

# THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF THE PHOENIXVILLE AREA

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## MARCH MEETING, MARCH 14, 2007

Members and their friends are invited to attend our Quarterly Meeting on Wednesday, March 14, at 7:30 PM at the Phoenixville Federal Bank Conference Center on Nutt Road, formerly the site of the Pizza Hut.

The topic will be "The Life and Work of Chester County Artist and Craftsman - Wharton Esherick". A representative from the Wharton Esherick museum will give a lecture and slide show presentation of this unique local museum, and discuss the life and works of the artist.

Wharton Esherick was born in 1887, and from his earliest years he was obsessed with drawing. He made endless sketches of his mother and scenes of life in his Philadelphia neighborhood where the Schuylkill River curved under the arched bridges made famous by local painter Thomas Eakins. After high school, he studied at the

Philadelphia School of Industrial Arts. In 1909, he was awarded a scholarship for further study at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts. In 1913, Wharton Esherick and his wife moved to Paoli. He unsuccessfully pursued a career as a painter, and he abandoned his brushes and canvas for chisels and wood in 1924. He threw himself into wood block printing, wood sculpting, and the crafting of small items of furniture. His sculptures, furniture, and architectural interiors were stunningly new in their time and eventually they changed the way many designers and artisans thought about the design potential of furniture and wooden structural forms. When he first started working with wood, he used exotic materials from Asia and Africa. He then began exclusively using local wood from his area of Eastern Pennsylvania. He was a lover of nature and he was profoundly influenced by Henry David Thoreau's book, *Walden*. During his life, Esherick's work was featured at three

World's Fairs, and was exhibited by such organizations as the Smithsonian Institution, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Crafts. He died in 1970.

Esherick's studio on Valley Forge Mountain took him forty years to build. The building, its contents and grounds have been preserved much as they were when he lived and worked there. There are more than two hundred of his works — paintings, woodcuts, sculptures, and furniture, produced between 1920 and 1970, on exhibition at the museum. The Studio is open for one hour guided tours on Saturdays 10 AM - 5 PM, Sundays 1 PM to 5 PM, and Monday through Friday (groups of 5 or more) from 10 AM to 4 PM. The museum is closed January, February, and on major holidays. Call 610-644-5822 for reservations and directions.



### OFFICE & MUSEUM

The office and museum are open Wednesdays and Fridays 9 A.M. until 3 P.M. and also the first Sunday of every month between 1 and 4 P.M. Appointments may be arranged for other dates and hours.

# MIRIAM CLEGG

## 1913-2006

### HSPA's Venerable Historienne

By Zoe Perkins

**M**iriam Clegg died on December 21 and to honor her twenty-three years of service to the Historical Society of the Phoenixville Area, we are devoting this newsletter feature article to her.

Miriam's affection for Phoenixville began in 1958, when she married Alfred Clegg, a Phoenixville native whose ties were strong and deep. Miriam was raised on the city side of City Line Avenue, the daughter of a wealthy paper merchant. She attended Merion Mercy Academy, as did her older brother William; she graduated from Rosemont College in 1935. She was the protégé of Carleton Davis, a founding engineer of what is now AquaAmerica, where she wrote the company newsletter. She spent summers at the Davis farm in Birchrunville, and upon Davis' death, she chose to make the farm her permanent home. Alfred was a water company employee to whom she was introduced in 1957. After the proverbial whirlwind courtship, they were married and he moved to Birchrunville.

Alfred arrived with some Phoenixville baggage: he was an enthusiastic collector of Griffin Smith & Hill majolica, having been introduced to its charms by his mother Lillian. Miriam caught the



*Miriam in 2003*

bug too, and over the years she and Alfred amassed one of the great collections of Etruscan majolica, including a treasured Holy Water Font, one of the rarest Phoenixville majolica pieces. The entire collection was willed to HSPA by Miriam, and it will be showcased early next year at the Society's headquarters at Church and Main Streets.

In her early days at the farm, Miriam gardened and learned to love the country life, but it was the countryside itself that fascinated her. She was intrigued by the old farmsteads and their inhabitants, how they lived and how they eked out a living on tough farmland – her own farm was called “Hard Scrabble,” appropriately named. She joined a group of local

historians, led by Elizabeth Eldridge, and together they created a history of West Vincent Township that is still being reproduced and sold. This whetted her appetite for history and historical research: she learned how to search the enormous data bases available at Chester County from Estelle Cremers and Eleanor Morris, grand dames of Chester County history. And by 1983, when she took over the newsletter of HSPA, she was poised to do some of her finest writing.

Her first article, which appeared in the fall 1983 newsletter, featured

an enduring favorite Phoenixville native son, Governor Samuel Whitaker Pennypacker and his life at Pennypacker Mills after retiring as Pennsylvania's governor. Her writing was plain and unembellished: “I realized my readers will be under the impression that I was born before the advent of the automobile. Not so. In my childhood the car had already replaced the horse and carriage, but the workaday horse and wagon persisted for a decade or so.” She never quite got around to admitting her age – she was seventy when she launched this career – but her self-deprecating manner lent a certain authority to her work.

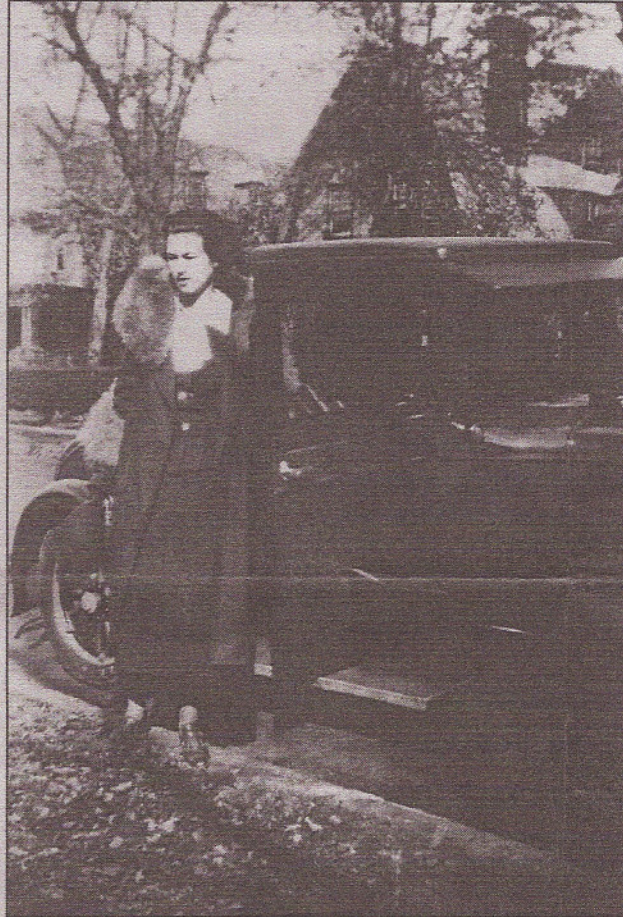
Thus began the principle joy of her life, her HSPA writing, and she often gave it precedence over her husband and her farm. Completing an article was for Miriam an obsession. She worked in an orderly but determined fashion: first she chose her subject, piled up research, reading every bit of it, making an outline – often revising as she met difficulties – then drafting, editing, re-editing and completing copy that was turned over to staff at HSPA for final production in the newsletter. Miriam was also responsible for the ‘rest of the newsletter,’ as she used to describe it, the public face of HSPA revealed in its announcements, dinner meetings, memberships and social events.

As you know, the newsletter appears quarterly, and as her expertise grew, Miriam’s articles became longer. Her first efforts were short but well-researched, and she enjoyed including the illustrations of her friends Jane Ritchey and Jack Shenkle. She was extremely proud of Jane’s series of Christmas Club tiles for the Phoenix Federal Bank & Trust Company, and often included the annual illustration in the Christmas newsletter.

Miriam concentrated on Phoenixville’s luminaries, its predominant steel industry and its Civil War ties. She never tired of writing about the iron and steel company, its great successes and its charismatic leaders. But she included the great disappointments, too, writing sensitively about the Quebec Bridge disaster and how the company fared as the iron and steel business waned in Phoenixville. The Reeves family, the McAvoy’s, the Whitakers, Pennypackers, Cornetts, Squire Howell are names by now familiar to readers of her HSPA articles. And of course William Penn, who started it all. One of her earliest

articles featured “Penn’s Sylvan Lands,” a theme she returned to many times to underscore the longevity of Phoenixville’s heritage and its strategic location along the French Creek.

She wrote many features about Griffen and his cannon that was instrumental in the Civil War. Miriam’s husband Alfred had a number of old daguerreotypes of



*Miriam in 1935*

his Civil War soldier-relatives, and she delighted in including them in her articles. In 1991, after a number of pieces devoted to John Griffen, she wrote “The unusually eventful life of ironmaster John Griffen deserves a full-length biography, and someday this may come about. Until one is written the following short account attempts to bring into sharper focus the life and times of a Titan of the American iron industry.”

Among the many delightful features of Miriam’s early newsletters was one called “What did they do before....” Introduced

in 1984 and running for five years, she investigated services taken for granted by her readers: banks, electric light, washing machines, cameras, ball point pens, paper bags, soda pop, panty hose, technical schools, supermarkets, superhighways, and interestingly, salt: all the conveniences of daily existence with fascinating histories of their own.

Miriam loved reader feedback and inquiries. Her “In Our Mailbox” column was very popular. Requests arrived from all over the country, from young and old, and each was answered individually and sometimes, when the subject merited wider attention, in the quarterly newsletter itself. Letters of appreciation sat on her desk for years, to be re-read at her leisure. They were marked “FAN – DO NOT DISCARD!”

Miriam loved books. As she became increasingly home-bound, the Hard Scrabble Farm library became her main source of information, until she discovered the internet. Some of that library, numbering many hundreds of reference books, will be added to the HSPA archives. She never missed an opportunity to commend another author, judiciously giving credit to those who informed her

writing. Most readers will remember that she relied most often on the *Pennypacker Annals* for historical reference. She admired Harry Rinker and Dr. John Lukacs and was a fan of Phoebe Gilkyson, whose columns were staples of the old *Daily Republican* newspaper. Miriam counted Neal Thorpe among her favorite people, not only for Neal’s Gilkyson family ties, but for her generosity with family photographs and memorabilia often published in the newsletter.

Until 1996, Miriam depended mostly on the work of Ritchey and Shenkle to illustrate her articles, but in that year, she began to



A Jane Ritchey drawing featured in a previous newsletter, and on the Phoenixville Federal tile that year

feature photographs from the HSPA photographic archives. That spring's newsletter concentrated on John Denithorne, his steam boilers and his small bridges – using photographs provided by her close friend and HSPA ally Bob Deger. It was to Bob that she turned in later years to photograph artifacts from her own collections as illustrations for her articles.

Miriam was an ardent supporter of Phoenixville and its revitalization. In June 1996, she wrote what can be considered a primer of the history of the Schuylkill River and Phoenixville's long association with that important waterway. "We confidently expect by the year 2000, or soon after, visitors to the region should be enjoying the benefits of beautiful shore lines. Boats will ply the waters, hiking, biking, and to use the term invented by the planners "cultural tourism" will prosper along the

greenways of the old Dutch mariner's 'Hidden River.'"

She worried about the fate of Phoenixville's great historical landmarks, condemning those individuals who 'allowed the General Pike Hotel' to be demolished. She alerted her readers to the potential risk to Moore Hall from a nearby subdivision. Miriam's longtime friend Eleanor Morris came to the rescue of that gorgeous structure, and it became a cause celebre for Miriam and the French & Pickering Creeks Conservation Trust. Miriam continued to write about the drama until Mrs. Morris completed protective covenants for Moore Hall and its adjacent landscape. The Foundry building was a particular favorite, and Barbara Cohen earned Miriam's thanks for saving and restoring that icon of the Phoenix Iron Company.

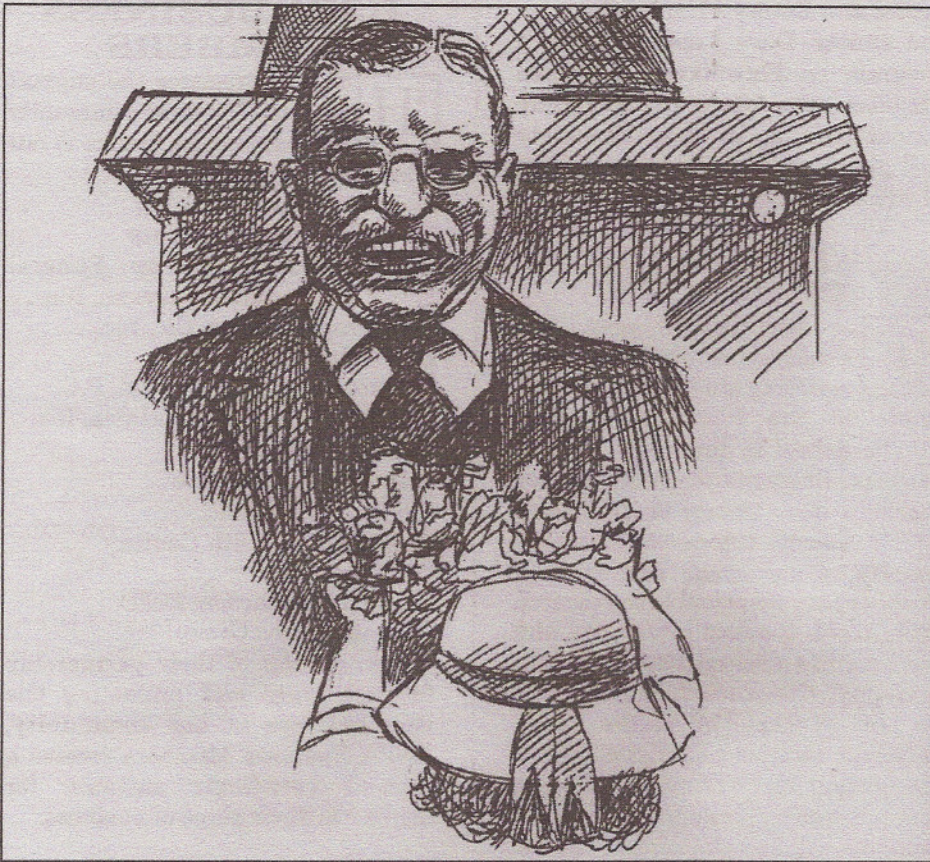
When Thomas Winpenny published his 1996 book, *Without Fitting, Filing or Chipping: An*

*Illustrated History of the Phoenix Bridge Company*, Miriam was initially elated. She devoted her June 1997 feature article to his work, but she gradually became disenchanted with the author, not for his scholarly work, but for his opinion of the role of the Reeves' leadership as the iron and steel company wound down in the 1950s. In fact, she demanded—and got—removal of what she considered negative references on the HSPA website.

On a more upbeat note, Miriam celebrated the twentieth anniversary of HSPA's founding by her dear friend David Frees Jr., following that article with wider-ranging subjects, like the history of the United States Postal Service and its Pennsylvania roots, notable towns of Southeastern Pennsylvania, old maps and their makers, and the global story of the iron and steel industry, when she tried to show her readers just how widely used Phoenix Iron products were: think East coast lighthouses, Ferris wheels and decorative iron work on the many Victorian palaces that still stand. In March 2001, Miriam teamed up with her Birchrunville neighbor John Coine to write "Automobiles of the Schuylkill Valley," devoted to early cars produced right here in Pennsylvania, illustrating that article with some remarkable images from John's collection.

Miriam never quite forgave an early HSPA president for donating the bulk of Phoenix Iron Company documents to the Hagley Museum, and she was determined to mine that source as best she could, which meant sending her researchers to Delaware to do her legwork. Miriam did all her writing at home, depending upon HSPA archives, her researchers and later, the internet, of which she became very fond. While she never pushed a computer button, she considered herself a 'techie' and spoke knowledgeably about various internet sites that she used.

One of her most engaging articles appeared in September



*A Jack Shenkle drawing featured in a previous newsletter*

2002, "Builders of the Pennsylvania Capitol." Because there was a hint of scandal and because she might be able to right a wrong, Miriam set about 'proving' that the maligned architect Joseph Huston and supplier John Sanderson were improperly indicted and convicted. After setting out a convincing argument, she wrote, "Isn't it time that historians revise the story of its construction so as to remove the blemish of crime from this otherwise magnificent structure and give the men who suffered so unjustly the credit they truly deserve?"

In June 2003, an exciting donation of letters was made to HSPA, prompting Miriam to demand to read them first and create an article around them. It was, as usual, elegant and informative. So were her last efforts: *The Miracle of Radio*, featuring Phoenixville's own songwriter/composer Terry Gilkyson; *Sturdy Old Barns of Chester County*, shaped around the efforts of local preservationists to save an

historic long barn in Tredyffrin Township; *Higher Education*, or how Phoenixville's elite were educated at the Ivy League colleges along the East coast – which included a survey of the histories of those colleges.

When Jack McCombs appeared at HSPA's offices a couple of years ago with a photograph of the interior of the Bodie Island Lighthouse, Miriam was notified that 'an exciting use of PICO iron' had been discovered. She corresponded with Jack, a well-known lighthouse expert, before finalizing her September 2005 article about Phoenix Iron Company and its lighthouse connections. Researchers were dispatched to the Hagley Museum to find ledger entries that attested to iron shipped for such purposes. Coming back empty handed was not an option, and the gracious research librarian at Hagley became Miriam's friend and ally.

June 2006 was perhaps her favorite article, because while she tackled the issue of Phoenix Iron

Company's many battles in court, she was assisted by the head litigator of a Philadelphia lawfirm, Kell Damsgaard, a friend and neighbor. Kell's legal research enabled Miriam to clear up some confusion created by incorrect newspaper accounts of the cases. She was delighted that one case involved a legal determination of when spring started, prompted by Phoenix Iron Company's untimely shipment of iron to England.

Miriam's final article about silk, for the December 2006 issue, was a struggle: she sensed that it might be her last and so she was more meticulous – if that's possible – than usual in her outlines and drafts. But she finished it in record time, sent it off to Becky Manley, her HSPA publisher, and considered it a job well done. It was.

Current HSPA President Jack Ertell wrote to Miriam shortly before her death, and we share his comments by way of closing: "The body of work you have produced over the years is a continuing source of information about our community to individuals, groups and organizations....your research and writing continue to benefit so many people and enriches an appreciation of our community's heritage."



*Miriam in 2000*

## A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT-

In late December, shortly before Christmas, Miriam Clegg, our longtime editor and chief writer of our newsletter passed away at the age of 93. The central article of this issue is a retrospective of Miriam's life and her many contributions to HSPA lovingly written by Zoe Perkins, newsletter staff member and a dear friend of Miriam. In the coming months, you'll notice changes in the HSPA newsletter as we move forward. The tasks of compiling materials, writing and editing will be taken up by the collaborative efforts of various members of the society. In her scholarship, writing and editing, Miriam set high standards in producing the newsletter. We will strive to maintain those high standards.

~Jack Ertell

## CLEGG BEQUEST

HSPA has received notification from the attorney representing the estate of Miriam Clegg. Miriam has bequeathed to the society her entire collection of majolica (approximately two hundred pieces), a Revolutionary War era rifle made in Chester County, and her extensive array of early 19th century blacksmith-made iron pieces. She has left a significant financial contribution to HSPA for, among other things, support of majolica display. Receipt of these items will come in future months as the estate is settled. As a part of determining how best to display these items, the HSPA Board is currently reviewing the present utilization of the HSPA building and the layout of the downstairs area.

## PROMOTING THE SOCIETY

Members of HSPA continue to promote the society through involvement in public speaking opportunities and participation in community events. In January, Jack Ertell gave a presentation on the work of the society to the Kiwanis Club of Phoenixville. In March, he will

speaking at a Rotary Club luncheon on the society. Dave Frees will give a program on Phoenixville Etruscan Majolica at a future Kiwanis Club dinner meeting. In May, the society will give a museum tour to a group of cub scouts.

## 8TH GRADE PROJECTS

For the fourth year, the society is aiding and assisting students in the 8th grade at the Phoenixville Area Middle School in their local history projects. Students of social studies teachers Jack Sturgeon and Dave Clark select topics on various aspects of our areas rich history. Students are responsible to research their topic, conduct interviews and put together a visual display. Due in mid-May, the student projects will be put on display in the school cafeteria. In order to assist students, the society has extended its hours and scheduled special days when the archives will be open exclusively for 8th graders and their parents. We've also assisted in guiding students to persons to be interviewed.

## PHOENIX BRIDGE COMPANY DONATION

Adam and Lee Deveney recently donated to the society several items related to the Phoenix Bridge Company. Two photo scrapbooks containing over a hundred and fifty photos trace the construction of the St. John's River Bridge in Jacksonville, Florida in 1924-25. Lee's grandfather, Mr. Harvey B. Orcutt, supervised the project. Among other items donated were drawings and specifications of various bridge projects and a full set of thirty-seven drawings compiled for the Province of Quebec in its investigation of the Quebec River Bridge collapse. HSPA continues to receive donations of photographs, documents and artifacts related to the heritage of our community.

## HSPA BUSINESS MEMBERS

HSPA appreciates the support from the business community and extends its thanks to our business members:

Angelo's Carpet Cleaning  
David M. Frees Insurance  
Devlin, Rosmos, Kepp Funeral Home & Cremation Services, Inc.  
Goodavage Drapery Co., Inc.  
Konell Insurance, Inc.  
O'Donnell, Weiss & Mattei, P.C.  
Pest Management Associates, Inc.  
Rabena Brothers, Inc.  
State Farm Insurance  
Tague Lumber, Inc.  
Wesley Sessa, 18th Century Restoration

William K. Reardon, DMD  
William James Group, Inc.  
In recognition of their partnership in preserving and promoting the rich heritage of our community, HSPA Business Members receive a framed certificate suitable for display in their place of business.

## STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL

The Strawberry Festival will be held in conjunction with the F.A.M.E. Festival on Bridge Street and the Kiwanis Duck Race. The scheduled date is Saturday, June 2nd, although it might move to another date in June. Check the local newspaper for any future announcements. The society will again hold a flea market as part of the festival. Items will be accepted after May 1st. HSPA will need volunteers to assist Chairman Dave Frees. Someone to coordinate children's games is especially needed. The HSPA Board of Directors thanks the following 105 contributors who have donated a total of \$9,085 to the 2006 ANNUAL APPEAL CAMPAIGN. We will use the funds to PROTECT and PRESERVE the facilities and artifacts of the Society.