

The  
**Historical Society**  
of the  
**Phoenixville Area**

204 Church Street,  
Phoenixville, PA 19460

(610) 935-7646

JUN. 2009, VOLUME 32, NUMBER 3

*Becky Manley, Newsletter Design  
and Layout*

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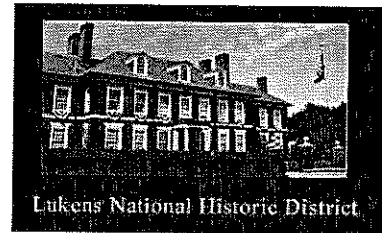
**OFFICE & MUSEUM**

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.

**QUARTERLY MEETING ON JUNE 10  
FEATURES PROGRAM ON THE LUKENS  
NATIONAL HISTORIC DISTRICT**

The quarterly meeting of the society will be held on Wednesday, June 10 at 7:30 PM at the Conference Center of the Phoenixville Federal Bank on Nutt Road. Following a brief business meeting, the speaker for the evening will be Mr. Eugene L. DiOrio, Executive Director of the Graystone Society of Coatesville. Mr. DiOrio, who was a founding member of the society created to assist Coatesville with historic preservation, is a former employee of Lukens Steel and the

author of "Chester County- A Traveler's Guide". He will present a program on the Lukens National Historic District which was established in Coatesville in 1994. Light refreshments will be served.



**HSPA ANNOUNCES TWO  
SPECIAL EVENTS**

**F**aces of Phoenixville — A special exhibit for the month of June. This exhibit will feature a display of more than one hundred and fifty rarely seen photos from the HSPA Archives that focus on the people of Phoenixville over the years. Coordinated by board member Anni Weden, a committee has been working on special display panels and preparing for this special event. The exhibit will kick-off on the evening of Thursday, June 4 with an invitation-only event for the contributors to the HSPA Annual Appeal Campaign. The exhibit will then open to members and the general public at Phoenixville's "First Friday" on June 5 when the museum will be open from 5 to 9 PM. In addition to the museum's regular hours in June, the exhibit will be open during the Strawberry Festival on Saturday, June 13.

**B**right Victory and Valley Forge General Hospital — The society will sponsor a special showing of the motion picture "Bright Victory" at the Colonial Theater on Sunday, July 19 at 2 PM. Filmed at the Valley Forge General Hospital and in Phoenixville, this Hollywood production from the early 1950s tells the story of a blinded soldier. To compliment the showing of the film, the HSPA Museum will feature a special exhibit of photos and memorabilia from the hospital during July and August.



# The Telephone Comes to Phoenixville

By J. R. Ertell

We live in an era of virtual instant communications around the world. It is sometimes difficult to image how different things were less than one hundred and fifty years ago. In 1859, the most modern form of communications was the telegraph system operated by companies formed by Samuel F.B. Morse. Experimentation with voice communications did not take place in earnest until after the Civil War with several scientist attempting to develop the capability of transmitting sound rather than "dots and dashes" to distant sites.

Scholars still argue over the true inventor of the telephone, citing the work of German physicist Johann Philip Reis, Americans Antonio Meucci and Elisha Gray in addition to that of Alexander Graham Bell. Bell's experiments finally proved successful in March of 1876 when the first complete sentence was transmitted "Watson, come here; I want you!" to his assistant Thomas Watson in another room. Although others had experimented with sound transmission and Elisha Gray had actually applied for a patent the same day as Bell (but two hours later), it was Scottish immigrant Bell, working on improvements to telegraphy, who is generally credited with inventing the telephone and creating a new industry. Displayed at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia that summer, spectators marveled at the new

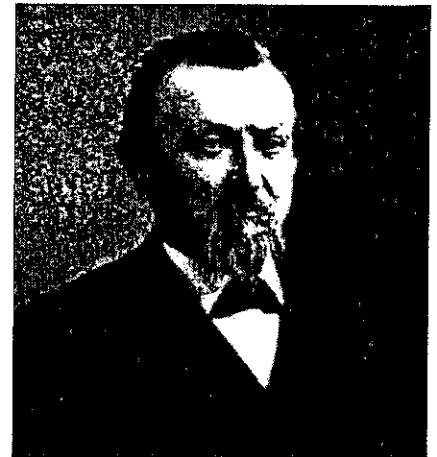


Alexander Graham Bell, 1876

device. The President of Brazil listening to Bell's device famously exclaimed, "It speaks!"

Within a year, Bell and business partners had formed The Bell Telephone Company and erected the first telephone exchange in Hartford Connecticut. Other inventors made claims of invention or patent infringement and Bell and his companies had to defend themselves more than six hundred times against various lawsuits; but in the end they prevailed. His company and the various subsidiaries that were formed gradually absorbed competitors, becoming a virtual monopoly over the course of the next three decades. Equipment was primitive, cumbersome and expensive at first. Early telephone transmissions had poor sound quality, with buzzing, hissing and a tendency for voices to be faint or to fade in and out. Despite these early limitations, the industry grew rapidly with many technological advances. Within fifteen years, thousands of miles of telephone lines carried messages between cities and the industry saw many technical developments in equipment.

The first telephone lines were often direct links between two specific locations. Phoenixville's first telephone was at the office of the Phoenix Iron Company and was a direct link to their office in Philadelphia. The invention of the switchboard in 1877 made it possible for telephones to connect with multiple sites. Unless there was a direct line, all telephone calls had to go through a switchboard. Manually operated, the early switchboards required an "operator." Receiving a call, the operator would make the connection between two telephone lines. Although rather crude automatic switching systems were first developed in the late 1880s, it would be well into the 20th century before operators were replaced by machines for most local calls and much later for long-distance calls. The rotary dial, which made automatic switching practical, was



Dr. Levi Oberholtzer

not developed until the 1920s.

Telephone service came to Phoenixville on September 1, 1883. The drug store of Dr. Levi Oberholtzer on Bridge Street (207-09 Bridge Street) was the location of Phoenixville's first switchboard. Dr. Oberholtzer (1831-1922) was a prominent figure in Phoenixville. A surgeon in the 139th Pennsylvania Infantry in the Civil War, he had established a pharmacy in Phoenixville after the war. Married to Angeline Vanderslice, a daughter of wealthy Phoenixville landowner John Vanderslice, he was active in community public life serving several times as a Borough Councilman and as Burgess (Mayor) in 1862 and 1863 and later in 1882. He also was an unsuccessful candidate for State Senator in 1883.

Phoenixville's first telephone operator was a son of Dr. Oberholtzer. Born in October of 1861, C. Herman Oberholtzer handled the telephone messages that came through his father's store. The switchboard had been placed there for customer's convenience. In a town of about 7,000 people, there were only four telephones in Phoenixville - located at the Phoenix Iron Company, the Phoenix Bridge Company, Dr. Nathan Pennypacker's home and at Oberholtzer's store. With only four telephones in town, much of

Herman's time was spent running messages to people. In an emergency, he would often deliver messages to people who lived more than a mile away.

Recalling later in life that he did not always do this task willingly, he commented that, "when a call came from a young man in another town who was endeavoring to arrange a date with a local girl, I sometimes rebelled." His reference to calls from another town reflects how the telephone changed communications. Communications from all over the world are routine in the twenty-first century. Long-distance was not quite so long in the late nineteen



*C. Herman Oberholtzer*

and early twentieth century. Early accounts of telephone operations from Phoenixville note that the telephone made it possible to talk with the outside world. In the 1880s, the "outside world" of telephone service meant talking to someone in Norristown or as far away as Philadelphia.

As time progressed, other subscribers were added to telephone service and the demands of handling calls at the drug store led Dr. Oberholtzer to hire a full-time operator. By 1900, there were sixteen telephone subscribers in Phoenixville (town population of about 9,000), with most located in businesses, industries and professional offices. The widespread

acceptance of the value of telephone service for business and the steady technical improvements led to its rapid growth. By 1905, service in Phoenixville had reached four hundred and ninety-four and by 1910, 1,098. With a population of about 11,000, this represented about one telephone for every ten persons in Phoenixville. Nation-wide, there were over 5.5 million telephones in 1905. It was reported by the *Daily Republican* that in the early twentieth century, the Phoenixville Military Band would assemble in front of Dr. Overholtzer's drug store and play concerts over the telephone lines to listeners in Norristown and Philadelphia.

As service increased, placing switchboards in small local businesses proved inconvenient and inadequate. Across the country the telephone company began to acquire their own offices and switching locations. In Phoenixville, the company bought property to build its own facility. By 1930, Bell Telephone of Pennsylvania had built a central office at 118 Gay Street. Located on the northwest corner at Hall Street, the company built a one-story office in the Beaux Arts Classical style, popular to the era. Located adjacent to Phoenixville's new post office, the modern commercial building handled business and technical services including manual and later switching equipment. By 1938, with new equipment installed, the site represented an investment of \$220,000 to Bell of Pennsylvania, a significant figure in the depression era. Proud of its facility, the telephone company held a three-day open house February 2-4, 1938. Still in use to day by Verizon, the building was expanded by adding a second floor in 1956 while still



*Bell Telephone Building, c. 1930*

retaining its architectural style.

The new company building reflected how integral the telephone had become in the everyday lives of people. Where once viewed as primarily a benefit for business activities, the majority of telephones in Phoenixville were now in peoples' homes. Of the 2,410 telephones in Phoenixville in October of 1938, 1,710 were in private home! The company employed twelve full time workers (six men and six women). By the 1930s with a population exceeding 12,000, the number of telephones in Phoenixville represented about one telephone for



*Telephone Building Today*

every five persons. Coupled with the growth of industry, transportation and population, the telephone had helped transform Phoenixville from a relatively isolated community in rural Chester County into an important part of the greater Philadelphia area and the "outside world."

In an earlier issue (January 29) in 1938, the *Daily Republican* (predecessor to the *Phoenix*) noted proudly: "Today, the 2,353 telephones in the community can be connected with almost any telephone in the civilized world and with incredible speed connections are made to the far corners of the world."



# Faces *of* Phoenixville

*An exhibition of rarely seen photographs  
from the museum's archives*

Exhibit dates:

June 5 to July 10, 2009

Opening Night:

Friday, June 5, 2009

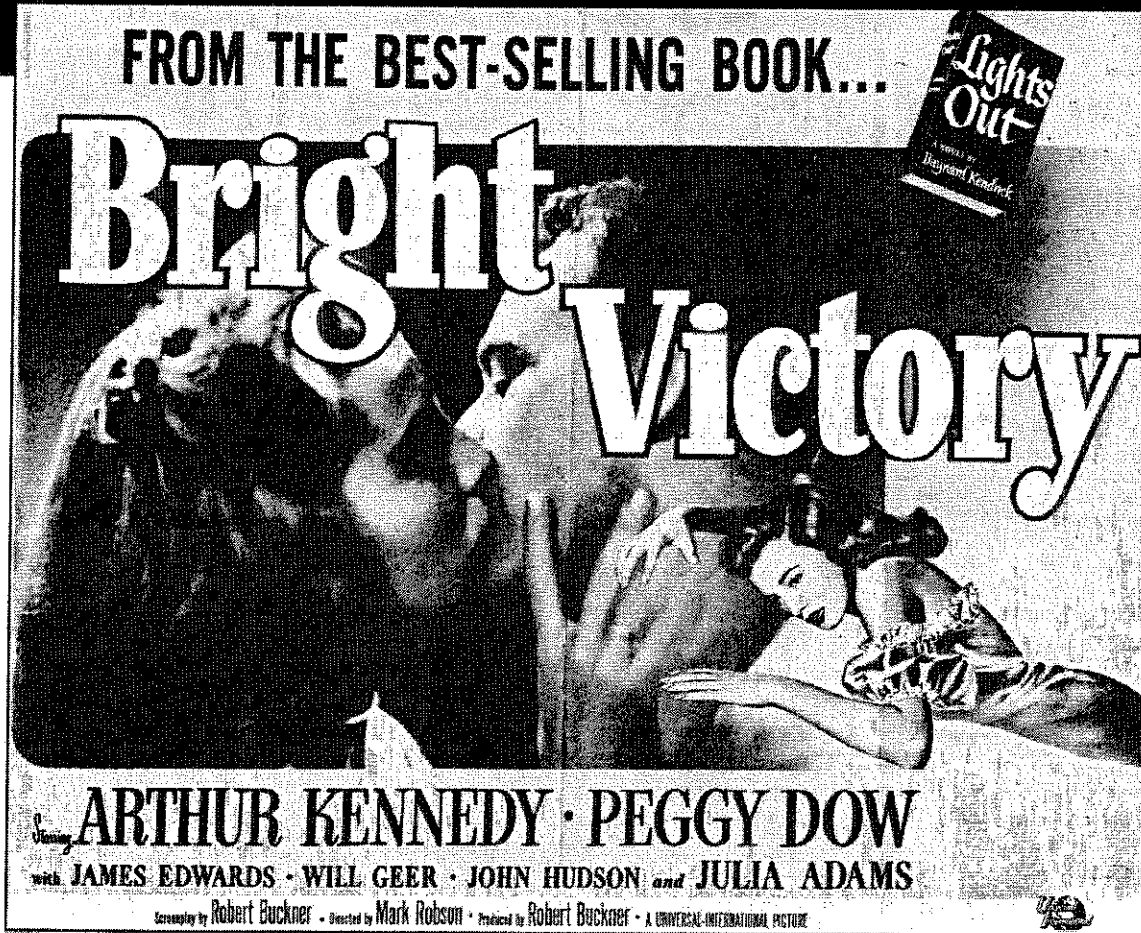
4-9 p.m.



204 Church Street, Phoenixville

Museum hours: Monday & Wednesday, 9 a.m.-3 p.m.;  
first Sunday of the month, 1-4 p.m.

The Historical Society of the Phoenixville Area  
*presents* **Bright Victory**  
at the Colonial Theater  
**Sunday, July 19 at 2:00 p.m.**



## **Valley Forge General Hospital Exhibit**

July 17 through August 28, 2009

Historical Society of the Phoenixville Area  
204 Church Street

Museum Hours: Mon. & Wed., 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.;  
First Sunday each month, 1 to 4 p.m.

## SPECIAL RECOGNITION TO HSPA VOLUNTEERS

In March, HSPA President Jack Ertell was one of ten recipients of the annual Mayor's Citizen Recognition Award presented by Mayor Leo Scoda for his volunteer work with both the historical society and the Kiwanis Club of Phoenixville. HSPA Volunteer and past Mayor's Award Recipient Bob Deger (HSPA Board Member, Assistant Treasurer and unofficial office manager) was recognized by the Chester County RSVP Program as their "Volunteer of the Year" at a luncheon held in March. Bob received an engraved clock along with certificates of recognition from the County Commissioners, State Senator Andy Dinniman and Chester County's State

Representatives. The society received a plaque for display honoring Bob.

## HSPA ELECTIONS AT QUARTERLY MEETING

The business portion of the Quarterly Meeting on June 10th will include the election of officers and board members. Positions to be filled are President, President-Elect, Treasurer and four Board Members. All positions are for two-year terms commencing in September. A Nominating Committee, chaired by Dave Frees, will nominate a slate of candidates at the meeting. Nominations can also be made from the floor, provided the person being nominated has assented to having their name place in nomination. Only HSPA members present at the meeting are eligible to vote.

## PROMOTING THE SOCIETY

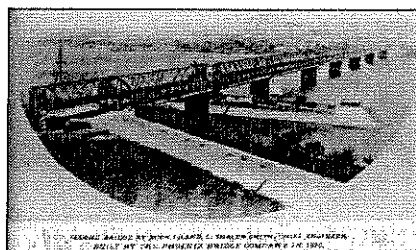
Members of HSPA continue to promote the society through their involvement in public speaking opportunities and participation in community events. On May 7, the society co-sponsored a multi-media presentation on the history of the Valley Forge General Hospital by Dr. Dan Mortensen, an administrator and faculty member at Valley Forge Christian College. Dr. Mortensen's presentation at the Schuylkill River Heritage Center had more than a hundred people in attendance. Also featured was an exhibit of hospital artifacts, documents and photos by HSPA Vice-President Ryan Conroy.

Several groups have toured the HSPA Museum and Archives recently. On May 13th, members of the Freedom Valley Questors were given a tour. Students and parents from the Kimberton Waldorf School visited on Monday, May 18. On May 20 a group of students from the Valley Forge Montessori School were visitors and on May 26 members of the Antique Committee of the Spring-Ford Women's Club were given a tour. Scheduled for June are visits by the fourth grade students of Barkley Elementary School and their teachers.

## RECENT DONATIONS:

The society continues to receive the donation of many wonderful items to our collection of artifacts, documents and photographs.

- Among items donated in recent months have been:
- A newspaper, "The Iron Man", published in Phoenixville in 1849. This four-page newspaper was published here briefly before relocating to Spring City. This donation came to HSPA from the Spring-Ford Historical Society.
- A large collection of Phoenixville-related booklets, pamphlets and other items from the family of the late Chester County Historian Paul Rodebough. Included was a small pamphlet related to the first bridges built across the Mississippi River in the 19th century. It was noted that the Phoenix Bridge Company built the second and third bridges that crossed the Mississippi. The collection also included a pamphlet published by the Phoenix Iron Works to guide a walking tour of the company's grounds by a group of British and German engineers in the 1890s, a ticket for the 1897 fiftieth anniversary banquet of the Phoenix Military Band, a directory (c. 1910) from the First Presbyterian Church, and a 1917 program from St. Mary's Church that featured a history of the church and pictures of the churches early pastors.



## HSPA MEMBER COMPILING WRESTLING HISTORY

HSPA member Maggie Cappelli has been compiling a comprehensive history of the wrestling program at the Phoenixville Area High School. Mrs. Cappelli has spent hours looking at microfilm of back issues of Phoenixville newspapers and through school yearbooks in doing

her research. HSPA readers who have information that might be helpful in her research are asked to contact the society.

### ACME RECEIPTS HELP SUPPORT HSPA

**H**SPA can be supported through the donation of ACME Markets receipts to the society. The company will donate 1% of receipt totals to the society. Hundreds of dollars have been donated to the society over the years through this program which is coordinated by HSPA volunteer Joanne Brown. Receipts can be dropped off at the society or mailed to HSPA.

### MEMBERSHIP REPORT

**H**SPA appreciates the many members who have renewed their memberships since the last newsletter and extend a welcome to the following new members:

Mr. George Sprenkle, Mr. Rodney Poskitt, Ms. Pam Trager, Mr. Michael Sabol and Business Member Paul C. Emery Co.

Donation - Mr. Robert W. Breiling

Additional Donors to the Annual Appeal Campaign - Mr. & Mrs. Richard C. Unger, Mr. & Mrs. Lawrence Gould, Mr. Hugo Buda, Ms. Alice Snyder, Mr. Emmett Gruici, Mrs. H.B. Freeman, Jr., Mr. Craig P. Emery of Paul C. Emery Co.

HSPA extends condolences to the families of recently deceased HSPA members Mr. Louis F. Glowacki and Mrs. Jean Mansur.

### HSPA FUND- RAISER AT IRON HILL BREWERY A GREAT SUCCESS

**T**he Iron Hill Fund-Raiser held by HSPA on Tuesday, April 21st, generated \$477 to the society for its preservation work. Patrons who presented a special coupon to their server saw Iron Hill contributing 20% of their bill (excluding alcohol) to the society.

This program was so successfully that Iron Hill has offered holding a second event to the society later in the year.

### UPCOMING EVENTS AND NEWS OF OTHER HISTORICAL ORGANIZATIONS

**S**chuylkill Canal Association - June 10, the SCA hosts the arrival of participants in the 11th annual Schuylkill Sojourn with an evening dinner and program. Saturday, June 28 - 27th annual Canal Day, 9-4 PM at Lock #60 and St. Michael's Park in Mont Clare. The Locktender's House is open to the public Mondays-Fridays, 9 AM to 5 PM. Check out their great website - [www.SchuylkillCanal.com](http://www.SchuylkillCanal.com), which now includes a 360 degree photo virtual tour of the canal and an animation of how a canal lock works.

**Pottstown Historical Society** - Their library is open for researchers the 2nd and 4th Sundays of the month, 1 to 4 PM and by appointments. Located at 568 High Street in Pottstown. Their website, [www.pottstownhistory.org](http://www.pottstownhistory.org)) has a great photo gallery.

**Chester County Historical Society** - Two special exhibits are now on display: "Abraham Lincoln in Chester County" and "Layers: Unfolding the Stories of Chester County Quilts." The quilt display will change exhibits twice over the year of the exhibit. In the fall, some of HSPA volunteer Joanne Brown's quilts will be included. Information can be found at their website - [www.cchs-pa.org](http://www.cchs-pa.org).

**Historical Society of Trappe, Collegetown and Perkiomen Valley** - Visitor's Center at 201 W. Main Street in Trappe. Tours of the Dewees Museum and Muhlenberg House available during the summer months on Sundays from 1:30 to 4:30 PM. Website - [www.trappehistoricalsociety.org](http://www.trappehistoricalsociety.org).

**The Mill at Anselma** - June 13, 10 AM to 4 PM, Flour Milling Demonstration - Website: [www.anselmamill.org](http://www.anselmamill.org)

### HSPA ITEMS AVAILABLE FOR SALE

The following items may be purchased by mail:

Annals of Phoenixville and  
Its Vicinity.....\$25  
It Started With  
A Nail Factory.....\$5  
Samuel Whitaker  
Pennypacker.....\$5  
History of Phoenix Hook  
& Ladder No. 1.....\$5  
Reprinted 19th Century  
Maps.....\$5  
(Phoenixville, Schuylkill, East Pikeland,  
Charlestown, Lower Providence  
Townships - Specify map)

*Price includes postage. Checks  
should be made out to HSPA.*

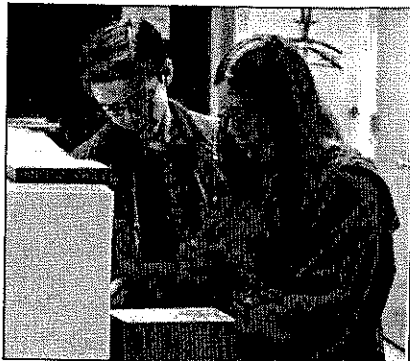
### YEARBOOKS NEEDED

**T**he society has a large collection of Phoenixville High School yearbooks since first published in 1930. Researchers find these to be valuable resources for family history and other information. We would like to fill the "holes" in our collection and would appreciate donations of any of the following years: 1979, 1985, 1986, 1990, 1993, 1997, 2002 to the present. We also have a collection of yearbooks from the Northern Chester County Technical School and could use the years prior to 1982 and after 1989.

### 8TH GRADE PROJECTS

**F**or the sixth year, the society has aided and assisted 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 selected topics on various aspects of our areas rich history. Students are responsible to research their topic, conduct interviews and put together a visual display. In order to assist students, the society extended its

hours by staying open on Wednesday afternoons until 4:30 and scheduled three Saturday morning special openings when the archives will be open exclusively for the students and their parents. We've also assisted in guiding students to persons to be interviewed.



## STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL

Mark your calendars for Saturday, June 13 when HSPA will hold its annual Strawberry Festival. With Dave Frees and John Keenan serving as co-chairman, the festival will include a super flea market, a special collectible and antique sales tent, a bake sale table, and lunch featuring our famous strawberries with cake and ice cream. Information was mailed out later in the spring. The Flea Market will begin at 9 AM, with food becoming available after 10 AM. Please contact the office if you can supply an item for the baked goods table. Flea market items will be accepted during regular hours of the society's office or by calling to arrange pick up. Please remember **NO CLOTHING, FURNITURE, TELEVISIONS OR COMPUTERS WILL BE ACCEPTED.**

## MEETING DATES

Board meetings are held on the second Wednesday of the month (first Wednesday in months when Quarterly Meetings are held). Quarterly meetings are held the second Wednesday of the month in March, June and December. The Quarterly meeting in September takes place as the annual banquet (date to be announced). Members are welcome to attend all meetings.

### MEMBERS NOTE:

If your mailing label is highlighted, your membership is due for renewal and this will be your last issue.

*The Historical Society of the Phoenixville Area is a non-profit corporation organized exclusively for charitable purposes within the meaning of section 501 c 3 of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code of 1954 as amended. Contributions are tax deductible.*

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