News from The Catholic Historical Society

Gary W. Roney, Director of the Department for Youth and Young Adults of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, joined the Society's Board of Directors on May 31, 2014.

Thomas E. White, Society Board Member and Archivist of Duquesne University, was recently selected by the American Association for State and Local History for a Leadership in History Award. He received an Award of Merit for his book, *Witches of Pennsylvania: Occult History and Lore.* He is the author of eight books about local history, legends, and myths.

Very Rev. Joseph M. Mele, Ph.D., former member of the Society's Board of Directors, assumed the position of Secretary of the Secretariat for Leadership Development and Director of post-ordination formation on July 1, 2014. He had previously served as rector of St. Paul Seminary in Pittsburgh.

Rev. James W. Garvey, Member Emeritus of the Society's Board of Directors, has completed writing the history of St. Anne Parish in Castle Shannon, which will be published in connection with the parish's 125th anniversary.

Francesco C. Cesareo, Ph.D., former member of the Society's Board of Directors, was named Chairman of the National Review Board by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. He also serves as president of Assumption College in Worcester, MA.

Michael Conway, who has served as the Society's "Rome Correspondent" while a seminarian at the Pontifical North American College, was ordained a priest of the Diocese of Pittsburgh in St. Paul Cathedral on June 28. *Ad multos annos!* One of Father Conway's articles appears in this issue.

Jack Demnyan, founding president of the St. Paul Seminary History Society in October 2010 and author of an article in the 2011 issue of *Gathered Fragments,* was ordained a Transitional Deacon of the Diocese of Pittsburgh in St. Paul Cathedral on June 14, 2014.

The February 9, 2014 issue of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* devoted a long article to "The Man Who Saved the Block House" — Michael Kennedy, who successfully frustrated efforts by the Pennsylvania Railroad to move the historic Fort Pitt Block House to another part of the city of Pittsburgh in the early 1900s. Kennedy was then a Pennsylvania state representative who introduced the "Historic Sites Act" of 1907 that prohibited the use of eminent domain to confiscate or remove buildings from the colonial or Revolutionary War periods. Kennedy, an avid historian, was one of the founders of the Catholic Historical Society at the organizational meeting held at St. Vincent College in Latrobe on May 27, 1940. He was the organizer of the Society's many field trips in the 1940s and 1950s — including a joint tour with the secular Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania to the Fort Pitt excavations at the "Point" on April 25, 1942. Kennedy was also a staff writer for *The Pittsburgh Catholic* newspaper. He died at age 89 on January 22, 1961.

Subsequent to publication of the 2013 *Gathered Fragments* article "John T. Comes, Catholic Architect," three events occurred which emphasize the importance of Pittsburgh's famed architect:

1. The former St. James School in Pittsburgh's West End is to be repurposed as an arts center/headquarters for the Pittsburgh Musical Theater, preserving the exterior and much of the interior of the 29,000 square-foot building.

2. The Church of St. Fidelis in Victoria, Kansas — the "Cathedral of the Plains" designed by Comes — was named a minor basilica by the Vatican in March 2014. Formal dedication of the church as a minor basilica took place on June 7, making it the first in Kansas and the 78th in the United States. There are approximately 1,600 minor basilicas throughout the world.

3. The life of John T. Comes was noted with publication of *Luxembourgers in America* (Belgium, WI: Luxembourg American Cultural Society, 2013).

On May 29, 2014, the mayor of Pittsburgh announced — in front of St. Stanislaus Kostka Church — that one-third of the Strip District in the City of Pittsburgh had been designated a National Historic District in the National Register of Historic Places. The area runs from 15th Street to 22nd Street and from just south of Railroad Street to Liberty Avenue — and includes St. Stanislaus Kostka Church and rectory, and St. Patrick Church with its integral rectory. The formerly independent parishes of St. Stanislaus Kostka (Polish), St. Patrick, and St. Elizabeth (Slovenian) merged in 1993 to form St. Patrick-St. Stanislaus Parish. Then-Cardinal Karol Wojtyla (now Pope St. John Paul II) visited St. Stanislaus Church on September 20, 1969.

In February 2014, the Mt. Lebanon Historic Preservation Board nominated a large portion of the Municipality of Mt. Lebanon (Allegheny County) as a National Historic District for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. Designation by the National Park Service was expected by Fall. The proposed district includes the historic St. Bernard of Clairvaux Church ("the Cathedral of the South Hills") complex, which was designed by the architectural firm of Comes Perry and McMullen.

In March 2014, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission approved the placement of a state historical marker to commemorate St. Nicholas Church on Pittsburgh's North Side. The marker will become part of a memorial plaza that will pay tribute to the Croatian community that developed along Route 28 starting in the 1890s. The ethnic national parish — the first in the Western Hemisphere — was created in 1894, and merged with its daughter parish of St. Nicholas in Millvale in 1994. The church, completed in 1901 with distinctive onion-shaped domes, was closed in 2004 and demolished in January 2013. The marker is to be erected this Fall.

The 163-year-old St. Severin log church in Drifing, Clearfield County (Diocese of Erie), which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was the subject of an article, "Old Log Church Stands Test of Time" in the June 2014 edition of *Faith,* a publication of the Erie Diocese, and accessible at http://www.eriecroc.org/faith.asp.

Bishop Lawrence E. Brandt of the Diocese of Greensburg announced the establishment of a diocesan Heritage Center in a February 11, 2014 letter. The center was blessed on May 13 and has the mission to "collect, preserve and assemble the cultural and archival patrimony of the diocese."
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Housed at the Bishop William G. Connare Center in Greensburg, the center includes additional space for the diocesan archives. A Diocesan Heritage Center Commission will function as an advisory board to the bishop. A 10-minute video of the Center is available at YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUpWCLGjUNY.

On January 13, 2014, the Benedictine Sisters of Elk County — located in the city of St. Marys in the Diocese of Erie — unanimously agreed to dissolve. Saint Joseph Monastery, the oldest Benedictine convent in the New World, will close after its 17 remaining members (ages 59 to 91) relocate or transfer vows to other Benedictine communities. The monastery was established in 1852 when Mother Benedicta Riepp and two companions arrived from St. Walburga Abbey in Eichstätt, Bavaria, at the invitation of Abbot Boniface Wimmer of St. Vincent's in Latrobe. Over fifty Benedictine monasteries in America and beyond trace their roots to the monastery in St. Marys. The city of St. Marys was established on the feast of the Immaculate Conception (Dec. 8), 1842 as Marientadt (Mary's city), a colonization project for German immigrants.

On November 23, 2013, the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth conducted a tour of the Motherhouse located at 285 Bellevue Road in Ross Township (Allegheny County), prior to the sale of the property. The four-story red brick building that once served as the provincial house and a girl's academy (which closed in 1970) will be converted to senior citizens' housing. The Mt. Nazareth Learning Center (preschool) and the chapel will remain.


Mercyhurst University in Erie, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, and Penn State University have collaborated in establishment of the Sister Joan D. Chittester Archive. A 1962 graduate of Mercyhurst, Chittester (former prioress of the Benedictines for 12 years and president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious) has become an internationally known lecturer and writer. The archive will be physically housed at Penn State, the Benedictine Sisters will maintain a permanent archives room, and Mercyhurst will host public events and exhibitions documenting her career.

Mary M. Wohleber, a long-time member of the Catholic Historical Society and one of the Board's former Members (1995-1996), died on September 5 at age 98. A fourth-generation resident of the Troy Hill section of the city's North Side, she was a community activist and historian who undertook the restoration of St. Anthony Chapel in Troy Hill in the 1970s when it was falling into disrepair. She led the successful effort to save the church, taking old slates from its roof, cleaning and painting and selling them for $5 each to raise money for the chapel's restoration. She gave a tour of St. Anthony Chapel and a lecture on the church's history for the Catholic Historical Society in March 1988. Mary was also a volunteer genealogical researcher at the Archives of the Diocese of Pittsburgh. She was the author of History of the City of Allegheny Fire Department 1828-1907 and was the subject of the book, The Women of Troy Hill: The Back-Fence Virtues of Faith and Friendship. Fittingly, Mary was buried from St. Anthony Chapel.

On June 19, 2014, Dennis Wodzinski, Society Board Member and Congregational Archivist for the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God, led an evening tour at the community's Whitehall Motherhouse, titled "History at Twilight — The Hand of Fr. Joe." The walking tour highlighted the life and ministry of the community's longest tenured Motherhouse chaplain, Fr. Joseph Skripkus. In addition to his spiritual duties, "Fr. Joe" greatly improved the natural landscape of Mt. Providence by helping construct the Motherhouse pond and several of the campus structures, and planting over 14,000 trees and plants on the property. The tour, attended by approximately thirty guests, traversed some of the Motherhouse grounds and stopped at several notable spots significant in the life of Fr. Skripkus. The "History at Twilight" tour is an annual feature of the outreach program conducted by the Sisters of St. Francis of the Providence of God's Archives Department.