

# The Oracle

*Newsletter for the Historical Society of Dauphin County*



## What's Inside?

- 150th Anniversary of HSDC
- Brick Returns to Dauphin Co.
- The Great Fruitcake Caper



Summer 2019

### **Mission Statement:**

The Mission of the Historical Society of Dauphin County is to collect, preserve, exhibit, publish, and promote interest in the history of Dauphin County for the education, enjoyment and benefit of the public.

### **Board of Directors:**

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Rick Hartman & Don Schwab  
*Docents*

And a dedicated & growing group of volunteers!

# **HSDC Turns 150!**

On the evening of May 13, 1869, a small group of men who shared “a deep interest in the preservation of the Historical Records of our County, so rich in old time memories” met at the home of Dr. William Egle on Walnut Street in Harrisburg for the purpose of forming a local historical society. Dr. James Fleming was chosen President and a committee was formed to draft a constitution and bylaws. A follow-up meeting was held on June 4 in the Lecture Room of the Market Square Presbyterian Church at which the constitution and bylaws were adopted and membership dues were set at two dollars per year.

The Historical Society of Dauphin County was on its way.

The society was based in multiple locations in downtown Harrisburg in the years between its founding and the acquisition of its permanent home in the John Harris-Simon Cameron Mansion in 1941 through a bequest of the Cameron and Haldeman families. (As Simon Cameron was firmly ensconced in the house that John Harris, Jr. built at the time of the meeting, the men who came together at Dr. Egle’s house surely never dreamed that the society they were organizing would eventually find a home in the Mansion.)

Over the past 150 years, officers, board members, staff, and volunteers have come and gone at the Historical Society while Dauphin County kept making history. Through it all, the Historical Society of Dauphin County has remained true to its objective of preserving the rich and diverse history of our County. That is definitely something worth celebrating.



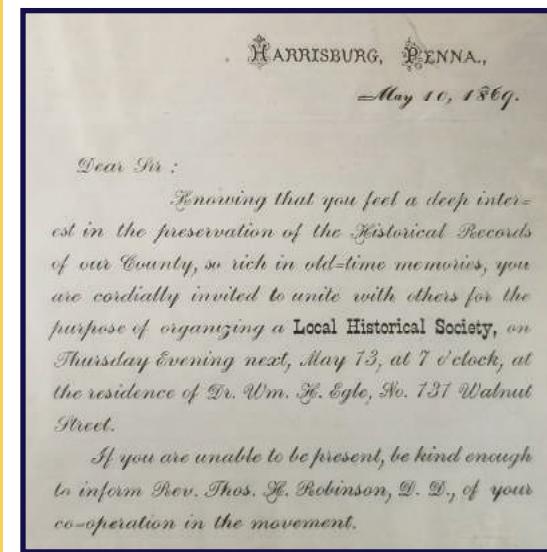
HSDC's first president,  
A. Boyd Hamilton  
President 1869



The birthplace of HSDC,  
Dr. Egle's home at  
131 Walnut Street, Harrisburg



HSDC's second president  
who lent his home for  
the first meeting,  
Dr. William Henry Egle  
President 1897-1901



Left:  
The official  
invitation to  
attend the  
organizational  
meeting at Dr.  
Egle's home  
on May 13,  
1869

Right:  
The official  
journal  
holding all of  
the original  
handwritten  
meeting  
minutes from  
1869



**Fun Fact:**  
Accounting for inflation, the \$2 dues in 1869 is equivalent to \$37.66 in 2019... meaning we have kept dues right around the original level!

# Fifty+ Years a Volunteer

In 1968, Ernest Kepner's love of history led him to become a volunteer at the Historical Society of Dauphin County. Fifty-one years later, he is still sharing his time and talents with HSDC and the Harris-Cameron Mansion. To put that in perspective, Ernie's tenure as a volunteer spans a third of the time that HSDC, which was founded in 1869, has been in existence.

Ernie began his volunteer career by working on the refreshment committee under the leadership of Miss Jean Pugh. At the time, the Society presented a program on the third Monday of the month followed by refreshments featuring tasty confections prepared by the members of Miss Pugh's committee. (Miss Pugh's silver tea set is on display in the Mansion dining room which has been named in her honor). Through the years, Ernie has kept that tradition alive by preparing tasty treats for teas and other HSDC functions at the Mansion.

Ernie served on the HSDC Board of Trustees during the late 1980s, a time of challenges and transition for both the Society and the Mansion. He served on the committee that conceived and ran the first July Fourth reenactment of John Harris, Jr. reading the Declaration of Independence from the front porch of the Mansion, an event that has become an Independence Day tradition.

Ernie is also well known for his amazing Christmas ornament collection. His teddy bear Christmas tree has added to the magic of the Mansion during the holidays for many years. Ernie decorated four Christmas trees, each with a unique theme, for the 2018 Deck the Halls Gala and holiday season.

Ernie is a member of a number of local historical societies and volunteers at the Historic Peace Church.

Ernie received a special presentation at HSDC's *Deck the Halls* holiday gala on December 6, 2018 in recognition of his years of exceptional service to the Historical Society of Dauphin County.

Ernest Kepner has been, and continues to be, one of HSDC's most treasured assets. We hope that his volunteering will continue for many years to come.



Ernie next to Miss Pugh's silver tea set



Ernie's teddy bear Christmas tree



Deck the Halls presentation, left to right:  
Jeb Stuart, Erik Fasick, Ernie Kepner, Chris  
Turner & David Biser as John Harris, Jr.

## Volunteers Needed

The Historical Society of Dauphin County could not survive without the efforts of our dedicated volunteers. If you would like to join them, there are many ways that you can help HSDC fulfill its mission of keeping the rich history of Dauphin County alive:

- ~ Give tours of the Harris-Cameron Mansion
- ~ Help out in the library and archives
- ~ Perform hosting duties at functions and programs
- ~ Exercise your green thumb in our gardens and grounds
- ~ Assist in the Society's office



Whatever your interests and skill sets are, you can spend fun and rewarding hours as an HSDC volunteer. For more information, contact us at 717-233-3462 or [office@dauphincountyhistory.org](mailto:office@dauphincountyhistory.org).

# One of a Kind Brick Returns to Dauphin County



The last brick returns to Dauphin County

The Historical Society of Dauphin County recently received a donation of a truly unique brick with a remarkable story. The whereabouts of this one of a kind brick was a mystery until February 2018. At first glance, it appears to be an every day brick from an ordinary building. In fact, this brick was part of a prize package for *The Great Brick Laying Contest*, developed by the *Harrisburg Telegraph* to promote the completion of the nineteen-story Harrisburger Hotel in the summer of 1930.

The contest was a clever twist on the old tradition of inviting dignitaries and the public to a ceremonial "buttering" (applying mortar to) the last face brick of a new large building. Readers of the *Telegraph* were invited

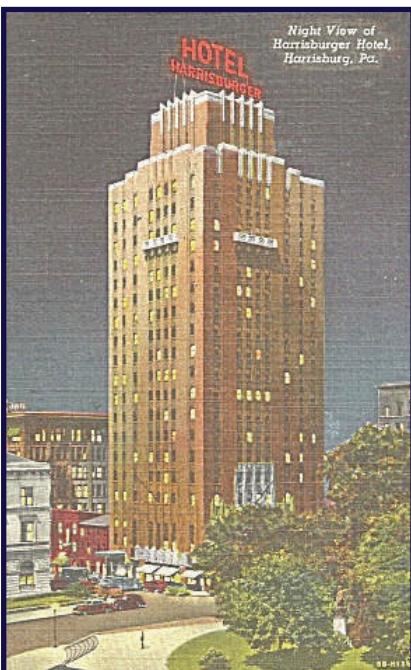
to guess the total number of facing bricks in the building. The person who came closest to the actual number of bricks (401,850) would not only win that special "last brick," but also \$12.50 in gold, a sum sufficient to buy a week's worth of groceries for the average family.

The winner was Mrs. Louise M. Demmy, whose guess of 401,803 was only 47 bricks short of the actual total. Mrs. Demmy was the spouse of David Demmy, a prominent local architect. In what certainly became the stopper in all arguments for the rest of their married life, Mr. Demmy's guess was off by 9,694 bricks. The Demmies moved to Altoona in 1953 where the brick gathered dust on a bookshelf. In 2018, the Demmies' daughter, Deborah Demmy Thomas, donated the historic piece of masonry along with some of her father's architectural drawings and other memorabilia to HSDC. The brick is now a permanent part of HSDC's collection and may be viewed by the public.

More information on the brick and *The Great Brick Laying Contest* can be found in HSDC Librarian Ken Frew's book *Building Harrisburg: The Architects and Builders, 1719-1941* (available for purchase at HSDC's gift shop).



Deborah Demmy Thomas presents the brick to HSDC librarian Ken Frew



Vintage postcard showing the Harrisburger Hotel at night

Vintage postcard showing the Harrisburger Hotel, Post Office and "New Office Building" c. 1930s

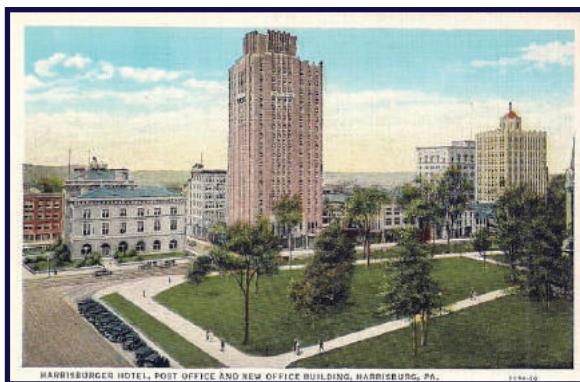
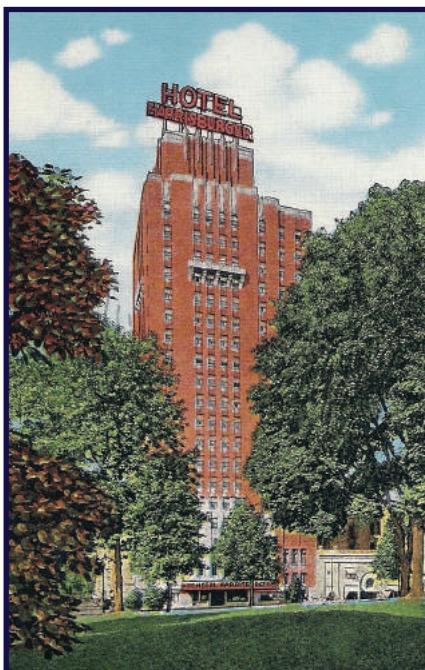


Photo showing a portion of the lobby of the Harrisburger Hotel



Vintage postcard showing the exterior of the Harrisburger Hotel

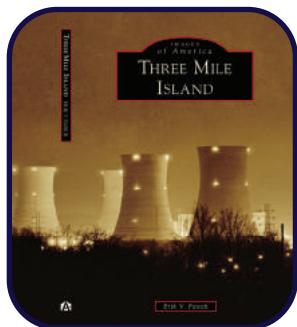
# 40th Anniversary of Three Mile Island Accident Panel Discussion & Exhibit

For area residents of a certain age, March 29, 1979 is a “Where were you when you heard...?” kind of day. As part of a weeklong series of events, the Historical Society of Dauphin County hosted a panel discussion, exhibit, and book signing commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island. The event was held on March 23, 2019 at the Harris-Cameron Mansion.

Highlighting the event was a panel discussion, coordinated by Three Mile Island Alert, featuring journalist R.B. Swift, nuclear engineer and expert witness in the TMI investigation Arnie Gundersen, and Eric Epstein of TMI Alert. The discussion focused on the events that unfolded at the state capitol in the days following the nuclear accident.

The event also featured the opening of an exhibit jointly curated by the historical society and Three Mile Island Alert. The exhibit includes photographs from the society’s Allied Pix collection and various Three Mile Island ephemera including publications, buttons, posters, tee-shirts, and other mementos. The exhibit is currently open for viewing as part of your tour of the Harris-Cameron Mansion.

The event coincided with the release of *Three Mile Island*, authored by society president Erik V. Fasick and published by Arcadia Publishing. The book features over 200 images sourced from the Allied Pix Collection which focus on the nuclear accident along with the protests and clean-up efforts that followed. Special limited signed and numbered copies of the book are available for purchase at the HSDC gift shop.



Pictures left to right:

Cover of *Three Mile Island* by Erik Fasick

TMI 40th Anniversary Panel Discussion held on March 23

A portion of the TMI 40th Anniversary exhibit, currently still on display



## Thank You to Our 2018 Deck the Halls Sponsors

**Harris**  
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Eckert Seamans Cherin & Mellott, LLC  
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Harristown Enterprises Inc.  
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Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency  
Roberta & Jack Shaub  
Greg & Susie Sutliff

A special thank you to our decorating committee for helping to make the Mansion look its holiday best!

Marion Alexander  
Sommer Garber  
Marcia Gobrecht  
Ruthann Hubbert Kemper  
Ernie Kepner  
Cathy Lotwick  
Jim Martin  
Tammy McClenaghan  
Bev Peirce  
Sandra Prahl  
Anne Yellott

Save the Date for This Year's Deck the Halls  
December 12, 2019 - 6:00pm

# Mansion Improvements

Thanks to the generous support of the Dauphin County Tourism Grant Program, The Alexander Boyd & Jane Starke Boyd Charitable Foundation, and other lovers of Dauphin County history, the wallpaper in the solarium, where Simon Cameron enjoyed his champagne breakfasts, has been restored to the original beauty. The spectacular scenic wallpaper, depicting the palace & gardens of Versailles and scenes of 18th century life in the French court, was produced in France by Zuber & Cie. It was among the many items acquired by Cameron in Europe to adorn the John Harris home that he planned to buy. The painstaking restoration work was completed by Historic Wallpaper Specialties of Johnson City, Tennessee.



A section of the wallpaper with significant water damage



The same section of wallpaper after the restoration

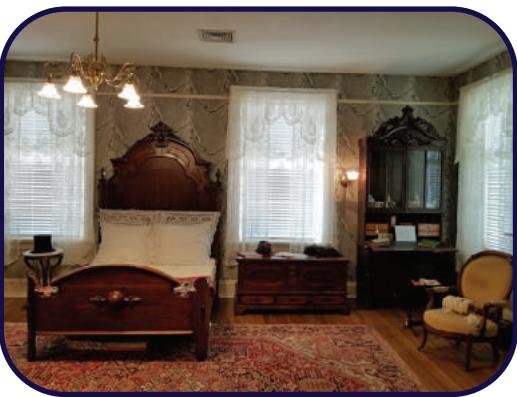
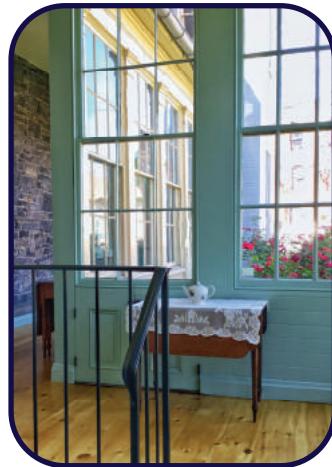


A restorer touches up faded and damaged spots with a very small paintbrush

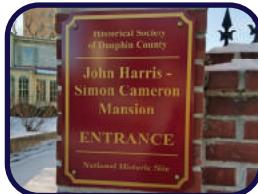


The restoration team takes a moment to pose in front of their finished work

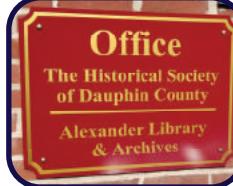
A new hardwood floor now graces the butler's walkway as a result of a grant from The Alexander Boyd & Jane Starke Boyd Charitable Foundation. As a result of the installation of this floor, areas of the Mansion that are open to the public, with the exception of the butler's pantry and the kitchen entrance, are now linoleum free, a fact that undoubtedly brings a smile to General Cameron's face in his home in the great beyond. Pictures to the right show the old linoleum flooring and the new wood floors.



We now have period appropriate lace curtains on the windows in the Victorian bedroom thanks to funding from the Civil War Dance Foundation.



Thank you to the Donald B. and Dorothy L. Stabler Foundation and the Josiah W. and Bessie K. Kline Foundation for funding our new signage.



# “Scant Clues Except That Thieves Have Liking for Fruit Cake”

Living in the time before the introduction of home security systems, the owners of the Mansion were much more vulnerable to burglary than homeowners are today. (That being said, Mansion residents were spared the possibility of penury due to someone gaining access to their bank accounts through the gateway of the smart icemaker on their refrigerators.)

Sometime during the night of August 8-9, 1928, the inevitable happened and the Mansion was broken into and ransacked while Richard Haldeman, grandson of Simon Cameron and owner of the house, was travelling in Canada. His housekeeper was staying at her mother's home before leaving on a trip to Coatesville.

According to contemporary newspaper accounts, the break-in was first discovered shortly after 9:00 AM by the housekeeper's mother who had come to the home to perform some duties for her daughter but, as she later told police, was too excited to report the crime. Shortly after 10:00 AM, Grace Plowman, a child who lived on Front Street, reported the burglary to a patrolman in the vicinity of South Front and Washington Streets. The subsequent investigation revealed that the burglars showed persistence and at least one of them apparently had a serious sweet tooth.

The police found evidence of multiple attempts to gain entry. The thieves initially removed the outside cellar door on the Washington Street side of the building only to be stymied by a heavily bolted inner door. There were signs that they attempted to force open a window above the cellar door also to no avail. They finally succeeded in cutting through a screen door then forcing the latch of a door on the Washington Street side.

The evidence indicated that once inside, the intruders proceeded to ransack the rooms on the second floor, paying particular attention to the master bedroom. One of Haldeman's shotguns was found leaning against a wall, apparently put there by the thieves for use in the event of interruption.

Since Haldeman was out of the country and unreachable, it was difficult to determine what, if anything, had been taken during the burglary...with one notable exception. Crumbs scattered on the floor of the master bedroom showed that the burglars had happened upon a fruitcake during their search for valuables and snacked on it while ransacking. This inspired the *Harrisburg Telegraph* to run perhaps the most unique sub-headline in the history of American journalism: “Scant Clues Except That Thieves Have Liking For Fruit Cake.”

Almost a year went by before a man was arrested at Second and Chestnut Streets brandishing a revolver. (His level of intoxication was not reported in the press.) The Colt revolver proved to be a gift from the manufacturer to Simon Cameron during his brief tenure as Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of War and was among the items taken during the burglary. The newspapers are silent as to the disposition of his case. Perhaps either the police or a judge felt that the gastric consequences of fruitcake consumption during the month of August was punishment enough.

## Paint & Sip in the Parlor

A big thank you to everyone who attended our first ever paint & sip in the parlor on May 31, to Meredith Woolverton for suggesting the event and to Bring Your Own Apron for teaching us all how to paint. We can't wait to do it again!



The Historical Society of Dauphin County

219 South Front Street

Harrisburg, PA 17104

717-233-3462

Your membership contribution benefits HSDC and you!

As an HSDC member you receive:

Unlimited Mansion tours

Unlimited visits to the Alexander Family Research Library

Discounts on HSDC sponsored activities and programs

Free subscription to *The Oracle*

10% discount in the Museum Shop

Members only programs and tours

Free tour of Ft. Hunter Mansion with your membership card

We're always thrilled to add new members to our rolls.

Please help HSDC grow our member base by sharing the form  
on the right with a friend or neighbor.

We would also like to communicate with our current  
members more quickly and easily. Please help us do so

by providing your email address to:

[office@dauphincountyhistory.org](mailto:office@dauphincountyhistory.org). Thank you!

**To become a member or renew your membership, simply  
complete the form, detach, and send with payment to:**

**HSDC, 219 South Front Street, Harrisburg, PA 17104**

#### **Membership Form - Please Join or Renew Today**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

#### *Check Level Desired:*

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student—Middle/High School   | \$10                                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student—College/Grad. School | \$15                                    |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Heritage Circle              | \$55                                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Haldeman Circle              | \$100                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cameron Circle               | \$250                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Harris Circle                | \$500                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Penn Circle                  | \$1000                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>New</b>                   | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Renewal</b> |

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