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SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

The principal project of your Historical Society has been the restoration of our historic headquarters and museum, built in 1884 by the Pierce family as the First Universalist Church of Sharpsville. Over the years, generous donations, some grants, as well as revenue from fundraising events have allowed us to accomplish several milestones in this restoration.

This year saw refinishing of the flooring and will soon include repairs to the front steps and railing. Over the last five years we have: Replaced the basement door and windows; replaced the gutters and repaired fascia and frieze board. Two large trees—which had they fallen would have seriously damaged our building—were removed. The north chimney was restored, water damage to interior plaster was repaired, and a major upgrade to our electrical system and lighting completed. Along with ordinary maintenance costs, we have spent $59,600 on these projects. This is out of a total of over $250,000 since we purchased the building in 2000. (Though restoration did not begin in earnest until 2010.)

Our next major project is to remodel the basement. While not a historic restoration, it is a place where we have recently expanded our displays of photos, documents, and artifacts—along with narrative context. Additional displays relating to railroad history, World War II, and our ethnic heritage are planned. The renovations will include updated wall surfaces and trim, new flooring, as well as remodeled restrooms, which will all make the area more inviting and easier to clean. Estimated costs are $26,500.

We are in the process of making grant applications to help raise this money. Unfortunately, historic preservation is not high on the list for foundation giving. (State money for "brick-and-mortar" projects require that we be open 100 days a year. Until we can get a larger pool of membership and volunteers, this is not now possible.) Nonetheless, we are hopeful some local funds, as well as the generosity of individual donors will help us get this project completed. All contributions are tax-deductible, and our only expenses are utilities and insurance; 100% of any donation goes to the restoration of this architectural treasure and home for Sharpsville's history.

Upcoming Events

GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIP

Meadows Casinos, Washington, Pa.
November 18h

Call 724-813-9199 for details

Borough Christmas Parade

November 24rd 6:00 p.m.

Main Street, with continued festivities at Mahaney Park, and the Log Cabin

Open House

As a reminder the Historical Society is open the first and third Saturday of the month from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Come see the unique architecture—both interior and exterior—of our historic building, and a large display of our artifacts, documents, and photos of Sharpsville history

Our basement displays have been recently expanded and may include items you may have missed on a prior visit.

With Gratitude

We have received generous donations toward the restoration our historic headquarters from:

Ed Kahl

The Sharpsville High Class of 1967

A Look Back

The Minstrel Show

The minstrel show was, by far, the most popular type of popular entertainment in 19th century America. Typical shows were a mix of song, dance, and humorous skits. Notoriously, it included characters in blackface. This, however, was not an incidental feature of the performances; it was the entire point.

Blackface performers emerged in the 1820s, with Thomas D. "Daddy" Rice's "Jump Jim Crow" song and dance routine from around 1828 considered the origin of the minstrel show.

The show quickly evolved into a structured formula. A dignified master of ceremonies, termed an interlocutor, would call on endmen, who would exchange corny jokes. He would then call for the performance of various songs and dance. A second act, the olio, consisted of variety acts and was a precursor of vaudeville. Often included was a stump speech riddled by foolish malapropisms. The final act would have the curtain rise on a plantation scene, with cotton bales, a white-columned house, and a steamboat, with the blackfaced "slaves" leading the audience in a foot-stomping "plantation tune."

Stock characters included Jim Crow, a simple-minded rural slave. (Yes, this character would later lend its name to the segregationist laws of the South.) Zip Coon, on the other hand, was a free Black living in the city and, his mangled attempt at highfalutin speech made him the fool in a different way. The Mammy character, usually played by a man, portrayed a black matron devoted to the white household she served. All reinforced stereotypes of a childlike folk watched over by a paternalistic plantation owner. The African-American outside the system was, instead someone who was bewildered and had no place among free society.



Sheet music engravings showing the demeaning, outlandish caricatures of the stock characters, Jim Crow and Zip Coon

From its origins in the Ohio River Valley, Daddy Rice's show went to New York City, where it became a sell-out hit. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, the popularity of shows exploded, with the Christy Minstrels, the Virginia Minstrels, and a few dozen other troupes active across the Northeast and Midwest. (The shows were less popular among the plantation owners as well as the small share-holders in the South, who lived in proximity with African-Americans.) Typically working class and male, the often raucous northern audience was attracted by the uninhibited performances that stood in contrast to the more-refined parlor music of the day. Having little interaction with free Blacks, and none with southern slaves, the northern white audience formed its perception of African-Americans from minstrelsy. Minstrel music was the beginning of almost two centuries of African-American music and dance that became a through line in the development of American popular music. But the exoticism of plantation life that so intrigued the Northerner, fixed in his mind the derisive, foolish representations on stage as reflecting the true nature of American Blacks. Frederick Douglass described blackface performers as "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens."

Catchy tunes were fundamental to minstrel music. Some of the most memorable are "Turkey in the Straw, "Jimmy Crack Corn," and "Dixie" (introduced in 1859 before it became the anthem of the Confederate States). Perhaps most memorable and still sung today by schoolchildren are those written by Pittsburgh's Stephen Foster. His emblematic

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With Gratitude

We recently held our first bingo fundraiser. It was both great fun for all who came as well as a financial success for the Society. We could not have pulled it off without help from the following:

Sponsors

Sharon American Legion Post #299
Looped Solutions
Sharpsville VFW Post #6404
Valley Silk Screening
Golden Caregivers
NLMK Pennsylvania
I.C. Electric
High Street Pub & Grill
Grimm Heating & Cooling
Alfredo Insurance
Ross Aviation Parts
Joni's Styling Salon
Shenango Valley Meats
D'Onofrio's
Lock, Stock & Barrel
Sam's Club
Hometown Pizza
and an Anonymous Donor who funded our $500 coverall prize

Raffle Basket Donors

Anderson Coach & Tour
The Kovach Family
Guy Moderelli
Cathy Womer

In addition to the Society Board members who worked the event, we were aided these other volunteers

Casey Verroco Diane Verroco
Carol Phillips Nancy Evans
Michelle Chiodo Elaine Schuster
Annie Baker Bonnie Gill

Special thanks go to Cathy Womer, Charlene Cupic and Jonnie Billig for their work and expertise in running a bingo.

Christmas Gift Ideas

Traces of Old Sharpsville

A thoroughly researched history of Sharpsville with short, readable articles grouped into themed chapters and many photos — $40

Charcuterie Boards

Engraved with images of Pierce Mansion, First Universalist Church, or Jonas Pierce House— $40 each

Santa Collection

Featuring images of Sharpsville's beloved Santa visits
Mugs — $15 Ornaments — $15
T-Shirts — $20

Bookmarks

Engraved with the 150th Anniversary Logo — $5

We still have limited quantities of:

Natural Stone Drink Coasters featuring lithographed scenes of Old Sharpsville — $4

Cat's Meow of the First Universalist church— $10

T-Shirts with the Historical Society Logo
S-M-L — $12; XL and above — $15

BUY-A-BRICK

Please consider an "In Memory of" or "In Honor of" brick for a loved one.
4" x 8" bricks with 3 lines of inscription—$75
8" x 8" bricks with 6 lines of inscription—$125
The bricks will be placed in the town park.

Contact Us

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Mailing address: 955 Forest Lane, Sharpsville, Pa. 16150
Meetings are held the Fourth Monday of the Month at 7:00pm at our headquarters

The Minstrel Show, cont'd.

minstrel tune, "Oh! Susanna" was written in 1848 and has the familiar first verse:

> I come from Alabama with my banjo on my knee;
> I'se gwine to Lou'siana my true lub for to see.
> It rain'd all night de day I left, De wedder it was dry,
> The sun so hot I froze to def, Susann, dont you cry.

While, it exaggerates Black dialect and characterizes the black-faced singer with nonsense lyrics, it does not compare with the second verse which, fortunately, is not as well remembered:

> I jump'd aboard the telegraph [a well known steamboat], and trabbled down de ribber,
> De lectricik fluid magnified, and killed five hundred Nigga.
> De bulgine [engine] bust and de hoss run off, I really thought I'd die'
> I shut my eyes to hold my bref, Susanna, dont you cry.

Stephen Foster's compositions would later reflect a shift in attitudes in the North. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 allowed bounty hunters into Free States to hunt run-away slaves. Even more, the publication the following year of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—the most widely-read novel of 19th Century America—galvanized the abolitionist movement in the North. It did much to dispel the myth of the happy slave and a paternal master. The slaver, eager with his whip, or the enslaved who could at any time be forever separated from a spouse, parent, or child, now became central images to many Northern whites. Foster's later songs, such as "Old Folks at Home," "My Old Kentucky Home," and "Old Black Joe," though in the minstrel genre were renamed "plantation melodies." Though they included the word "darkie," they otherwise lightened or omitted dialect, and took a more compassionate view toward the plight of the enslaved—so much so that Frederick Douglass praised these later tunes that "they awaken sympathies for the slave, in which anti-slavery principles take root and flourish."

Reaching even more people than the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, were stage adaptations, none of which were licensed by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Some adhered to the original anti-slavery message while others were full-fledged minstrel parodies, that ignored elements like the wicked plantation master Simon Legree.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, minstrelsy's popularity declined, with vaudeville taking its place. In contrast to the set formula of the minstrel show, vaudeville's mostly unrelated acts—musicians, comedians, acrobats, dancers—allowed a rotating lineup. The audience, too, was different. The waves of recent immigrants from Europe saw little interest in lampoons of plantation life. The ethnic humor of a Borscht-belt comic, or of the Hibernicon, a stage-show (with one making an appearance in Sharpsville in 1892), which made light of caricatured Irish stereotypes, played better with their Jewish or Irish-American audiences. (Much, as today, a Hispanic or Asian-American comic will make fun of his upbringing, yet with this being is largely in-group humor. This is entirely different from a dominant group [whites] finding fun in ridiculing African-Americans.)

The professional minstrel show is often described as ending by 1900. But, even in its decline, it continued to wheeze along for another two decades in small towns. We find in the Greenville newspapers several examples in the 1910s of troupes playing locally. These were typically former stars of the minstrel circuit, who now as aging impresarios led one of the handful of remaining companies. Where minstrelsy did not die out, however, was in amateur and student productions. Performances—mostly in small towns—were done by lodges, churches, and high-school or community groups, often as a charitable fundraiser. They were also popular as college productions. Guides were published on how to produce such a show, which were considered easy to put on and full of "clean fun." The guides provided jokes, music, and directions on costuming, sets, and applying black-face makeup. The second act of the traditional minstrel, the olio, was left to resemble a community talent show. One guide from 1953, *Burnt Cork and Melody*, stated that "despite the fact that all professional minstrelsy had practically vanished, there was never a night when a minstrel show was not being given somewhere in our country."

Against this abbreviated background of the minstrel show in America, we find on the next page two disturbing photos from Sharpsville.

The Minstrel Show, cont'd.





Taken around 1914, a label on a scrapbook page (along with the appearances of the performers and school banners) indicate it was a high-school production. (In February of that year, Sharon High School students also staged a minstrel show at the Buhl Club auditorium.) Little else is known about the Sharpsville production, other than the photographer's son was in high school at the time and may have been on stage, and that the envelope containing the negatives was labelled "Prof. Cyko." (That may have been a reference to Cyko postcards, though.) The stage was at the Colonial Theater. The Colonial had opened in 1911 in a section of the building called Park Hall (at the corner of Park Way and Shenango Street). The Colonial closed around 1929—and, aside from some prior nickelodeons, was Sharpsville's first and only true movie theatre, until the Ritz opened on Main Street in 1924. It was known mainly as

The Minstrel Show, cont'd.

a movie house, though it apparently had a small stage.

As shocking as the photos are to us in this day, it should be remembered that they were taken during what is termed the Nadir of Race Relations: The White Supremacy enforced by Jim Crow Law in the South; an explosion of lynchings; race riots (meaning white mobs attacking black districts); Woodrow Wilson's order to re-segregate the Federal workforce (to the extent that the if office space was unavailable, Black employees had to work in cages.) These were all elements of a period that its pre-eminent historian, Eric Foner, wrote that: "[Racism] by the early twentieth century had become more deeply embedded in the nation's culture and politics than at any time since the beginning of the antislavery crusade and perhaps in our nation's entire history." In Sharpsville, we can find one reflection of race violence associated with the era. In October 1900, responding to the lay-offs of white men *at other furnaces*, the hiring of Blacks at the Shenango, resulted in a riot reported in one headline, "Bullets are flying at Sharpsville." Since the Black workers were not fired, a mob attacked a boarding house where many Blacks lived, shooting it full of holes, and a Black man was chased, causing him to climb to the top of the Douglas Furnace, where he was short at. Injuries were reported, but amazingly, no one was killed. No other record of racial violence, however, has been found here. More broadly, of the over 4,000 documented, race-related lynchings after the Civil War, only two took place in Pennsylvania (though 15 in Ohio, with 102 in the other free states)—with the remainder in the former slave states.

Yet bigotry doesn't require a rope. Its banality is reflected in the purposeful omission of our (almost entirely Black) Second Baptist Church from *The Sharon Herald's* page profiling the town's churches for its 1924 anniversary edition: purposeful because the paper's rival *The Sharon Telegraph* included it. Or, the fact that for its first few decades, African-Americans were barred from Buhl Park. Or, because of lingering notions of where Blacks should live, those, who in 1966 had the temerity to move one block up the Mercer Avenue hill toward Shenango Street, were criticized for their presumption.

Perhaps no more insidious, however, was the post-Reconstruction whitewashing of the true legacy of slavery. Some efforts were more direct, such as the massive efforts led by United Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy to erect Confederate monuments, to push out writings, and to endorse schoolbooks that promoted the myth of the Lost Cause. Here, rebel soldiers were always valorous, defending their homes against Union aggressors; the causes the war had nothing to do with slavery but with the just protection of their states' sovereignty; and the trope of the faithful slave was often repeated to try to create a reality where the pre-War Slave Society was an idyll that benefitted both White and Black. Other Confederate apologists were more subtle, led by the plantation romances of Thomas Nelson Page. Told in black dialect and wildly popular in the North, the stories depicted the Antebellum South as a peaceful agrarian society peopled with a kindly plantation owner, his gracious family, and their devoted slaves. When the pastoral scene is interrupted by the War, the slaves remain loyal to "Meh Lady." The Uncle Remus stories also belong to this genre, as do, decades later, both the book and the movie *Gone with the Wind*. Part of the sympathy this myth of the Lost Cause found in the North was a reaction to industrialization, with a sentimentality for a simpler, agrarian time, for which the Southern plantation provided a model. Many Northerners, too, were eager to consider the "Southern Problem," which consumed much of nineteenth century America, as solved for once and for all. Books that placed narratives of both Union and Confederate veterans side-by-side as combatants in equally noble causes became popular. (Admittedly, many—primarily Union veterans and churchmen—fiercely opposed any brushing aside the legacy of slavery and the causes of what was then commonly termed as The War of Rebellion.) Reconciliation of the former foes was celebrated, with the setting aside of sectional differences necessary for the nation's advancement. But, this was done on Southern terms, with the experience of Black America largely effaced.

The minstrel show and blackface indeed persisted. Al Jolson's "My Mammy" bit in 1927's *The Jazz Singer* is perhaps the most well-known. Yet, still, in 1950, Fred Waring's variety show on CBS television, included an episode with a complete 22-minute minstrel blackface performance, (Though it appears now to be a somewhat pathetic recreation, the recording on Archive.org may be our best available glimpse at an actual minstrel show.) A British television variety show, *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, was hugely popular there and featured most of its numbers with singers in blackface; it aired from 1958 to, astonishingly, 1978. Locally, a report of the Greenville Jaycees' annual minstrel show dates from 1959. While it had some modern skits, the was also a "minstrel portion of the show" with the traditional parts of endmen and an interlocutor, as well as "Parry Foxall, an old-timer in the minstrel show business who will perform a song and dance act." So, these performances were done in blackface. The South Pymatuning PTA also sponsored a "Show Boat Minstrel" at the South Py Elementary School in 1962 and 1963.

In recent years, periodically, controversy will erupt over some politician or college fraternity photographed in blackface. The excuse is usually that it was an attempt at edgy humor, with no racism intended. That may well be true, but it cannot be separated from the degradation contained in the actual history of blackface and the minstrel show in America.