

History of the Western Pennsylvania Genealogical Society

Forty years ago, the Western Pennsylvania Genealogical Society was formally organized having started with fifteen interested local genealogists/family historians who met at the home of Mrs. Helen Harriss in June and October of 1973. They focused their discussions on establishing a genealogical society in Pittsburgh with the hope that they could generate enough interest to draw at least fifty members by the next fall. That goal was exceeded in September 1974 with a membership of 120 (plus associates), representing 16 states and 1 foreign country.

The fifteen people who set into motion the creation of the society were: Mr. Robert S. Armstrong, Ms. Carol W. Bell, Miss Eunice Elliot, Mrs. Helen Harriss, Mrs. E. Val Horner, Dr. Elizabeth Johnston, Mrs. Gretchen Knowles, Mrs. Billie LeBlanc, Mrs. Jean S. Morris, Mrs. Lillian Moss, Mr. and Mrs. Harry B. Scott, Mr. and Mrs. Robert B. Simmons, and Mrs. Virginia Snowden.

Helen Harriss accepted the position of Acting Chairperson and Jean Morris, that of Acting Secretary. A Bylaws Committee was constituted with Chairman Robert Armstrong, Helen Harriss, Jean Morris, Harry B. Scott, and Virginia Snowden.

On the 13th of December 1973, the Bylaws were adopted and the following officers installed: President, Helen Harriss; Vice President, Robert Armstrong; Secretary, Nell Herchenroether; Treasurer, E. Val Horner; and Directors, Gretchen Knowles, Robert Simmons, Jr., and Virginia Snowden.

The society started out with four committees: Membership, Rita Gerardine and Betty Rankin; Program, Ruth Salisbury; Social, Dorothy B. Braden; and Ways and Means, Betty Wall. The Membership, Program, and Ways and Means Chairs were retained for the 1974-1975 membership year while Helen Wilson became the new Social Chairperson. WPGS added new committees with Samuel C. Reed, Jr. chairing the Editorial Committee; Edgar R. Taylor, Jr., Publicity; and Eunice Elliot, Special Projects.

As stated in the Bylaws, Article II, the purpose of the society was and is "to foster an interest in genealogy and related fields among its members and the general public; to preserve and safeguard manuscripts, books, relics and artifacts relating to genealogy; and to hold meetings for the instruction and entertainment of its members and the general public."

Jots from the Point, the monthly (September through June) newsletter of the society, first edited by Helen Harriss, and was published early in 1974. Mrs. Harriss remained editor through June 1978, returning a year later and continuing in that capacity until May 1996. Linda Mamaux served in the interim. Suzanne M. Johnston was editor from August 1996 until June of 2000, when Alexis K. Olkowski accepted the position. In 1997, the National Genealogical Society selected *Jots from the Point* as runner-up in their Genealogical Newsletter Contest. Entered in the 2001 International Newsletter Contest sponsored by the Ellen Payne Odom Genealogy Library and *The Family Tree*, the judges awarded *Jots* Honorable Mention in the Service to Readers Genealogical Society Newsletter category. Entered in the same contest in 2002, *Jots from the Point* received Third Place honors. In August of 2004, the *Jots* became a bi-monthly newsletter which was edited by Barbara Braden Guffey.

The Board soon recognized the need to establish the society as a nonprofit organization and Henry C. Herchenroether, Jr., an attorney and member, prepared a resolution that designated the Board of Directors as the committee to handle the process. The membership accepted the resolution on 30 May 1974 and received the Decree of Incorporation on 6 July 1974. Mr. Herchenroether's services and expenses were his gift to the society.

An election was held on 30 May 1974 and, on the recommendation of the Nominating Committee, the officers installed in December 1973 were retained for the 1974-1975 membership year with the exception of Robert Simmons who had moved to Utah. Samuel C. Reed, Jr. was chosen to fill the vacancy.

The first issue of the *Western Pennsylvania Genealogical Society Quarterly* appeared in August of 1974 with Samuel C. Reed, Jr. as editor. Robert S. Armstrong, Dorothy B. Braden, Helen Harriss, Kay Houser, Kenneth T. H. McFarland, Virginia Snowden, and Elizabeth R. Taylor comprising the Editorial Board. In addition to Mr. Reed, there have been three other editors over the thirty-five years: Dr. James H. Sterrett, Jean Morris and currently Suzanne M. Johnston.

From the beginning, the society held meetings in the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania (HSWP) building at 4338 Bigelow Boulevard, Pittsburgh. In 1973 and 1974, the rent was paid through the generosity of Gretchen Knowles. Today, meetings take place in the Lecture Hall at the Oakland Carnegie Library.

Dues for January through June 1974 were \$5.00 and \$3.00 for an associate. Dues for the full year, September 1974 through June 1975, were set at \$10.00 and \$5.00 for an associate. The society offered a Charter Membership for an additional gift of \$5.00 or more. Mrs. Barbara Armstrong prepared a certificate for those who contributed.

Robert Armstrong designed the seal of the society, which James McFarland executed. Mr. McFarland also created the original masthead for the *Jots from the Point* newsletter.

Many of the plans of the founding members were realized within a short time: classes in basic and advanced genealogy, research trips, workshops, a surname file, a library collection, and publications committee. The society organized interest groups for those members specializing in English/Welsh, German, and Irish research.

In November 1975, some members from Westmoreland County voted to meet locally as a chapter of WPGS. Jo Ann Lentcher became the first chairperson. Their meetings continued through June 1978 when the group dissolved; however, the participants remained as members of WPGS.

On 30 May 1986, WPGS received the Award of Merit from the National Genealogical Society "in recognition of distinguished work in American Genealogy".

WPGS has observed many milestones along the way. The Tenth Anniversary was highlighted by a dinner at the Parkway Center Inn on 14 October 1983; the guest speaker was Milton Rubincam, a distinguished American genealogist. During the Quindecennial Year of 1988-1989, the society invited past presidents to present programs through the year. The society marked the Twentieth Anniversary with a two-day seminar on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh from 22-23 July 1974. The theme: *Pittsburgh, The First Gateway to the West*.

On 25-26 June 1999, WPGS celebrated its Twenty-Fifth Anniversary with a conference entitled, *You've Got an Ancestor in Pennsylvania*, which 350 members from all over the country attended. The Keynote Speaker was Hank Jones; the Chairperson for the event was Barbara Braden Guffey.

The successful association with the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania ended when HSWP made plans to move to a new location, the proposed Pittsburgh History Center (Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center). Early in December 1994, the Bigelow Boulevard building was closed to the public excepting for Fridays and Saturdays. Members could gain admittance by appointment or for previously scheduled meetings. WPGS held its last meeting at that location 10 December 1994. In the interim, the society met in Trinity Cathedral, 325 Oliver Avenue, Pittsburgh PA.

On 14 March 1995, the late Robert B. Croneberger, Director of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (CLP), and Franze Atherton, President of WPGS, signed an agreement between WPGS and the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh that brought the library collection of WPGS to its new home in the CLP main library located at 4400 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh/Oakland. This agreement had been prepared with the assistance of Attorney Henry C. Herchenroether, Jr., a fellow WPGS member.

The "Great Move" to the Oakland Library was a tremendous undertaking directed and planned by Leslie Dunn assisted primarily by Suzanne Johnston, Jean Morris, Marilyn Holt, and Barbara Guffey. Ms. Dunn had spent months preparing for the relocation of WPGS collection by cataloging and labeling the society's books, which had been shelved with the HSWP collection. Under her direction, volunteers inventoried, relabeled, packed the books, unpacked them at the CLP, and helped shelve them in the stacks of the Pennsylvania Room as a separate WPGS collection. On 11 May 1995, WPGS held its first meeting in The Carnegie Lecture Hall.

In 2004, the WPGS collection moved from the second floor of the Carnegie Library to the new location of the Pennsylvania Room on the third floor, where the ever-growing collection will have more space and WPGS has an office. Many of the books and manuscript collection from the Soldiers and Sailors National Military Museum and Memorial were added to the Carnegie Library and WPGS collections early in 2004, due to the efforts of Diane Ragan.

In recognition of exceptional service to the society and/or their contributions to the field of genealogy, nine people have received WPGS Life Memberships, as follows:

- Mrs. Della Reagan Fischer, who was presented with the WPGS Honors Award for her body of work on 18th and 19th century Western Pennsylvania records.
- Helen Harriss, a founder and first President of WPGS, for her dedication to the organization of the society and her support over the years as an officer and editor of *Jots from the Point*.
- Lesle Dunn, a past president, for her tireless work in preparing for and carrying through the move to the Carnegie Public Library in Oakland.
- Jean S. Morris, a founding member, for her many years as an editor of the *Western Pennsylvania Genealogical Society Quarterly* and her contributions to the success of the society.
- G. Jean Gregord, for her work with the Publications Committee and First Families of Western Pennsylvania.
- Suzanne M. Johnston, for years of dedication to the society in many capacities and for First Families of Western Pennsylvania.
- Barbara Braden Guffey, twice past President, for her work organizing local and national conferences for WPGS.
- Phyllis Locke, for her guidance and diligent care of the society's financial and business affairs.
- Marilyn Holt for her leadership and continuing contribution of time, expertise, and service.
- Dorothy B. Braden, a founding member, for her lifetime dedication to the society and the book she compiled **Presbyterian Churches in Allegheny County** for the society.

First Families of Western Pennsylvania is a project that recognizes any WPGS member who is a documented descendent of a pioneer who settled in one of the 26 counties of Western Pennsylvania by 31 December 1810. The society recognizes new members yearly.

In 1999, the society used the money raised from the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Conference to buy a microfilm camera to preserve old records and started a Microfilming Committee with Kathy Kenna as Chair. Lesle Dunn contracted with The Library Corporation to place the WPGS library online, and the WPGS Board entered into an agreement with the National Genealogical Society to co-host their One Hundredth Anniversary Conference in Pittsburgh at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center.

Lois Foss helped reestablish our cooperative efforts with the Historical Society and worked with Jean Morris on updating *The Quarterly*. Audrey Iacone helped the society to obtain a domain name for our website, directed the redesign of the website (www.wpgs.org). Collaboration with the Historical Society as well as Soldiers and Sailors National Military Museum and Memorial increased. In 2002, the society formed an Archives Committee to help preserve the Allegheny County Photographs and Records that have been in storage for years.

May 2003 brought 1800+ visitors to Pittsburgh, as WPGS successfully hosted the National Genealogical Society 2003 Conference in the States, which marked the One Hundredth Anniversary of the National Genealogical Society. The theme was, ***Moving a Nation Westward***. Hundreds of volunteers helped to make this an interesting learning experience for all who came. Barbara Braden Guffey, WPGS President, was awarded the 2003 NGS Distinguished Service Award in recognition of her work as the Local Arrangement Chair. NGS also recognized Donna Booth, Jim Costello, Lesle Dunn, Jim Ellison, Marilyn Holt, Audrey Iacone, Suzanne Johnston, Shirley Kuntz, Phyllis Locke, Chuck Novak, Alexis Olkowski, Elissa Powell, and Diane Ragan for their significant efforts in support of this event.

In 2006, WPGS partnered with the Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania to present the first statewide All Pennsylvania Genealogy Conference at the Sheraton Station Square Hotel on September 29-30. Led by John Humphrey - Conference Chair and Barbara Guffey - Pittsburgh Chair the organizing committee was Lesle Dunn (volunteers), Phyllis Locke (accounting), Diane Ragan (registration), Suzanne Johnston (syllabus), Marilyn Holt (program), Janet McFarland (vendors), and Donna Booth (government and society liaison).

2010 found WPGS in partnership for a Conference with the Palatines to America at Sheraton Station Square on June 9 -11. It was titled ***"Kommen Sie wieder nach Pennsylvanien zurück!"*** (***"Come back to Pennsylvania again!"***). Barbara Braden Guffey was in charge of Local Arrangements, Ed Heinlein handled grants and arranging for German Musical Groups, Marilyn Holt set up the programs/seminars, Suzanne Johnston organized the syllabus and its publication while Jean Taylor took care of registrations. 150 people attended and had a very good time at the Conference as well as the Dinner Cruise.

For the 2013-2014 Society year, Robert Felton is serving as President of the Board of Directors with Debbie Kappas as President Elect for 2014-2015, Elaine Roebing serves as Recording Secretary, Nancy Romig is the Corresponding Secretary, and Barbara B Guffey is the Treasurer. The Board of Directors also has six directors Ronald Briskey, Lesle Dunn, Kathy Kenna, Marilyn Holt, Jean Taylor and Rebecca Kitchta Miller (Also Jots Editor).

WPGS has been fortunate in its leadership. The men and women who have held the office of President over the past forty years have built a strong society.

Mrs. Helen Harriss*	December 1973 - June 1975
Mr. Robert S. Armstrong *	July 1975 - June 1976
Mrs. Dorothy de Groat	July 1976 - June 1977
Mrs. Virginia Guttendorf *	July 1977 - June 1978
Mrs. Nell Herchenroether*	July 1978 - June 1979
Mrs. Naomi Quigg-Lennox	July 1979 - June 1980
Mrs. Virginia Patton*	July 1980 - June 1981
Mr. James Cyphers	July 1981 - June 1982
Mrs. Edna Murdoch *	July 1982 - June 1983
Mrs. Gladys Harper *	July 1983 - June 1984
Mr. Henry Hively	July 1984 - June 1985
Mrs. Jane Gwyer*	July 1985 - June 1986
Ms. Lesle Dunn	July 1986 - June 1987
Ms. Nancy Singleton	July 1987 - June 1988
Mr. Armor Murdoch *	July 1988 - June 1989
Mrs. Mary K. Lee	July 1989 - June 1990
Mr. Robert Whiteside*	July 1990 - June 1991
Mr. J. Clyde Miller	July 1991 - June 1992
Mr. James Fair	July 1992 - June 1993
Dr. Reid W. Stewart	July 1993 - June 1994
Mrs. Franze Atherton	July 1994 - June 1995
Brother Patrick F. Power	July 1995 - June 1996
Mrs. Mary Ellin Proehle	July 1996 - June 1997
Mrs. Elissa Scalise Powell	July 1997 - June 1998
Mrs. Marilyn Cocchiola Holt	July 1998 - June 1999
Ms. Barbara Braden Guffey	July 1999 - June 2000
Mrs. Lois Foss	July 2000 - June 2001
Mrs. Audrey Abbott Iacone	July 2001 - June 2002
Ms. Barbara Braden Guffey	July 2002 - June 2003
Ms. Diane Ragan	July 2003 - June 2004
Mr. J. Clyde Miller, III	July 2004 - June 2005
Ms. Donna Booth*	July 2005 - June 2006
Ms. Marilyn Cocchiola Holt	July 2006 - June 2007
Mrs. Carol Jo Henderson	July 2007 - June 2008
Mrs. Anne New	July 2008 - June 2009
Ms. Marilyn Cocchiola Holt	July 2009 - June 2010
Mrs. Anne New	July 2010 - June 2011
Mrs. Debbie Kapp	July 2011 - June 2012
Ms. Marilyn Cocchiola Holt	July 2012 - June 2013
Mr. Robert Felton	July 2013 - June 2014
Mrs. Debbie Kapp	July 2014 - June 2015

(*) Deceased

This society has surpassed the goals of the founders and continues to move ahead with the same spirit that our Western Pennsylvania ancestors used to build this part of the state. We think they would be proud of our efforts to preserve and relate family history.

Mrs. Dorothy B. Braden (member #8) wrote this history for the 25th Anniversary Conference in 1999 and revised it for the Pa Genealogy Conference in 2006. The 35th Anniversary Year in 2009 and the 40th Anniversary Year history in 2014 were added to the 25th history by Ms. Barbara Braden Guffey (member #2320), Dorothy's daughter.