

# The Lackawanna Historical Society BULLETIN

Vol. 10, No. 1

October 1977



THE GEORGE H. CATLIN MEMORIAL HOUSE

## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF LACKAWANNA COUNTY

Lackawanna County is the 67th and last county to be created in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. We will celebrate the Centennial of its establishment next year in 1978. The story of the long fight to bring about the creation of this county is an interesting and fascinating one for it was only after a 40 year struggle that we were able finally to break away from the mother county of Luzerne.

Luzerne County was established in 1786 and originally embraced most of the territory of north-eastern Pennsylvania, including all of the present day Luzerne, Lackawanna, Susquehanna, Wyoming, Columbia, Lycoming and parts of Bradford, Montour and Sullivan counties. Gradually these areas were carved off to form new counties without opposition because the land was principally farming country. However the political powers at the county seat — Wilkes-Barre — were determined to keep the remaining upper end of the county because of its wealth in natural resources and tax revenues. The continual growth of Scranton, Carbondale and the other mining towns of the Valley and the difficulty and inconvenience of going all the way to Wilkes-Barre to transact all legal business made a new county in the upper end a growing necessity.

As early as 1839 Joseph Griffin, the first "upper Ender" to be elected to the State Legislature presented a proposal for a new county but it was easily defeated by the more powerful political forces of the "lower Enders" as they were then called. In 1843 Hon. William Merrifield of Hyde Park was elected to the legislature on the new county issue. He influenced the House to pass a new County bill but it was killed in the Senate by a tie vote. Next in 1852 Hon. A. B. Dunning introduced a new county bill which again passed the House but was defeated in the Senate by the influence of Hon. Charles Buckalew of Wilkes-Barre. By this time the "lower Enders" were alarmed at the persistence for a new county and were determined to kill off the agitation. Accordingly they were able to have a Constitutional amendment adopted in 1857 which provided that before a new county could be created, the proposal must be submitted to a vote by the entire county. It looked as if the opposition had won. But again in 1863 the two representatives from Scranton succeeded in having the House and Senate pass a new county bill only to have it defeated by a majority of 3000 when it was submitted to the voters of the county.

Finally in 1873 a new State Constitution was adopted which eliminated the provision regarding new counties. The effort now began again in earnest. In 1878 Atty. Edward Merrifield, whose father had fought for the issue in the forties, was delegated by the Scranton Bar Association to draft a new county bill for presentation to the legislature. Hon. James O. Kierstead presented it in the House and was ably assisted by Hon. Albert I. Akerly, David M. Jones and John B. Smith, the other representatives from this end of Luzerne County. A number of other persevering lawyers and citizens spent considerable time in Harrisburg gaining support and votes, among them: Attorneys Col. F. L. Hitchcock, Edward N. Willard, Frederick W. Gunster, Aretus H. Winton, as well as Dr. Benjamin H. Throop, Hon. Joseph A. Scranton, R. H. McKune, George Sanderson, Lewis Pughe, H. S. Pierce, U. G. Schoonmaker, Corydon H. Wells, Matthew W. Clark, John E. Barrett, John H. Powell and others. Here at home in spite of some opposition to the effort, the "Scranton Republican" and the Scranton Board of Trade helped to raise public funds and sentiment in favor of the movement. Finally in April 1878 the petition passed the legislature but before it could become a law, the electors of the upper end must vote their approval. The Governor issued a special proclamation ordering a special election to be held on August 13. The election in the proposed district resulted in 7629 voting for the new county and

1986 voting against. These results were quickly transmitted to Harrisburg where Gov. John F. Hartranft immediately issued a proclamation dated August 13, 1878 declaring the new county of "Lackawanna" established with Scranton as the county seat. That evening the victory was celebrated in a brilliant manner in Scranton and the other towns of the valley. Church bells were rung, mine whistles blown, bonfires lighted, cannon thundered and the streets were thronged with rejoicing people.

In due time the initial county officers were appointed and the first county offices and courts were located in Washington Hall (where the Sampter Building now stands) and above the Second National Bank across the street on Lackawanna Avenue. These served the new county until the Lackawanna Iron and Coal Company donated an empty lot bounded by Washington and Adams Avenues and Linden and Spruce Streets (which had originally been a pond and swamp) for county offices and a public park. Ground was broken for the present imposing Court House in 1881 costing the then large sum of \$150,000 and was dedicated on March 24, 1884.

Plans are underway to appropriately celebrate the centennial of our county during 1978. The Historical Society has been charged by the County officials with planning this event and will welcome all ideas and support for this forthcoming event.

WPL

## OCTOBER PROGRAM

The October program meeting will be held on Thursday, October 20 at 8 o'clock in the Catlin House and will feature Kenn Stryker-Rodda, South Orange, New Jersey who will talk on Genealogy and Family History. Since the Bi-Centennial and the TV series "Roots" there has been a tremendous renewed interest in looking up one's ancestors. Our speaker is a well known genealogist and historian and will make the program a very interesting one.

## NOVEMBER PROGRAM

Thursday, November 15 — 8 P.M.

Atty. Philip V. Mattes, a Vice President of the Historical Society and a well known lawyer and former City Solicitor, who will celebrate his 90th birthday on October 14, will discuss from his own knowledge and experience the "Origins of Lackawanna County".

## DECEMBER PROGRAM

Tuesday, December 13 — 8 P.M.

Christmas choral music and a slide presentation entitled "Christmas in Williamsburg". A special exhibit of antique children's toys will be arranged for the entire month of December.

## STAFF

Rev. William P. Lewis, former President of the Society, began his duties as new Executive Director on November 1, 1976. He is responsible for giving general supervision of the total work of the Society, including program planning, public lectures and speaking engagements, fund raising and membership recruitment, staff supervision, exhibits and research, bulletins and publications, etc. He is ably assisted by Mrs. Eugene Vellela, our genial staff secretary since October 1973 and Mr. and Mrs. James McLane who have taken such good care of the house and grounds since July 1975.

## IMPROVEMENTS

The Building and Grounds Committee, Atty. H. R. Van Deusen, Chm. has been responsible for the installation of a very sensitive ADT Security System in the house during the fall of 1976. We are grateful to the Five Star Detective Agency for giving us gratuitous surveillance of the grounds every night. The rain gutters have been cleaned, a front entrance column rebuilt, rear areas have been blacktopped and all new electric light switches have been installed in the house, also our heating system has been repaired.

The House Committee, Mrs. T. Archer Morgan, Chm. has been responsible for the complete renovation of the Kitchen including new painting, new linoleum, new kitchen sink and refrigerator and new lighting. This work was accomplished through a generous contribution given to the Society by Trustee Frederick J. Platt. The House Committee also had three tables repaired, several rugs and curtains cleaned. An Inventory of the Contents of the Second and Third Floors has been made to be added to the complete inventory and appraisal which had been made previously of the contents of the First floor.

A number of new members have joined the Society. Our present membership totals 305. A number of groups and organizations have held meetings in the Catlin House, including the Architectural Heritage Society (AHA) which is a young organization endeavoring to raise awareness of the City's architectural and historical heritage.

"We were all saddened on July 5 by the untimely death of one of our Trustees - Carl Ellis - art curator of the Everhart Museum."

## LACKAWANNA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### OFFICERS

President - Dr. John L. Earl  
First Vice President - George A. Broadbent  
Second Vice President - Atty. Kenneth A. Rhodes  
Third Vice President - Miss Jane Dakin  
Secretary - Miss Florence Gillespie  
Treasurer - Albert F. Fries  
Assistant Treasurer - Charles J. Weber  
Executive Director - William P. Lewis  
Staff Secretary - Mrs. Eugene Vellela

### TRUSTEES

Dr. John L. Earl	Alfred E. Breen
Atty. George Houck	Miss Jane Dakin
Mrs. Albert G. Isaacs	Carl Ellis
W. Kenneth Moffat	Mrs. Henry Friedman
Mrs. T. Archer Morgan	Albert F. Fries
Mrs. James K. Peck, Sr.	Frederick J. Platt
Atty. Paul H. Price	Miss Margaret Y. Richards
Miss Marie Smith	Atty. Kenneth A. Rhodes
Charles J. Weber	Everett D. Thomas

Miss Margaret Briggs  
George A. Broadbent  
Atty. Franklin P. Gelder  
Miss Florence Gillespie  
Atty. Willard Henkelman  
Atty. Raymond T. Law  
Atty. Philip V. Mattes  
William I. Pentecost  
Atty. Henry R. Van Deusen, Jr.  
Mrs. Robert Y. Moffat  
Mrs. J. Elmer Williams

LACKAWANNA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

CATLIN HOUSE

232 MONROE AVENUE

SCRANTON, PENNSYLVANIA 18510

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
Permit No. 56  
Scranton, Pa.