “Bridges of Allegheny.” Wilson described the story of bridge design and construction that developed at different locations in Allegheny City/North Side from the early 19th century to the present. In this presen-

tation he incorporated history with engineering developments, and architectural detail. This program was also done with a great degree of human interest. The Q-and-A period following Wilson’s presentation spoke to the author/engineer/historian’s ability to capture the interest in his topic.

As always, delicious snacks and libations added to the pleasant atmosphere that is always part of our Annual Meeting.



Detail of the iconostasis (icon screen) in the chapel at the Seminary of Saints Cyril and Methodius



## Lois Weber Marker Unveiled

**Celebrating the 140th birthday of Allegheny City's own Hollywood director**

Tom Wilson

Like most days in early June, the weather on June 13 was rather unsettled. But the Allegheny City Society, the Heinz History Center, The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh Allegheny Branch, and the Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission would not be deterred from celebrating the 140th birthday of Allegheny City's own Hollywood director, Lois Weber, and unveiling a Pennsylvania Historical marker outside the site of her birthplace on Federal Street.

Lois Weber produced, directed, wrote or starred in over 300 films in a career spanning 1908-1934. Of those, only about 20 films survive. At her peak, she was the top-earning director in Hollywood (readers of the *Reporter Dispatch* will recall her biographical profile from the Spring 2012 issue).

Lauren Uhl of the Heinz History Center organized the Lois Weber Day celebrations, hoping to bring more public awareness to this almost forgotten film pioneer. Featured speakers included Shelley Stamp (who recently published a biography: *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood*), and Illeana Douglas from Turner Classic Movies.

Descendants of the Weber and Snaman families, as well as a Lois Weber re-enactor (in the form of the lovely Brittany Tague) were on hand to draw long-overdue attention to Lois Weber's life and work. Mayor Peduto's representative, Gloria Forouzan, read the official proclamation making June 13, 2019, Lois Weber Day in the city of Pittsburgh.

The celebrations continued into the evening with a presentation at the Heinz History Center where Illeana Douglas and Shelley Stamp discussed Lois Weber's body of work as a director and an innovator in early American film. That "conversation with Illeana Douglas and Shelley Stamp has been uploaded to the Heinz History Center's YouTube channel:

<https://youtu.be/gaTAV1SVRG>

## Support the Avery Bell Project

**All donations through ioby Pittsburgh are matched**

ACS is working with the fundraising group, ioby Pittsburgh, on a project to place a monument near the East Commons that will honor Charles Avery and the Avery Institute, once located in that section of Allegheny City. When the Avery Institute building was levelled to make way for highway development, the PH&LF secured and protected the "Avery Bell" from being lost or destroyed. This historic artifact has been offered to the Society, and we have undertaken a project to create a design and secure a location for the mounting of the "Bell."

The Buhl Foundation has given support to ioby in a way that enables them to match a dollar for every dollar donation

made toward the research and development of this project. We are fortunate, indeed, that "The Buhl" is supportive of many North Side projects such as this one.

Ruth McCartan and David Grinnell have taken the lead in working with several community groups as well as the PH&LF and Observatory Hill resident/architect/historian, Jeremiah Brooks on the project.

This Avery Bell project will include a number of educational programs focusing on the significant role that the Avery Institute played in the story of Allegheny City/North Side.

We encourage all ACS members to support this project by donating at the following e-address: [ioby.org/Avery](https://ioby.org/Avery)

# Walking Tours 2019

## Highlighting people and places in Allegheny City

Ruth McCartan

At the January annual retreat of the ACS Board of Directors, it was decided to give a tour every month on some aspect or neighborhood of Allegheny City/North Side.

February's celebration of Black History Month gave us the theme for our first ever tour entitled "Forgotten Black History in Allegheny." (see the Spring 2019 *Reporter Dispatch* for a more detailed description of this tour).

March featured Women's History with a twist "Allegheny Female Artists and Authors." Impressionist painter, Mary Cassatt and writer Gertrude Stein both born in Allegheny were featured but so was muckraking journalist, Ida Tarbell and dancer, Martha Graham who both got here as soon as their families could get them to Allegheny City. Tom Wilson, told of Alleghenian filmmaker Lois Webber an early woman director who was just honored with an historical marker outside the Carnegie Library on Federal Street. The highlight of the walk was stopping at City Books on Galveston and talking with a current Allegheny author Kathleen George. Her book entitled *Johnstown Girls* is wonderful historical fiction (selection for the upcoming ACS Book Club discussion in September; see sidebar). Once again the weather did not help even with snow flurries and freezing rain over 20 people came out to walk.

May's historic mural tour gave us a real challenge. It wasn't the weather this time, but the noise from the traffic on Route 28. A special thank-you goes to Board member Tom Wilson for being the "sound guy." Hundreds of thousands of people go speeding by the walkway retaining wall of Route 28 never seeing the black-and-white historical images depicting the story of the community that once surrounded the road. All lost except for the images sand blasted in the wall which shows a Croatian bookstore, a Pennsylvania canal boat, the Avery Institute, the billet shearing machine of the Carlin factory, and the Federal, Perrysville streetcar. At the end of the walkway is a memorial to the first Croatian Roman Catholic church in America, St. Nicholas. Tour goers learned of the lost prevention fight to save the church, as explained by Jack Schmidt who was involved in the campaign. The Society would be remiss if the two international businesses found along this stretch of the Allegheny River, Pittsburgh Wool and the Heinz factories were not mentioned. New board member Carole Ashbridge told of H.J. Heinz and his 57 varieties that gave hundreds of locals steady employment. David Rothenstein, author and professor gave a short history of the Pittsburgh Wool factory. No walk in this section of Allegheny would be complete without a stop at Penn Brewery. We hope to video this tour and post it on the ACS website at a later date.

In June, we returned to a site that we toured last year: Riverview Park, Allegheny's urban green space. For once, the weather cooperated with us and it was a beautiful evening for a walk down the Wissahickon Trail. Park Ranger Nancy Schaffer guided our group down the ravine trail telling about the wildlife found in this park and the history of the former nature center. In 1924, a full-time naturalist provided year-round learning on botany and park wildlife. Mayor William M. Kennedy who dedicated the park in 1894 joined us and read this speech from that glorious day elaborating on the wonders of Allegheny City. While standing outside the Allegheny Observatory with the sun setting looking out over the hills of Allegheny City, Craig Britcher gave us the history of the building and the great men who worked there.

More tours are planned you can always join us by checking our website, Facebook page, or meet-up for upcoming Allegheny History walks in October and November. A Union Dale cemetery tour is scheduled for September.

## Allegheny City Book Club

Thursday, September 12 at 7pm

Unitarian House at 1110 Resaca Place

(behind Allegheny Unitarian Universalist Church)

This is the first meeting of the new Allegheny City Book Club! We'll be reading local history and local authors with gatherings to discuss them on the second Thursday of every other month.

Our initial read is *The Johnstown Girls* by Kathleen George. The book is widely available from bricks-and-mortar and online booksellers, as well as the Carnegie Library system.

Our location may move around, but on Sept 12, we'll meet at Unitarian House in the Mexican War Streets neighborhood of Pittsburgh's North Side.

"Edgar-finalist George successfully moves to period fiction with this evocative, historically themed whodunit, set in 1989, as the great Johnstown, Pa, flood approaches its centennial.... George offers complex and rewarding storytelling that pays tribute to not only the magnitude of the disastrous flood but also the resilience of Johnstown and its citizens."

—*Publishers Weekly*

A program of the Allegheny City Society,  
learn more at [www.alleghenycity.org](http://www.alleghenycity.org).

Questions? Contact Mark Tomlinson at  
[info@alleghenycity.org](mailto:info@alleghenycity.org)





Allegheny City Society  
PO Box 100255  
Pittsburgh PA 15233-0255



## UNION DALE CEMETERY TOUR

Visit selected sites with ACS on Saturday, September 21

Go back in time as the Allegheny City Society sponsors a walk through this serene, tree-covered cemetery on the North Side on Saturday, September 21. We'll be hearing stories about 21 notable people buried there while walking through Division Two bounded by Brighton Road and Marshall Avenue.

Did you know that Union Dale was established in what was once the rural outlands of Allegheny City? The First Associate Reformed Church created the Mount Union Cemetery on 10 acres above the city. Another cemetery, Hilldale, was established right across the road. Both were created as part of the rural cemetery movement. It was the custom to visit cemeteries and picnic there to get away from crowded streets and industrial areas.

In 1846, the two were combined into the 96-acre Union Dale of today. For more than 150 years, historic notables as well as Civil War and other veterans have been buried in its rural surroundings.

The Division Two and cemetery office entrance is on Brighton Road right above the Breadworks. Parking will be along the driveway near the main building. The tour will gather in the Chapel at 9:30 am. The cost is \$10 per person, payable when you arrive. Expect to tour for possibly two hours, 10 am-noon.

**Please Note:** we will be climbing up and down hills as well as walking on uneven ground over the course of the tour.