

Mt. Gretna Campmeeting History

A Brief History of the Mount Gretna, PA Campmeeting

In 1891 the leaders of the United Brethren Campmeeting Bible Conference, held in Stoverdale, PA, expressed concern about strict adherence to religious beliefs and the importance of being insulated from worldly influences especially on the Sabbath. After much consideration, the Bible Conference left Stoverdale and relocated to Mt. Gretna. Robert H. Coleman, a wealthy iron magnate and philanthropist, leased the Conference twenty acres of land for twenty years at a total cost of one dollar.

The Mt. Gretna Campmeeting Association received its charter on March 17, 1892 and celebrated its first Bible Conference beginning August 2, 1892. At this time 102 cottages were already erected, a dormitory large enough for 60 cots, and a dining hall. The first year or two 12'X12' canvas tents also housed some attendees. Tiny cottages and tents circled the worship area where folks sat on backless planks listening to lengthy sermons during the ten-day conference.

That Campmeeting "season" soon expanded to include the entire summer. Many more cottages were built, expanded upon, and Victorian embellishments added which became the cottages we still enjoy today. We have many year-round residents, including retirees and working professionals who enjoy the summer crowds, activities, and devotion, as well as the winter calm. Summer guests and residents still come for the Bible Festival. In addition, folks enjoy biking and hiking, theater, music of all genre, nature, educational and diverse arts programs. All appreciate the social nature of our porches. Many friendships begin on these porches and are renewed there each summer.



September 4, 2012 – Mt. Gretna Campmeeting historic area is placed on the [National Register of Historic Places](#)

The source of this information is from [Mt. Gretna A Coleman Legacy](#); Bitner, Jack. A Lebanon County Historical Society Special Publication. 1990

Mt. Gretna Campmeeting History

Mt. Gretna Campmeeting

1866 Stoverdale Memorial Campmeeting Association

- United Brethren Church in Christ, East Pennsylvania Conference
- Location – between Hummelstown and Middletown on the Swatara Creek
- 2 chapels, 80-100 cottages, boarding hall, preacher's stand, able to accommodate large groups
- Train, road access

1890 Stoverdale Concerns

- Excessive "commercialism and worldliness"
- Excursion trains on Sabbath day - presence and "trafficking" of candy, peanuts, and soda water stands
- The store located on the Stoverdale campground sold newspapers and magazines, cigarettes, ice cream and candy on Sundays (luxuries, non-essential items)
- Need to have water more convenient to cottages (*5 springs located away from cottages at the bottom of a hill*)



Would 1890 Mt. Gretna be any better?

- Mt. Gretna Park
- Cornwall and Lebanon Railroad
- Summer encampment of the National Guard (*Artillery units, rifle range, calvary/horses; summer of 1890 - 8,000 Guardsman, 400 Regular Army troops*)
- 1885 Conewago Creek dammed (*boating, swimming*)
- Farmer's Encampment previously held in York County moved to Mt. Gretna (*Coleman offered exhibit space at no charge.*)

Some factors affecting a move to Mt. Gretna

- Stoverdale authorities uninterested in making changes in their Campmeeting
- Unacceptable practices (*pinochle/Rev. J.R. Meredith*)
- Coleman's offer to the Association
 - Lease for twenty acres for twenty years for one dollar
 - Coleman's crews would clear the land
 - Coleman would relocate 27 Stoverdale cottages by rail for owners if desired (*didn't happen*)
 - A chapel and dormitory would be supplied
 - Pipes would be laid to bring water to each cottage
 - Association would receive a rebate for C&L tickets sold during the Campmeeting (*3 cents per full fare ticket*)
 - Coleman and directors of the C&L were willing to forego service to Mt. Gretna for one Sunday a year except an early train to get Park employees to work

Mt. Gretna Campmeeting History

Preparation for the first Campmeeting

- Lot map created (20' x 24' lots; east-west streets named after bishops)
- Coleman erected a chapel building (3rd & 4th south of Glossbrenner; later the Preacher's Dormitory then Blinn Hall) dormitory and dining hall, and sanitary facilities
- Temple area with a pulpit, lighting, and benches (small octagonal pulpit, oil lamps, chandelier, backless benches, sky roof)
- One hundred two tiny cottages were erected between March and August 1892. (Coleman had offered to relocate cottages from Stoverdale. Didn't happen. Coleman gave the Association \$1800 to be divided among the 27 cottage owners in proportion to the value of each house. Each owner was also given a stipend to build a new cottage.)



1892 Cottage Rental

Single cottage during 10 day camp	\$8.00
1 st story single cottage	\$5.00
2 nd story single cottage	\$4.00

Single cottage before or after
Campmeeting except during Chautauqua
or Farmers Encampment, per day 40 cents

Double cottage rates shall be twice that
of a single cottage

- Tent sites were prepared

Some Campmeeting attendees lived in white canvas tents, 12 feet by 12 feet. One half of the tent served as sleeping quarters and the other half for living. In the sleeping area a box-like bed was constructed covered with straw, sheets, and blankets.

The living area of tents generally included a table, few chairs, a lamp, perhaps a carpet and a Bible. At the rear of the tent was a stove plate and chimney where meals were cooked. In the evening oil lamps were lit and the sight of the white canvas tents was remarkable.

P.B. Gible's History of the East Pennsylvania Conference

Mt. Gretna Campmeeting History

Other...

- 1885 – Lake Conewago dammed to create a lake (15-17 acres, not in use till 1886)
- 1893 - Campmeeting store built (now [1992] the Sunday School room of the MGUMC)
- 1899 – John Cilley was commissioned May 1899 to build the MGCA Tabernacle
 - self-taught architectural engineer, skilled carpenter
 - completed before August 1, 1899
 - 23 chestnut posts
 - Built 2-5 other similar structures
 - Cilley was paid \$1,132.60; Daniel Gelbach & Co. paid \$167 for “labor”
- August 6, 1899 - Tabernacle dedicated



- 1899 – Fire in Campmeeting (destroyed 6 cottages; Mrs. William Miller- attempting to boil water filled a saucepan with kerosene instead of water)
- 1904 – MG Fire Company established (chemical fire engine purchased from C&L)

The Campmeeting fire company first occupied the tiny building at the corner of Pinch Road and Route 117, now the community library, and then moved to a smaller cinderblock building where the church parking lot is now.

Until the company moved to their present location in 1953 they had stashed fire hose and extinguishers in several sink holes around the community. Most of them were invaded by squirrels and other animals and so the hoses leaked and the extinguishers were rusted shut when they were needed. The company purchased their first full-sized fire truck in 1965.

mtgretnafire.com. Mt. Gretna Fire Department Station 38

- 1905 – 225 cottages on Campmeeting grounds
- 1949 – Fire in Campmeeting (destroyed a full block of 16 houses now Memorial Park)
- 1952 - Mt. Gretna United Methodist Church built (old store incorporated)

Mt. Gretna Campmeeting History

Information Sources

Bitner, Jack. Mt. Gretna A Coleman Legacy; A Lebanon County Historical Society Special Publication. 1990

Gibble, Dr. P. B. *Gibble's History of the East Pennsylvania Conference* referencing the "Historical Sketch of Mt. Gretna Camping" by Dr. S. C. Enck Sr.

Meredith, Thomas R. and Edward F. Ohms, The Mt. Gretna Campmeeting Association A Centennial History. Mt. Gretna Campmeeting Association, Inc. 1992

Mt. Gretna Campmeeting Association Committee, Chairman Thomas R. Meredith. Listed! How the Campmeeting qualified for the National Register of Historic Homes

mtgretnafire.com. Mt. Gretna Fire Department Station 38