



MGAHS Chairperson's Report

By Susan Hostetter

Inside this issue:


<i>MGAHS Chairperson's Report</i>	1
<i>A Hidden History</i>	2
<i>MGAHS Board and Advisors</i>	7
<i>Business Sponsors</i>	8

Dear Society Members,

Recently, I received an email from an Oklahoma resident who is the daughter of a man for whom Mount Gretna holds fond memories. "My father was a life guard at the Lake every summer as a teenager growing up in the 50s and 60s, and he often worked the spotlight for the dinner shows. Bernadette Peters was there at one time and called him *boy*. He hated that. We now live in Oklahoma, but when we go back to Gretna, he gets misty-eyed with the memories of Poppy Otto (Gene, Sr.), the Jigger Shop, and things that are not there anymore. The stories he has!" As you can see the Mount Gretna memories are spread far and wide and preserving memories is our mission. Do you have a Mount Gretna story to tell us? Contact us at info@mtgretnahistory.org or 717-964-1105—we would love to hear it. Our Research Library winter hours are by appointment.

This spring and summer have been very busy months at the Society. Events included presenting four historical programs, an antique appraisal fair, hosting our annual porch party, and two sold-out premiere showings of our new documentary, *Mt. Gretna: A Perennial Spirit*. Our volunteers continue to inventory Museum items and enter this data into the database, Past Perfect. We hosted special tours including a group of twenty from Emory Grove Campmeeting in Maryland. As a not-for-profit organization, we are working on obtaining more grant funding and have built new relationships with other local historical societies. In honor of Campmeeting and Chautauqua's 125th anniversary, an anniversary committee has been formed with planned events for various months in 2017. Visit us on Facebook. Our organization will soon offer a self-guided, GPS audio-visual walking tour of Mount Gretna.

We offered several new products for sale including the DVD documentary, a photo calendar, ceramic tiles, and the first edition of the *Mt. Gretna Review* featuring the life of J. Max Hark. We are selling colorful photographic notecards depicting the seasonal changes in Mt. Gretna and photographs by Madelaine Grey suitable for framing. The Museum exterior has been painted and we are working toward the restoration of the bell from Coleman's Park. To finish out the 2016 season, we recognized our wonderful volunteers at a reception in September. ***Thank you to our many supporters and volunteers who have helped make all these things happen!!***



A membership to the MGAHS is a great holiday gift for your friends and neighbors!

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A Hidden History: Robert H. Coleman's Railroads and Mt. Gretna Park

By Patricia Gible

Like many folks in our region, I like to walk on the Pennsylvania Rail-Trail. No matter the weather - rain, shine, or snow - a hike through the forest is a pleasurable way to get some exercise and enjoy the beautiful natural environment surrounding our village. As I enter the trail from the Mt. Gretna spur on Timber Road, I am often reminded that hidden behind the trees, scrub bushes, and grassy areas are the locations where Robert Habersham Coleman established his amusement park and railroads at the end of the 1800s. These areas played a pivotal role in Mt. Gretna's earliest history.

Robert H. Coleman was the great-grandson of iron furnace baron Robert Coleman. Together with his seven year old sister, Anne, he inherited the controlling interest in the Coleman iron empire in 1864 at the age of nine. By 1870, Robert assumed management of Coleman industries and an estate that included 24,000 acres in Lebanon, Lancaster, and York Counties. At the age of twenty-six, his fortune and investments made him an American industrial titan.

Robert's interest since childhood in trains and mechanics led to the construction of the Cornwall & Lebanon (C & L) Railroad that ran from Lebanon through the Conewago Hills to Elizabethtown. His train line traversed miles of heavily wooded lands which, in the eighteenth century, were the source of charcoal needed to run the Coleman Iron Furnaces at Cornwall and Colebrook. At a mere 22 miles in length, the C & L Railroad was completed by October 1884. Coleman also built an elaborate Victorian-style station at Lebanon, and smaller station buildings at Cornwall, Mt. Gretna, Colebrook, Bellaire, and Conewago (Figure. 1). In an advertisement booklet he published in 1886, Coleman outlined his future plans for his rail line including extensions from Cornwall east through Buffalo Springs, Schaefferstown, and Kleinfeltersville. He had hoped to expand southward as well along Middle Creek, South Mountain, Clay, Lincoln, Ephrata, to New Holland where the C & L would connect with a branch of the Pennsylvania Railroad. However, these latter railway expansions never came to fruition.



Figure 1. 1884 Postcard of Mt. Gretna's Earliest C & L Railroad Station

A Hidden History (Cont.)

John C. Jennings and Hugh Maxwell, Secretary and Treasurer of Coleman's Rail enterprise, are credited with naming Coleman's properties between Cornwall and Colebrook that became Mt. Gretna. Because of the "thickly wooded and more thickly overgrown" setting, Maxwell's wife suggested the Scottish word, Gretna with Jennings contributing the Mount prefix to acknowledge the distinctive views from the nearby mountain, Governor Dick. Maxwell recalled in 1901 "...We thought our [rail] road should have a picnic ground somewhere on the line ... as a pleasure resort and as a traffic feeder... For that purpose no better place [than Mt. Gretna] could be found."

After completing the C & L rail line, Coleman constructed an amusement park, consisting of five wooded acres well-watered by abundant springs. The park offered shaded picnic groves, a children's playground, forested walkways, dance hall, restaurant, shooting gallery, bowling alley, soda water booths, ice cream stands, and kitchens with fuel provided for the public use (Figures 2-5). During the first season, over five thousand people enjoyed the new entertainment venue with its verdant natural scenery. Coleman enlarged his recreational offerings by damming the Conewago Creek west of the park in 1885, creating Conewago Lake. Visitors were charged 25 cents to rent boats to glide across the small lake. By 1886, he had added the first of three carousels placed in the park, made by the Philadelphia Toboggan Company. Coleman then installed a sandstone fountain in 1888 located along the entrance to Mt. Gretna Park from the C & L Railroad station (Figure 4). The stone fountain remains the only above-ground relic of the original park that can be seen today.

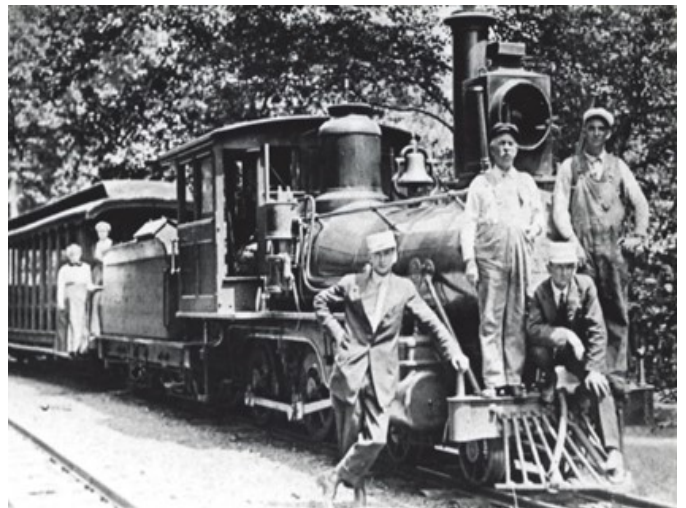
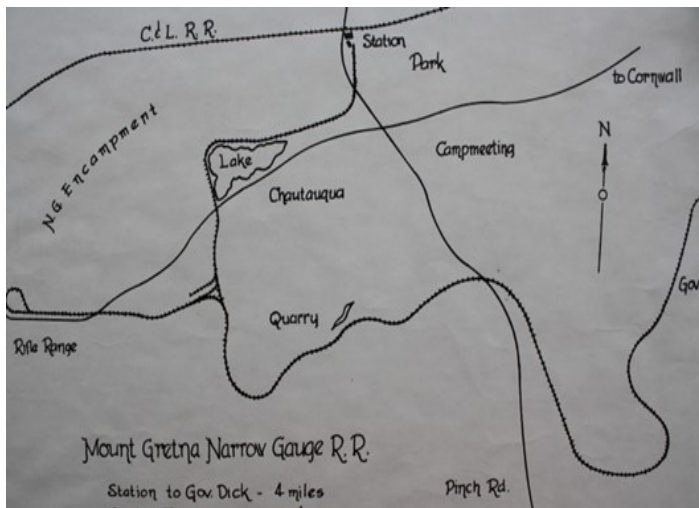


Figures 2-5. Children enjoying the Park playground (upper left), Coleman's second carousel (upper right), Park visitors crowded around the sandstone fountain with steps to the NGR entrance on the left (lower left) and the Park's early refreshment stand (lower right)

A Hidden History (Cont.)

Coleman invited the Third Brigade of the Pennsylvania National Guard (PNG) to hold their annual troop encampment west of his park on a 120 acre plot. On July 25, 1885, Camp Siegfried (the name for the PNG encampment during the first season) began operations with shooting ranges and areas for troops to practice artillery fire. The military camp featured daily parades, band concerts, boxing matches, and special events to the delight of visitors to Coleman's recreational complex. President Benjamin Harrison, PA. Governors, Army Generals, and other notable officials visited the PNG from time to time.

In 1889, Coleman again indulged his life-long love of trains by installing the most unique element of his entertainment resort, the short-line narrow gauge railroad (NGR). At a cost of 25 cents, visitors could board the NGR via steps across from the Park's fountain for a ride in open cars to the summit of Gov. Dick Mountain where they exited near a 60-foot observation tower (left on Figure 4). The train route also carried visitors south between the Park and parade grounds, and west along the shores of Conewago Lake. Southwest of the Lake, a branch for the NGR was added to connect to the PNG rifle range at 10 cents per ride per passenger (Figure 7). The railroad line rose from 702 feet above sea level to 1,148 feet at Gov. Dick Mountain. He commissioned construction of two locomotives (#s 11 and 12) that boasted steam pressure up to 150 pounds for climbing the steep incline to the mountain. NGR riders experienced a one of a kind ride, on colorfully decorated green, red, and yellow open cars with brass trimmings. In the first season, the NGR delivered 34,000 people to the viewing tower at the top of Gov. Dick. There is a small model of the NGR on display at the Historical Society, on loan from Joyce Ebright in honor of her husband, Tom Ebright.



Figures 6 & 7. Jack Bitner's 1990 Map of the path of the NGR (left—not to scale), Coleman's NGR with open cars and Engine #11 on the day it arrived in Mt. Gretna on July 4, 1889 (right)

Coleman's resort became part of an expanded village after two religious and educational associations purchased land tracts from the industrialist. The newly organized Pennsylvania Chautauqua Building and Grounds Committee met with Robert Coleman to select and then lease a 47 acre land tract in September 1891. Full ownership was transferred from Coleman to the Chautauqua Board in March 1892, expanding the group's property to 80 acres. A United Brethren Campmeeting enclave, who formerly held summer assemblies at Stoverdale on the Swatara Creek, leased another 30 ¼ acres east of the Chautauqua land parcel. This property was formally transferred from the Coleman estate to the Mt. Gretna Campmeeting Association in January 1892, thus establishing a seasonal venue for religious conferences in the "beautiful grove across Pinch Road."

A Hidden History (Cont.)

Changes wrought by the new Federal Silver Law of 1890 and excessive industrial production put pressure on our nation's reserves resulting in the 1893 stock market panic. At the time, the value of many larger railroads dropped by 36 percent. Smaller railways such as Coleman's C & L and his Florida line running from Jacksonville to Tampa went bankrupt. Cornwall Furnace had shut down a year before (1883) as a result of competition from hot-blast iron furnaces fueled by cheaper anthracite coal instead of charcoal fuel used at Coleman's furnaces. When Coleman's Lebanon Trust and Safe Bank folded, his debt proved to be much greater because his personal wealth was based on real and physical property and interdependent business ventures. The panic of 1893 severely impacted his financial holdings further, sending his estate into receivership held by brother-in-law, Archibald Rogers. Whatever the source of his fiscal woes, in December 1893, Robert Coleman and his family left the central Pennsylvania region, settling permanently on Saranac Lake, New York, where he would spend the next 37 years until his death.

Robert Coleman's loss of economic sustainability did not result in the decline of Mt. Gretna in the early 1900s. Campmeeting and Chautauqua organizations flourished, the Park and Lake swimming facilities expanded, and public water, sewer lines and electric lights were installed. The C & L railroad built a new Mt. Gretna station after 1910 with an adjacent, ornate entrance ushering visitors onto the Park's main thoroughfare. In 1894, the NGR had abandoned its run to Governor Dick, but retained the rail line during the summer months to shuttle passengers and troops to and from the Lake, Park, and rifle range. Two accidents, one in 1914 in which a child was gravely injured and another in 1915, caused the permanent shut down of the NGR. The second incident resulted from National Guard soldiers trying to board the already packed NGR train, causing several open cars to tip over harming passengers.

By March 1917, Robert Coleman's sister, Anne and brother-in-law, Archibald Rogers sold 153.8 acres to Philadelphia entrepreneur, Ferdinand Gremminger, for \$27,000. The land parcel included the C & L Railroad station, Mt. Gretna Park, and acreage north of the Conewago Creek and Lake. The site of the Conewago Hotel, built in 1909, was not part of the sale. Gremminger constructed a store adjacent to the present day miniature golf course, offered rooms for rent above his store, and managed the Park and Lake facilities.

The Great Depression, followed by WW II, led to a decline in popularity of Gremminger's Mt. Gretna entertainment resort. By November of 1942, his three properties were sold at a sheriff's sale. Gene Otto, Sr., and wife, Midge, who originally came to Mt. Gretna to operate Abraham Kauffman's Laurel Park east of the village, managed the properties for the bank that foreclosed on Gremminger. Gene, Sr. later bought the resort together with his brother, Henry, and formed the extended family corporation, Eastern Enterprises, Inc. The Otto family operated Conewago Lake & Beach and Park throughout the 1940s, hosting bingo games, cowboy bands, shooting galleries, casino attractions, picnic groves, and refreshment stands. The Park closed in the 1950s when the number of visitors was insufficient to support its continued operation. Since that time, four generations of the Otto family have continued to offer recreational fun with spring-fed summer swimming and boating on Conewago Lake, a miniature golf course along Rt. 117, and year-round roller skating at the former Farmer's Exhibition Hall which Robert Coleman built in 1892.

The abandoned casino/bingo hall, office/souvenir stand, carousel, refreshment stands and the Otto's summer home above the shooting galley were all that remained of the amusement park into the 1970s. Fires decimated the refreshment stands (Jan. 1996), shooting gallery, the Otto's summer home (May 1995), and bingo hall (July 1996). The carousel collapsed under the weight of a heavy snowfall. By 2008, Dr. Gene Otto III removed the Park office, the last standing structure.

A Hidden History (Cont.)



Figures 8, 9. Circa 1950s Photographs of the Park's Offices & Souvenir Stand (left), Park Carousel (right).



Figures 10, 11. Circa 1950s Photographs of the Park's Refreshment Stands (left), and Casino/Bingo Hall (right)

Through the growth of vines, trees, and bushes, all that is visible today of Robert Coleman's entertainment enterprise are the concrete foundations for the C & L railroad station and the Park's sandstone fountain. As I end my walk through the historic area, in my imagination I can picture the scene there in the 1880s. Bustling crowds are setting out their picnic lunches, laughing children are riding the carousel or playing on the swings, lovers share a soda, and service men and their sweet hearts line up to take a ride on the NGR. Echoes of the rich history from Mt. Gretna's earliest years still ring out in the woods. (Sources: Bitner 1990, Advertisement Booklet for Mount Gretna Park 1886, and Informant interviews)

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