

The Gretna Chronicles

PUBLISHED BY THE MOUNT GRETTNA AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY • SPRING 2024



Thank You, Lebanon County Commissioners!

FROM THE BOARD, MGAHS

In February, Lebanon County Commissioners—Michael J. Kuhn, Jo Ellen Litz and Robert Phillips—approved our application for \$5,000 in hotel tax funds to help finance renovations and upgrades of the Jack Bitner Research Library and Archiving Center at the Mt. Gretna Area Historical Society.

Those renovations were completed in March for a total project cost of \$8,807. Besides new flooring, we upgraded our electrical, lighting and audiovisual systems. New LED lights facilitate examination of our many documents and photographs by our archivists and visitors.

With our new smart television, we can host groups including homeschoolers via Zoom, hold trainings for staff and collaborate with other historical societies in our region.

Our research library is home to historical researchers and visitors. Our unique collections include house and property maps, photographs, legal materials, and artifacts pertaining to the history of Robert H. Coleman, Mt. Gretna residents and events, and the Pennsylvania National Guard. Many items were donated by Jack Bitner, after whom the Research Library is named. Bitner wrote *Mt. Gretna: A Coleman Legacy*, the definitive history of the area.

The Archiving Center also operates in this space to inventory and catalog the thousands of donated and loaned items received. All donated and loaned items are recorded in our database and stored in the environmentally controlled vault.

The Research Library is open to visitors and researchers by appointment on Tuesday and Friday mornings from 9:30 to noon. Materials cannot be checked out. Please call Patricia Gible at 717-304-8865 for an appointment.

The Board and members of the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society thank you for your support and urge you to come in person to see our upgraded research library!



*Pictured at right :
our upgraded research
library with new
flat-screen TV.
Photo: Ralph
Zimmerman*



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They “Built” Mount Gretna— Coleman and Cilley by Margaret Hopkins

The history of Mount Gretna features two men—Robert H. Coleman (1856-1930) and John H. Cilley (1845-1916)—who grew up less than eight miles from each other but whose circumstances set them worlds apart.

Coleman inherited an empire forged from the iron furnaces his great-grandfather owned and operated in Cornwall and beyond. When he took control of that empire in 1877, it had an estimated value of \$7 million.

Five years later, he literally put Mount Gretna on the map by siting a station on his Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad for picnic grounds. Shortly thereafter, he gave land for the Pennsylvania National Guard training camp—he owned 24,000 acres across Lebanon, Lancaster and York counties—and entered into land agreements with the Pennsylvania Chautauqua and Mount Gretna Campmeeting.

It could be said that by doing so, Coleman ‘built’ Mount Gretna. — continued on page 2

Gretna Chronicles

is published by the
Mount Gretna Area Historical Society
206 Pennsylvania Ave., Mt. Gretna, PA
P.O. Box 362, Mt. Gretna, PA 17064
phone: (717) 964-1105
info@mtgretnahistory.org
www.mtgretnahistory.org

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Design & Production

The Mt. Gretna Area Historical Society is a non-profit 501 (c) (3) organization and is registered as a charitable organization with the State of Pennsylvania. The MGAHS is charged with preserving the heritage of the Mount Gretna area, including Mount Gretna Borough, Campmeeting, The Pennsylvania Chautauqua, the Heights, Timber Hills, Conewago Hill, Stoberdale, areas of Colebrook once occupied by the PA National Guard, and areas of Cornwall involved with the Coleman family.

THE MGAHS MUSEUM is open from Memorial Day weekend until Labor Day weekend, 1-4pm, or by appointment. We offer school and group tours, summer walking tours, and research assistance by appointment throughout the year.

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They “Built” Mount Gretna— Coleman and Cilley – *continued from page 1*

Cilley also ‘built’ Mount Gretna—in his case, quite literally. His first construction project in Mount Gretna was a ‘basket house,’ which he built for the picnic grounds and park that Coleman had ‘built’ in Mount Gretna.

But Cilley is better known for two iconic structures—the original Chautauqua auditorium and the Campmeeting Tabernacle, both of which he designed, engineered and constructed and which became known as “Cilley’s famous umbrella design.”

Unlike Coleman’s well-documented background, details about Cilley’s background are sketchy. The youngest of five children, he grew up around present-day Colebrook, had no formal education beyond 8th grade and fought for the Union Army during the Civil War. Upon his return, he completed a carpentry apprenticeship and began carpentering full-time while at night, he taught himself geometry, trigonometry and mensuration, a branch of mathematics that focuses on shapes and the measurements of their areas and volumes.

Were it not for that self-study, Cilley might well have labored as a carpenter in obscurity. But his passion for geometric shapes enabled him to progress from carpenter to master carpenter and to partner in a Lebanon construction company. Recognition came with his ingenious and unique design of the circular, open-sided auditorium for Chautauqua. Having mastered the design and construction, Cilley built the Tabernacle in 10 weeks and then in the next 10 years, three others in different locales—all which could seat thousands.

He also worked his love of geometric designs into residences, building cottages in Chautauqua with circular porches and turrets—several of which can be found today.

While Coleman was fascinated with railroads, large and small, Cilley was passionate about bicycles. He engineered a two-seated tricycle that he pedaled throughout Lebanon (while his wife sat in the seat behind) and was granted a patent for this tricycle from the U.S. Patent Office in 1887. But he didn’t pursue its manufacture. Instead, he started the Lebanon-based Enterprise Shoe Manufacturing Company.

Although Coleman and Cilley’s enterprises overlapped in Mt. Gretna, they likely never met given their very different backgrounds. As a boy and young man, Coleman



Top: Cilley was hired in May 1899 to build the Campmeeting Tabernacle which was constructed in 10 weeks and dedicated on August 7, 1899.

Below: The present day Chautauqua Playhouse built on the site of Cilley’s first ‘umbrella design’ for the opening of Chautauqua in July 1892. Photos: K. Donahue



Two cottages in Chautauqua designed and built by Cilley. Note the turrets and round porches. Cilley built cottages, dormitory-like residences and a hotel in Chautauqua. Photos: K. Donahue

summered in Europe. He graduated from Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., where he was popular but not studious. Named the Iron King of Pennsylvania, he was welcomed by families in social circles with similar status and wealth.

He also was known for his generosity and his investments in the community-at-large whether underwriting holiday

Volunteer with MGAHS

MGAHS volunteers are our lifeblood! We depend upon our volunteers for everything from creating displays and introducing visitors to Mount Gretna’s history to planning events and maintaining our building.


Many of our volunteers have long ties with MGAHS. Connie Dwyer, for instance, has been a member and volunteer almost from the society’s beginning! She started off helping with inventorying the many items in our collection. Those archived items are now in a searchable database, thanks to Connie’s and others’ efforts.

She also served as a board member from 2013 through most of 2020. Now she is key to the distribution of the society’s twice-yearly newsletters.

parties for employees, entertainments and amusements for the public or the construction of buildings.

Unfortunately, Coleman’s investments in Florida railroads made him vulnerable to economic downturn as happened in 1893 when he was forced to liquidate assets to meet financial obligations. His fortune decimated by bankruptcies, lawsuits and the Panic of 1893, Coleman left the area with little more than a suitcase, horse and buggy. Upon his death, local papers extolled his expansion of the iron furnaces, development of the Cornwall and Lebanon Railroad and philanthropy, noting that had he been able to weather the Panic of 1893, he might well have regained his wealth and national stature.

Cilley never appeared in the local newspapers until he was well into his 30s, and then, he was identified for his construction projects. However, by the early 1900s, he was doing less hands-on carpentry and holding leadership positions in local business organizations. He also was appointed to several county positions. Despite his lack of formal education, he was variously described as an engineer and architect. His obituary paid tribute to the many structures he built in Lebanon and Mount Gretna—structures like the Campmeeting Tabernacle which even today, local engineers find ingenious for its unique design and execution.

While they shared Lebanon County roots, Coleman and Cilley’s different backgrounds shaped how each man used his gifts to ‘build’ Mount Gretna. As such, their contributions are a reflection of their individual circumstances, assets and interests—as well as a response to the needs of a growing community. We are fortunate today that those contributions have stood the test of time. 

Sources:

J.H. Beers & Co. (1993). *Biographical Annals of Lebanon County, Pennsylvania Containing Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Representative Citizens and of the Early Settled Families.* pp. 376-379.

Bitner, J. (1990). *Mt. Gretna: A Coleman Legacy.*


Lebanon Daily News. Jan. 11, 1882; April 4, 1883; July 10, 1893; Dec 6, 1884; Sept. 19, 1885; June 30, 1886; March 7, 1887; August 9, 1887; April 17, 1889; June 13, 1892; June 14, 1892; June 29, 1892; August 9, 1892; July 5, 1893; July 10, 1893; August 16, 1893; August 23, 1893; May 28, 1894; May 29, 1894; June 7, 1894; May 23, 1895; May 20, 1902; Feb. 17, 1904; Dec. 20, 1904; April 13, 1916.

Lebanon Courier and Semi-Weekly Report. July 6, 1892; Sept. 6, 1893.

Lebanon Semi-Weekly News. March 2, 1930.

“I’d never been a part of a historical society before, but I’ve always liked history,” Connie said. “I really got to know people in the community through my involvement in MGAHS.”

As a volunteer, you determine when you can help and what you want to do. Our needs are many, and we are happy to work with you to match your interests with our to-dos. Visit <https://mtgretnahistory.org/support/volunteer/> to see descriptions of volunteer opportunities

To volunteer, stop by the museum. We’re open 1-4 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays from Memorial Day (May 25) through Labor Day (Sept. 2) or by appointment. You can also call (717-964-1105) or email (mtgretnahistory@gmail.com) for more information. 

“Published by Harpel” — To Be Sure

Doctoring images started long before Photoshop. Take a look, for instance, at the postcard titled, “Mt. Gretna Camp Life.” While the image depicts soldiers in training, they may not be Pennsylvania National Guard.

And they very likely were stationed somewhere other than Mount Gretna.

That was the conclusion of local historian Vince Montano who purchased that postcard as part of a souvenir folder of postcards with “Mount Gretna” on the cover. When he examined the folder, he noticed that “Mount Gretna” appeared to be stamped onto it—almost like an afterthought.


Curious, he found another photo souvenir folder online that was an exact duplicate of what he had purchased. This folder was stamped, “Fort Dix.”

To confirm his suspicions about the postcards’ authenticity, Montano contacted Charles Oellig, Museum Director and Curator, Pennsylvania National Guard Museum, Fort Indiantown Gap. Oellig, who has firsthand knowledge of Mount Gretna from tramping around for years with Jack Bitner, knew the postcards were not genuine.

According to Oellig, it was common for postcard companies to print scenes from Army posts all over the U.S. and then situate them locally. So images of Wisconsin troops might end up as Mount Gretna postcards, and images of Mount Gretna soldiers might end up in Wisconsin.

For the most part, “we can’t tell where the photographs were actually taken,” Oellig said. Said Montano, “The images of the Pennsylvania National Guard that you can trust were actually taken in Mount Gretna were the ones by Luther Harpel.”

Harpel, who was from Lebanon, was the official photographer of the Pennsylvania National Guard, Oellig said. He started taking photos of troops training at Mount Gretna in the late 1890s. Many of his pictures were published in metropolitan newspapers and magazines around the U.S., according to his obituary in the *Lebanon Daily News*.

Be assured that if an image is stamped, “Published by Harpel,” you are looking at the Pennsylvania National Guard at Mount Gretna. 



Top: Photographs of soldiers training were often stamped with locales other than the actual site of the image—as was the case for this photo.

Below: Note that this was published by Harpel, Lebanon, Pa., so it authentically depicts the encampment at Mount Gretna. Postcards from MGAHS Archives.

Art Featuring Scenes of Mt. Gretna to be Sold at Annual Porch Sale

The family of a former resident of Mt. Gretna has donated a collection of art works by local artists to the Historical Society—and given permission for these to be sold. The collection includes framed large and small scenes of Mt. Gretna as well as Gretna Art Show posters and photographs of historic structures.

These art works will be sold on Saturday, May 25, at 610 4th Street, Mt. Gretna Campmeeting, during the annual Campmeeting Porch Sale. Proceeds from the sale of the art will benefit the Mt. Gretna Area Historical Society.

The Campmeeting’s annual Porch Sale runs from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.





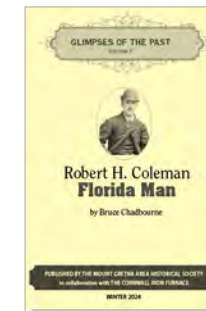
From Our MGAHS Bookshelves

COMING THIS SUMMER:
The Historic Carousels of Mount Gretna by Joshua Groh

Robert H. Coleman: Florida Man

by Bruce Chadbourne

Beloved son of Lebanon and Cornwall, Robert Habersham Coleman would ignore the advice of trusted advisors and risk all in pursuing his passion for all things railroads and trains. Despite his foibles, his legacy is a life well lived, in the midst of tragedy, and for that he was and still is admired. \$10 MGAHS members; \$15 non-members.



Anne of Cornwall

by Bruce Chadbourne

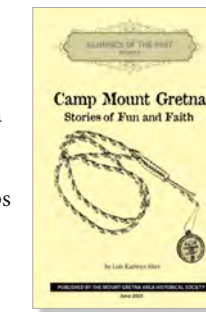
Robert H. Coleman is well known in this area for his wealth, the railroad he built, his philanthropy, and the founding of Mount Gretna. But what about his sister, Anne Coleman Rogers? Her life spanned the time of the setting of L.M. Montgomery’s Anne of Green Gables books, and one could say “our” Anne lived an equally remarkable and romantic life. \$10 MGAHS members; \$15 non-members.



Camp Mount Gretna: Stories of Fun and Faith

by Lois Kathryn Herr

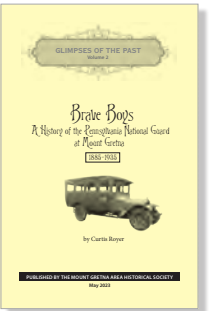
Many of us, in our younger years, have gone to a camp and know that the experience can be life-changing or at least memorable. Whether it was the songs, the crafts, the games or the friendships made, camp can leave an indelible impression on its campers. From 1949-1970, Camp Mount Gretna did just that. Includes first person accounts and photos from that time. \$10 MGAHS members; \$15 non-members.



Brave Boys: A History of the Pennsylvania National Guard at Mt. Gretna

by Curtis Royer

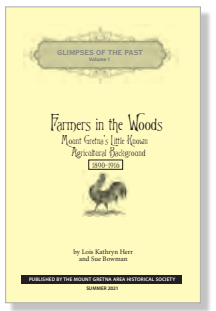
From 1885-1935, thousands of troops converged annually in Mt. Gretna for military training and an opportunity to hone their marksmanship skills. Beginning with 125 acres donated in 1885, it served the Pa. National Guard and the U.S. Army until 1935. Visitors and dignitaries came to view troops preparing for a war with Spain, a Mexican border war, and WWI. \$10 MGAHS members; \$15 non-members.



Farmers in the Woods: Mt. Gretna’s Little Known Agricultural Background

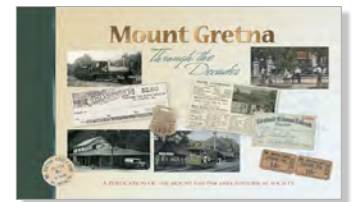
by Lois Kathryn Herr

Imagine thousands of visitors with their prized poultry and livestock, converging on Mt. Gretna for a ‘Farmers’ Encampment.’ It was an annual August event, from 1890-1916, held in the building now used as the Mt. Gretna Roller Rink. After the last Encampment in 1916, the Pa. Farm Show appeared in January 1917 (often considered a sequel to this early Encampment). \$7 MGAHS members; \$10 non-members.



Mount Gretna Through the Decades

Take a look at the history of the area organized by decades from 1881 to today. With photographs and maps from each of 14 decades, it takes us from the beginnings of Mt. Gretna Park, the Pa. National Guard, to its current mix of past and present, tradition and innovation. \$30 MGAHS members; \$35 non-members.



Available for purchase at the MGAHS Museum or from our secure website at <https://mtgretnahistory.org/shop>

MGAHS Summer Calendar of Events

June 15 – 10 a.m.
History on the Porch
MGAHS Porch



Join local historians and other curious-minded folks for coffee and conversation.

July 5 – 7 p.m.
Hall of Philosophy
“Herbert Hoover: Nova President.”

Presenter: Jean-Paul Benowitz, Director, Public Heritage Studies, Elizabethtown College.

July 13 – 10 a.m.
History on the Porch
MGAHS Porch



Join local historians and other curious-minded folks for coffee and conversation.

August 10 – 10 a.m.
History on the Porch
MGAHS Porch



Join local historians and other curious-minded folks for coffee and conversation.

August 23 – 7 p.m.
Hall of Philosophy.
“The Otto Years.”

Moderated talk on Mt. Gretna History with Dr. Gene Otto. Moderators: John Feather and Larry McKenna.



Sunnyside Up

106 Brown Avenue by Julie Wray Herman

On Oct. 22, 1910, Lebanon-businessman William Hutchinson paid \$260 to the Chautauqua Corporation for four lots. The deed stipulated that Hutchinson build a cottage within two years. Hutchinson, who managed the American Iron & Steel Manufacturing Company's three Lebanon mills, apparently met the deadline.


In July 1921, Hutchinson enlarged his Mount Gretna holding, purchasing from the corporation an additional strip of land 20 feet wide bordering the south side of his property, being a paper street (several proposed streets in Gretna were never developed, leading to the term 'paper street' used here). Hutchinson died in 1924.

In November 1929, his heirs sold the cottage to Lebanon physician and former World War I surgeon Alfred Strickler for \$4000. The Strickler family summered in Gretna, returning to Lebanon once a week to shop and do laundry while Dr. Strickler "commuted" daily into town for his medical practice. Soon after they bought the house, Dr. Strickler's father or father-in-law built the rough steps that come up to the back door from Brown Avenue.

Marian Strickler Fritter, who inherited the home on her father's death, said there was a maid's room on the second floor of the house. The maid accessed her room by a ladder-like stairway leading to a trap door in the floor of the room. The ladder stairs were removed sometime prior to 2015, and the trap door permanently closed. The room is currently a bunk room for the current owners' grandchildren. Marian added a furnace in the late 1970s so that she could live in the cottage year-round.

What became generally known then as the Strickler Cottage remained in that family until 1988 when Marian sold the house. It was resold two years later, and the new owners called it "Keystone Cottage" after the massive keystone that centers the fireplace arch. The house was then sold to Paul and Julie Herman in 2015, who renamed it Sunnyside Up after the vibrant yellow porch.

The two-story cottage is clapboarded and has a shingled hip roof. Downstairs is an 800 sq. ft.

porch, living room, dining room and kitchen. The current owners enclosed the small back porch under the former maid's room to add a full bath and washer/dryer. They also combined what previously was four rooms: a half bath, utility closet, butler's pantry closet and kitchen into the current kitchen. The second floor has four bedrooms, a full bath and the maid's room/closet. The majority of the wood interior still shows the lacquering that the Stricklers did each summer to help the wood maintain its luster. 

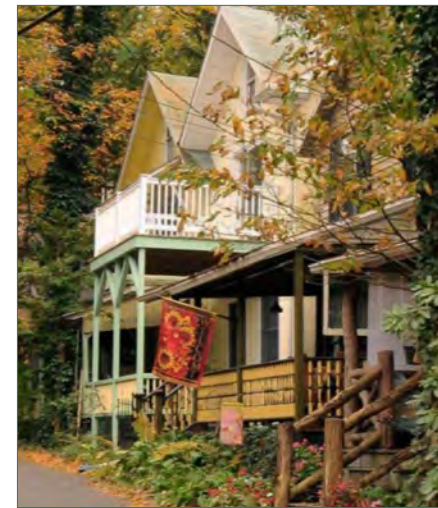


Photos: Julie Herman and Kristi Donahue.

If a Cottage Could Talk...


One of the most often asked questions asked at the Historical Society is, "What can you tell me about my cottage?"

We have a collection of cottage histories, so we might be able to provide some history. But if your cottage isn't in our



database, we can help you get started on learning the history of your property. Call the Society for an appointment. 717-964-1105.

Once you have completed your research, please share

what you have learned. We have both an Online Input Form (located at: forms.gle/drBXh5D5TDxGczPr9) and a Printable Input Form. If you wish to submit the printable History of Your Cottage, stop into Mt. Gretna Area Historical Society on a Tuesday or Friday morning. 

MGAHS LEGACY GIFTS

Imagine what Robert Coleman would think if he could see Mount Gretna today! Many of our greatest community assets exist because someone thought it important enough to bequeath funds to develop and sustain them.

If you are interested in learning more about legacy gifts to the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society, call us at (717) 964-1105 or email us at info@mtgretnahistory.org

Consultation with a legal or financial adviser can help you to take advantage of any savings on inheritance tax. Our Mount Gretna Area Historical Society representative will help you through the process and the details.



BUSINESS MEMBERS

A warm thank you to our business members. Consider supporting them and thanking them for their support of MGAHS.

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PO Box 194, Mount Gretna, PA
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rbchefonthego@verizon.net

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717-867-1200
jef@featherlaw.com

Garver Insurance
809 Holly Lane, Lebanon, PA
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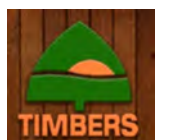
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PO Box 10, Mount Gretna, PA
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PO Box 112, Mount Gretna, PA
717-279-1433
brad@gretnagraphics.com



P.O. Box 362
Mt. Gretna, PA 17064
(717) 964-1105
info@mtgretnahistory.org

Learn about our
Mount Gretna History
& help to preserve it

JOIN THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY!

OUR MEMBERS are the lifeblood of the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society. Your dues help us to maintain the MGAHS building and preserve our collection.

Your yearly membership includes discounts on merchandise, updates about the Society's programs, and newsletters with feature articles on area history. You will join a dedicated and growing group of people who value our past and who want to preserve it for future generations.

There are several ways to begin or renew your membership:

- complete an online membership form at <https://mtgretnahistory.org/membership/>
- print our membership form (at right), complete it and mail it to us at P.O. Box 362, Mt. Gretna, PA 17064;
- call us at (717) 964-1105 to provide your information.

Follow us on Facebook, Instagram, & YouTube!



Join Mount Gretna Area Historical Society

- \$20 Individual Membership \$30 Family Membership
 \$75 Business Membership

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