

# Sewickley Valley Historical Society *Signals*

XLIV, Number 6

May 2017

*Sunday, May 21st, 2017, 4:30 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.*

## *Garden Party & Supper Celebrating 200 Years at Newington*

*Hosted by Jay Judson Brooks Jr.*



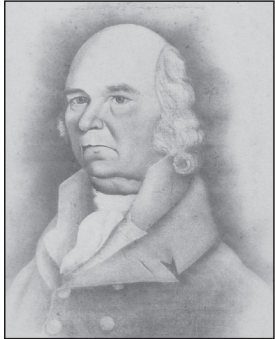
On the left the 1823 addition and on the right the original 1816 farmhouse.

**This event is for members and their guests.** Children are welcome. There will be a short Annual Meeting of the Society beginning at 5:00 pm for the election of officers and directors for the 2017-18 year as well as the presentation of the 2016 Architectural Preservation Award to Mr. Rody Nash. The meal will follow the meeting. Parking will be at the Sewickley Academy Fields parking lot, across from Newington on Beaver Road. Those with disabilities may park on Shields Lane.

*The mission* of the Sewickley Valley Historical Society  
is to promote interest in and to record, collect, preserve, and document the history of the Sewickley Valley.

## Newington

The commanding presence of the Shields family in the history of the Sewickley Valley begins with Major Daniel Leet (1748-1830). Born in New Jersey, he grew up in Virginia and studied surveying at William & Mary College. In 1773 he came west to live in Washington, Pennsylvania. He did surveying for George Washington and later served under him in the Revolution. He was an Indian fighter, a brigade-major in Crawford's disastrous expedition against the Indians in 1782.

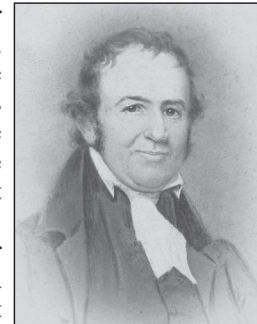


**Major Daniel Leet**

After the war, he returned to his home in Washington, Pennsylvania, and his business, which included surveying some of the lands to the north and west of the Ohio and Allegheny Rivers that had recently been obtained through purchase from the Indians. These lands, called Depreciation Lands, were to be given to veterans of the Revolutionary War in lieu of their depreciated pay. Major Leet and Nathaniel Breeding surveyed the sections that include the Sewickley Valley. Although the surveyors were not to take unfair advantage, Daniel Leet through the fore-knowledge obtained in his work, managed, when the lands went on sale in Philadelphia in 1786, to bid on and obtain desirable plots right beside the Ohio River in District #2, which he had surveyed. In fairness to Leet, he probably had a fistful of depreciation certificates both from his own distinguished service and purchased from veterans who were not interested in settling these lands, so far from the East and as yet only partly pacified. Still, by one means or another, including later purchase, Leet managed to obtain the finest land in Sewickley Bottom (today Edgeworth and Leetsdale Boroughs), lots 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9, known respectively as "Newbury," "Norwich," "Newington," "Lincoln," Locust Bottom," "Sugar Bottom," and "Leetsburg."

Content to concentrate on his myriad interests, Daniel Leet remained in Washington, Pennsylvania, and let others, particularly his brother William Leet, oversee development of these lands. A plantation with several buildings was created where the Beaver Road crosses Little Sewickley Creek. Land was placed under cultivation. Both a saw and grist mill were built before 1800. A bridge was constructed over the Little Sewickley Creek, and a stone inn was completed to serve the increasing traffic on the Beaver Road. It was called "Half Way House," because it was midway between Pittsburgh and Beaver. It survives as a private home across from the Quaker Valley High School. A brick farm house was built in 1816, the locus of the grand estate of today called "Newington," still to be found alongside the Beaver Road in Edgeworth. It is this structure's 200 plus years we celebrate in May 2017.

In 1803, in Washington, Pennsylvania, Major Daniel Leet's only child, a daughter Eliza (1784-1876), married the son of a silversmith visiting from Philadelphia, David Shields (1780-1857), lately a merchant in the West Indies trade. The couple settled in Washington, Pennsylvania, but over the years they made frequent visits to Sewickley Bottom to check on her father's plantation. They came there to live permanently in 1823 with their eight children, having constructed over the course of several years a large and stylish Greek Revival addition to the 1816 house, built with bricks fired on the place and exterior and interior trim made from local trees. David Shields had been a business agent for the Harmony Society for a number of years. That German pietist society was in the process of moving from Indiana to their third and final home at what would be called Economy, Pennsylvania, just downriver from the Leet holdings (today's Ambridge). Shields could assist them more readily if located nearby. He became the first Postmaster in the Sewickley Valley, conducting the business of Sewickley Bottom Post Office out of his home from January 9, 1824 until his death in 1857.



**David Shields**



**Eliza Leet Shields**

He also kept a store. The stage coach traveling the Beaver Road regularly stopped there, and sometimes travelers stayed with the Shieldses. The patriarch Daniel Leet came up in 1827 from Washington, Pennsylvania, to spend his last years at "Newington" and died there in 1830. He was buried in the family graveyard, beyond the garden towards the river, near the Indian mound.

The following is taken from *Old Penn Street* by Agnes M. Hays Gormley (1847-1908), published in Sewickley in 1922 by Gilbert Adams Hays, describing a journey to "Newington" in the 1850s with her grandmother McFadden when Agnes was a young girl.

"Our grandfather and grandmother McFadden had made their wedding journey, October 7, 1823, driving a chaise from Washington, Pennsylvania, to Newington in Sewickley Bottom, the house of David Shields, then not quite finished, accompanied in another chaise by their best man and bridesmaid, Mr. & Mrs. John K. Wilson. What journey now-a-days compares with such a one, or with one taken in the early fifties, my first railway experience? [Leaving Pittsburgh on the train] we crawled past Outer Depot, Pork House, Jack's Run, Courtney (today Emsworth) and Kilbuck, and saw old Captain Hay standing in front of his old road house at Haysville, stopped at Sewickley, and gazed respectfully at [Edgeworth Female] Seminary Lane. We disembarked at Shousetown Lane (today Leetsdale), where a magnificent carriage with a black coachman was waiting. We rolled past the stone tavern built by Mrs. Shields, past the blacksmith shop where the red light [from the forge] streamed across the road, past the grist mill with the great water wheel run by the Little Sewickley Creek and passing the miller's brick house, drew up with a flourish to the very doorway where Mr. and Mrs. Shields had stood to welcome my grandmother years before. I could hardly eat my supper, even if Jeff, the black boy, did offer waffles and other forbidden-by-night delicacies, for my eyes were riveted on the great fire place, where Mazeppa, bound on his iron steed, was forever pursued by iron wolves. [The scene from a narrative poem by Lord Byron is depicted on the iron fire-back.] What a real plantation life was lived here; what a majestic presence was Mrs. Shields; what a Quaker gentleman was Mr. Shields! When we retired he handed my grandmother her silver candlestick from the hall table, just as people in the English

novels do. The joys were multiplied the next day, when grandchildren, who were my contemporaries, arrived, and I saw the great barn, the mill-race and the big maple trees whence came the sugar eggs that had astonished our Penn Street eyes.

We drove to Economy, to find Miss Gertrude [Rapp] and Miss Pauline busy with their wax work, and as I returned from their wonderful garden, and more wonderful grotto with the wooden statue of "Harmonie," and brought with me a little cucumber, they took a plaster cast of it, molded and tinted the wax, and as if by magic the little cucumber reappeared, and the frail wax has outlasted even Economy itself. [The Harmony Society dissolved in 1905.]

On Sunday we journeyed to the [1840 Presbyterian] brick church with a lunch, heard Rev. [James] Allison preach, and after service we took possession of some flat gravestones under the big trees and picnicked, and then went back to Sunday school. The only impression left on my mind is that of dozens of Nevins and Miss Reedy Davis's broad brimmed hat covered with corn flowers and poppies. The next day we spent at Mrs. John Way's, and even the garden was old and lovely.

What good manners we had when we were visiting! One's feet always dangled from the horsehair sofa or chairs; you never volunteered a remark, and always said "Yes, ma'am," or "No, Ma'am," and by and by the grown-ups would say something, and a little tray with paradisiacal cookies and little cut-glass goblets, just big enough for your doll, would be brought in, and grandmother would say, "No wine for Agnes, please."

Where now-a-days do we see people like Miss Hanna and Miss Rebecca Shields, or Miss Anne or Miss Mary Way, or meet with such gracious hospitality?"

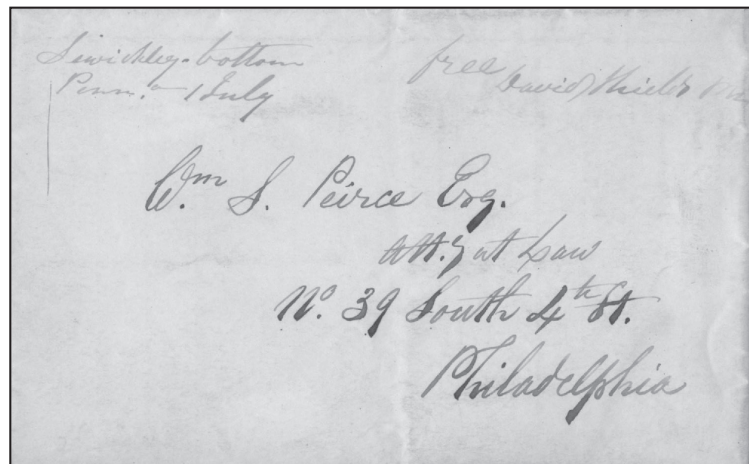
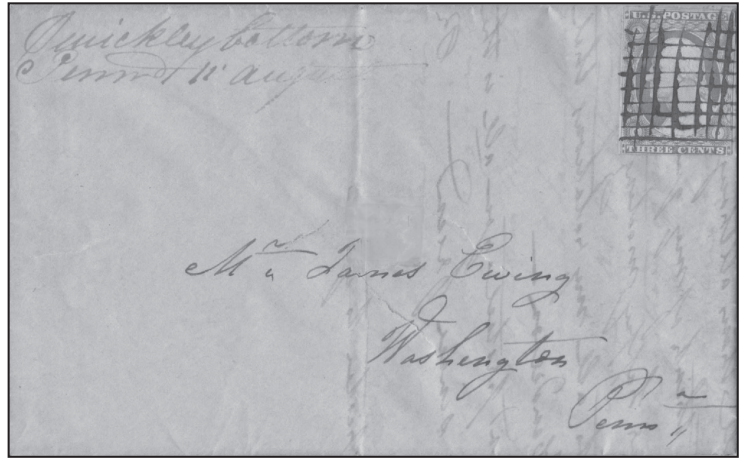
**Seven generations of the same family have lived at Newington:**

- 1797 William Leet (agent for brother Daniel Leet)
- 1823 David and Eliza Leet Shields (daughter of Daniel Leet and her husband)
- 1870 Hannah and Rebecca Shields (daughters of David and Eliza Shields)
- 1895 Martha Cook Williams (niece of Rebecca and Hannah Shields)
- 1936 Susan Williams Davis (daughter of Martha Williams)
- 1958 J. Judson Brooks, Sr. (nephew of Susan Davis)
- 1995 J. Judson Brooks, Jr. and Ellen Still Brooks

## Sewickley Bottom Post Office

This letter was sent from Sewickley Bottom Post Office, August 11, 1851, so marked in characteristic red ink by the Postmaster David Shields, who pen cancelled the U. S. 1851 3¢ rose-colored Washington stamp, which had first been issued the previous month on July 1, 1851. It is from an unidentified R. B. to James Ewing in Washington, Pennsylvania, dated August 9, 1851. It describes the first train traveling through the Sewickley Valley on July 4, 1851, the day he arrived in Sewickley on a steamboat.

"Mr. Darlington is to remain in the country during his sister's absence. I did not write to let them know the day I was coming to Sewickley, as it was to be a great day on the cars [the railroad]. I thought I would go by steamboat, so I landed on the old landing, left my baggage on terra firma and walked to John H's and took them by surprise. I found Shields and Rebecca there- they were all very much pleased to see me, and very much astonished to find I had walked up from the river, but it was a pleasant walk, the greater part along the railroad. I was just in time to see the grand sight (for me it was a grand sight), never having had the pleasure of seeing a train before. There were six passenger cars full to overflowing with gentlemen going down to Brighton to celebrate the opening of the road.



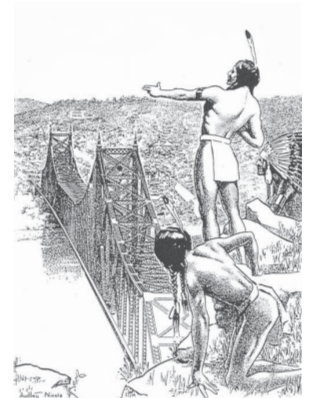
They have by now gotten fairly under way, and we can see them going twice a day to Pittsburgh and returning, always plenty of passengers, never less than two cars sometimes three or four. Cousin M and I were wondering where all the people came from. It goes up in the morning from Brighton to Pittsburgh at half past eight, returns a little after eleven o'clock, at three returns to Pittsburgh, and at six returns. The stopping place is about three miles above. They are trying to get a platform at the [Edgeworth Female] Seminary, which is about one and a half miles up. I hope we will see you someday soon sailing down [on the cars]."

The letter to the left to an attorney in Philadelphia from Sewickley Bottom, dated July 1, 1851, bears the free frank of David Shields, Postmaster. Free frank refers to the fact that the postmaster could send personal mail without paying for postage.

**Sewickley Valley Historical Society**  
**200 Broad Street**  
**Sewickley, PA 15143**

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**May 2017**



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*The Garden at Newington*

Hannah and Rebecca Shields, who inherited Newington from their parents in the 1870s, according to family tradition invited Samuel Parsons to produce a planting plan. Mr. Parsons, then in his 30s, would go on to become the landscape architect for the city of New York. At Newington he installed a romantic landscape in the style of the 18th century English landscape gardener Lancelot "Capability" Brown. In 1895 the place passed to Hannah and Rebecca's niece, Martha Cook Williams, who in 1906 engaged



architect and landscape architect Bryant Fleming, a Buffalo, New York, native who founded the landscape architecture department at Cornell University and designed many American country house gardens, to create at Newington a series of garden rooms with proper French and English influences.

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*Thanks to the following, who have supported SVHS with gifts in addition to membership dues:*

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In Memory of Lawrence Vacarro  
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We're open 10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m., Tuesday through Friday, or by appointment.