

## Society Homes over the Years

Robert Dunkelberger

Last December, the former PNC bank building on Bloomsburg's Market Square was purchased to become the latest in a series of homes since 1914 for the Columbia County Historical and Genealogical Society. This article is the most complete story thus far of all the locations in Society history, now numbering seven (not counting storage), two of them used twice. A special thanks to the *Press Enterprise* for the use of three of their photographs (from 1939, 1946, and 1955) held by the Morning Press Negative Collection in the Andruss Library Special Collections.

The inspiration for the creation of the Society goes back to the evidential artifacts and historic relics left behind by the first settlers in the area who founded its communities, including Millville in 1772, Catawissa in 1774, Berwick in 1786, and Bloomsburg in 1802. This evidence survived to serve as a record of how these people lived and worked.

The physical items from well over a century became important as Bloomsburg began planning for the county's first big anniversary, the town's centennial celebration in 1902. Among the many attractions, which included parades and baseball games, was a historical museum. Managed by women who were members of the Civic Club, with Mrs. Hervey (Sarah A.) Grotz the head of the Committee on Relics, by May all local citizens who had items of historic value were encouraged to loan them for use in the museum.

Everything was pulled together in three months, so that by the end of August the old Presbyterian Church on Market Street (which within four years would be the site of the Yorks/Yost mansion) was fixed up to house the never-to-be-duplicated displays. Open to the public for an admission charge of ten cents, the museum was billed as "a rare opportunity for the young people to learn many unfamiliar details concerning the life and habits of their ancestors."

While there is little doubt this gathering of historic relics created a spark to preserve history in Columbia County, the flame that brought it to life might well have been the intensive work done in 1914 to fully document that history. Undertaken by the J. H. Beers Company of Chicago, the result was the two-volume *Historical and Biographical Annals of Columbia and Montour Counties*. A meeting on May 9, 1914, in the Columbia County Courthouse, initiated by the Fort McClure Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution and attended by George Parke representing Beers, led to the organization of a historical society. Chartered on December 7, the purpose of the Society was to establish a historical museum, collect and preserve materials of all types that illustrate the county's history, and publish research based on the Society's collections.



*Historical Society president Harry S. Barton with one of the historic artifacts newly housed in the county courthouse, December 1939. (Morning Press)*

Being a county society, the first location for the initial collections was in the courthouse. In June 1914, local businessman, part-time historian, and Society member Heister V. White secured from the commissioners the use of two rooms on the third floor, a larger room for a museum and a smaller one for use by the society officers. By the end of the year cases were in place to exhibit the historic relics that had thus far been donated, thanks to the work of the Relics and Curios Committee. It was headed by the same Sarah Grotz who had been the driving force for the Centennial relics committee 12 years before.

The Society remained active throughout most of the 1920s, but the initial enthusiasm to preserve the county's history was difficult to maintain. When the Bloomsburg Public Library opened in January 1926, plans were for the lobby on the first floor to contain exhibits from the Society's collections. Two years later a committee was appointed to supply a case for the displays, but then the Society did not meet again until 1932. That December, in order to save \$1,200 a year in rent for offices kept in the American Legion building at Center and Main streets, the commissioners asked the Society to vacate its space in the courthouse. The collections were then moved to a room on the third floor of the First National Bank building at the southeast corner of Market Square, coincidentally and appropriately the site of the Society's newest home.

The collections remained in the bank building for seven years, kept safe but in storage and seemingly little used. That was until interest in the Society revived and it was reorganized, thanks to the efforts of the Bloomsburg Rotary Club and its president, local businessman Harry L. Magee. While the reorganization was in progress, an addition to the courthouse was under construction. In August 1939, the commissioners again assigned the Society a good-sized room, this time on the building's second floor, and by December the historical collections had been moved into the new space.

Although the room allowed for some access to the Society's material, including a number of volumes of bound newspapers, it was still not suitable for the overall collections, especially the artifacts and museum items. The situation remained unchanged until October 1945, when an office for veterans needed space and it was given the Society's rooms. Once more the Society had to leave the courthouse and, except for some storage space, this time it would be for good. Discussions were held on where to go and it was Harry Magee who provided an answer.

A lifelong collector of historic memorabilia, several years before he had remodeled the second floor of the rear portion of his garage at 698 West Main, gave it a west-facing entrance, and called it the Magee Museum. While the major portion of this floor was allocated to his own impressive collection, he designated part of it as a temporary home for items from the Society and furnished a truck for the move from the courthouse. The advertisement announcing the museum's opening to the public (access was previously limited) said that what was on display included the "Columbia County Historical Society with its antiques, old deeds, and miscellaneous papers."



*Harry Barton is seen looking over an 1871 register for the Forks Hotel in the display space for Society collections in the Magee Museum, June 1946. (Morning Press)*

The Magee Museum officially debuted on Saturday, September 7, 1946, with no admission fee, hours each Saturday from 1 to 6 p.m., and Lydia Creasy as hostess. This is where the Society remained until an opportunity arose in 1954. That February, Helen B. John, who lived at 353 East Main Street on College Hill, passed away and willed the home to her cousin and Society member Edwin Barton. By August an agreement was reached for the Society to lease the house for \$300 a year, including utilities, to serve as a museum and meeting place. Five rooms were available for the display of historical items, as well as one large room for meetings and a storage area in the basement. Although still not ideal, the house was better than either the courthouse or Magee Museum had been.



*Several of the nearly 200 visitors who came to view historic artifacts during the Historical Society's Open House in its headquarters at 353 East Main, March 19, 1955. (Morning Press)*

The Society had an open house in its new location that lasted for 12 hours on March 19, 1955. Nearly 200 people came through to view the largest display ever of the historic artifacts collected over the past 40 years. Yet once more, by February 1963 if not earlier, the Society Board was investigating different space, especially one that offered security and safety for the collections. This led them back to the Magee Museum because of an offer from Harry Magee to consolidate his collections with the Society's. In anticipation of the merger being approved and looking to expand his own display area, Magee converted the front section of his garage facing Main Street into exhibit space, which opened on April 25, 1964. So confident was he that the Society would join in the venture, he had the plate glass above the doors stenciled with its name along with Magee Museum.



*One of the exhibit rooms at 353 East Main, featuring the Society's Native American artifacts, 1960s*

An agreement could not be finalized however, which turned out for the best. Located across Main Street from Fishing Creek, just eight years later the museum was wiped out due to the horrendous flooding caused by Tropical Storm Agnes. Instead, in December 1964 the Society went in a different direction and asked the Town for permanent quarters in the old Fifth Street School, which

had not been used for education since the opening of Memorial Elementary in 1953. The request was for storage space for records, but this too did not happen. Even though the old school building hosted a youth center, it was plagued by vandalism and not a safe location for items from the Society's collections.

Still looking for a new and more adequate site, the Society next turned its attention to a working relationship with Bloomsburg State College and discussions began in December 1966. At that stage the talks only related to storing certain items in the new library building, which had opened in August. A cooperative arrangement became possible thanks to the efforts of Dr. Craig Newton, a faculty member in the college's history department and vice president of the Society. This was an opportunity to enable students to take advantage of the research potential of the Society's books, newspapers, and manuscripts. Expenses were also eliminated, with the college providing space and the personnel needed to care for the collections.



*The Society's research collections in Room 105 of the Bloomsburg State College Bakeless Center for the Humanities, 1971. (Bloomsburg University Archives)*

The 25-year agreement was reached in December 1969, signed in January 1970, and that September the collections were moved into Room 105 of the recently opened Bakeless Center for the Humanities. During the first week of December an open house was held in the large classroom space. The arrangement worked well, with first Dr. Ralph Herre and later Craig Newton serving as curator. They were assisted by students, both undergraduate and graduate, who wrote course papers and theses on local history.

In the end the agreement barely reached a third of its anticipated length. The growth of the college throughout the 1970s meant that classrooms were at a premium and a prime first floor room was attractive space. The agreement reached in 1969 called for a two-year grace period before its termination, which was relayed to the Society in August 1977. A year later the college said Room 105 was needed now, so the Society vacated its reading room and moved to the ground floor of Bakeless. As an accompanying historical resource, six months later the College Archives, which

had been in the Hartline Science Center, moved to a nearby room and opened on March 19, 1979. It would remain there until the completion of the second Andruss library in May 1998.

After a year on the ground floor, the Society's collections were packed up and returned to 353 East Main on October 31, 1979. But this was a temporary move, especially due to the fact that disorder in the house meant it could not be used for normal operations. The house had been donated to the Society in 1977 by Edwin Barton to become a museum to complement the facility in Bakeless. However, since 1970 it had been completely renovated into apartments on each of its three floors. The cost to bring the house up to state code standards was prohibitive, anywhere from \$55,000 to \$80,000, so another location was needed.

Once again numerous options were proposed, with none completely satisfactory. On this occasion, for the first and only time in Society history, its home would not be within the town limits of Bloomsburg. As nothing better was available, the location the Board chose was the Presbyterian Church building in Orangeville and, unlike all previous Society locations, it would be purchased. But this could not happen until revenue was generated from the sale of the Barton House. Coming to the Society's aid was the Catholic Diocese of Harrisburg. Wanting a new site for its Newman House, then at 527 East Third, it decided a location just down the hill from Carver Hall was ideal.

The East Third Street property had to be sold first, but when it was, the other necessary steps were set in motion. The Catholic Campus Ministry bought the former Barton home for \$47,200, and by December 1980 the Society purchased the church for \$15,000. The collections were moved and, as had happened before in 1955 and 1970, an open house was held, this time on March 22, 1981. For once there was ample space, with the Edwin Barton Library set up immediately for historical and genealogical research in the former Sunday School room, while planning began to transform the sanctuary into a museum. This would allow for the majority of the collections to go on display.



*The museum in the sanctuary of the former Orangeville Presbyterian Church, 1986*

As reported in the September 1994 newsletter, library “volunteers spent untold hours cataloging, cross-referencing and arranging books, scrapbooks, genealogies, church and cemetery records,

wills, and deeds.” The library would grow to nearly 1,600 books. As for the museum in the former sanctuary, partitions divided “the area into rooms which display the appropriate artifacts. There is a kitchen, drawing room, bedroom, schoolroom, and tool shed. The remaining miscellaneous artifacts grace display cases, tables, walls, mannequins, and all available space within the museum.”



*The Historical Society library in Orangeville, 1990s*

An improvement over previous sites, there were drawbacks. The facility, although heavily used, was open for just 15 hours three days a week and closed from October to April. It took 16 years, but an opportunity for a better location back in town finally came up. The Bloomsburg Public Library was building an addition and there was extra space that could hold the Society. It was an opportunity for new growth and an expansion of services in a more modern building. The Board felt it was a chance it could not pass up, an agreement was reached, and preparations began for the move. By August 1998, the church building had been sold for \$37,000.

The completion of the addition was one of two fortuitous events concerning Bloomsburg libraries to benefit the Society that year. The other was the opening of the second Harvey A. Andruss Library at Bloomsburg University. With all new furnishings purchased for that building, the Society was able to acquire at no cost the shelving, tables, and the other furniture it needed to outfit the new location. While the museum’s space would be restricted, the library was now able to expand and develop.

The room on the second floor of the public library’s addition was nearly 1,700 square feet, with 576 square feet of storage space in the basement. The Society library closed in Orangeville on June 27, moved on July 7, and reopened on July 15, 1998. The museum items came later, with some placed on display and the rest going in storage. Then in the last major change for the Columbia County Historical Society in the 20th Century, in 1999 it merged with the Central Susquehanna Valley Genealogical Society. This further reinforced research on both the history of the county and the lineage of the families who reside here.

Now once again, after 109 years as an organization, the Society has the opportunity to grow while occupying its largest accommodations yet. It will remain in downtown Bloomsburg, attract additional researchers, bring in visitors to a museum that has the potential to fully document the county's history, and provide meeting space for programs and groups. This latest chapter in the Society's history is giving it the potential to realize to a greater extent than ever before the goals set forth on that long ago spring day in 1914.