

## SPOTLIGHT

# A Page in History

## Judge J.W.F. White presides faithfully over community

*"A Page in History" will chronicle some of the most distinguished and interesting former citizens who are now at rest in Sewickley Cemetery, and each essay will be collected to make a walking tour of the cemetery.*

*This article will remind us of Judge White, one of the most public spirited individuals in the Sewickley Valley in the second half of the 19th century. Most visible of his benefactions, a lasting monument to his memory, is the town clock in the tower of Sewickley United Methodist Church.*

John W. F. White, born Jan. 19, 1821, was the son of the Rev. John White and Elizabeth James White.

The family home was in Williamsport, now Monongehela, Pa. The Rev. White was a wagon maker by trade, but also a Methodist itinerant preacher or circuit rider. He chose the difficult task of supporting a family while serving the church.

While riding the Harmony-Sewickley circuit in 1839 and 1840, in company with the Rev. Joseph Wright, he preached to the Methodist Society in Sewickleyville in their newly constructed frame sanctuary on the corner of Broad and Thorn.

Soon after he retired from 44 years service in 1856, he moved to Sewickley, and remained until 1861 when he moved to the home of a son-in-law in Washington, Pa. He died there, at age 76, in 1863.

The 1820s and '30s were difficult for the family. With their father frequently gone, the family spent a good deal of time at the James family farm nearby in what is today Finleyville, where the house still survives. Young John lived there exclusively from age 8-17 when he went off to Methodist Allegheny College, which he attended from 1839-1842.

He then trained for the law in the firm of Thomas M. T. McKennan in Washington, Pa., and was admitted to practice law in Washington County in May of 1844. In addition to developing a law practice, he was publisher of the Washington Reporter.

In 1850, John White married Mary Esther Thorn from Sewickleyville, the daughter of the prominent Rev. Charles E. Thorn and Sophronia Hoey Thorn. The Whites had their first child the following year and raised five children, four sons and a daughter, to maturity.

In 1851 John W. F. White moved his new family to Pittsburgh and ultimately

to Sewickleyville, the home of his wife.

The Whites lived on a five-acre estate between Broad and Chestnut streets right on the new railroad track, which had come through in 1851, along the path of what is Route 65, the Ohio River Boulevard.

The lumber for the 10-room Gothic home, a stable and chicken house was floated in a raft down the river from a mill far up the Allegheny River. The house still stands on Melville Street, which was constructed much later through the estate.

J. W. F. White Esq., immediately immersed himself in town affairs.

Being a confirmed Methodist, the son and son-in-law of Methodist ministers, White devoted himself to the local Methodist Society organized in 1837. (His father had been one of the first pastors.)

His service to this faith runs like a thread through his whole life in Sewickley.

In 1852 he helped the society become incorporated as the Methodist Episcopal Church of Sewickleyville. In 1853, he guided 81 fellow citizens in petitioning the Court of Quarter Sessions of Allegheny County to the effect that they were "desirous of being regularly incorporated as a Borough and forming a separate Election and School District."

A decree made by the court on July 6, 1853, established Sewickley Borough, to be governed by a burgess, an assistant burgess and seven town councilors. (This year, 2003, we celebrate the 150th anniversary, of that incorporation.)

In 1854, White was much involved in the moving of the frame Methodist Church further west on Thorn Street to make way for a new brick sanctuary built at a cost of \$3,100. His father preached the dedicatory sermon. There were 139 members of the congregation at the time.

In 1860, White was among the original 30 incorporators of Sewickley Cemetery, and president of the board from 1871 until his death in 1900. He and his fellow Methodist David N. White, the subject of our last essay, steered the cemetery through its formative years.

On July 6, 1861, White presented swords to the officers of the Sewickley Rifles and New Testaments to each man before they departed from Sewickley Station as Company G of the 28th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers.

White also distinguished himself in his



**JUDGE JOHN W. F. White is buried in Section A of the Sewickley Cemetery with his wife and children.**

profession. He was solicitor for the City of Pittsburgh from 1861-1865. In 1873, he was elected to the District Court of Allegheny County, which became the Court of Common Pleas #2. He served on the bench for three consecutive 10-year terms, becoming President Judge of the Court of Common Pleas #2 in 1897.

In 1872, the increasing need for pure water in the town led to the passing of a council resolution to appoint a Water Commission consisting of Messrs. J. W. F. White, D. N. White, T. H. Nevin, Robert Watson and William Harbaugh.

A beautiful tract of ground supplied with plentiful springs was purchased and reservoirs constructed. In the beginning, this area on Waterworks Road was also a public park with driving roads and pathways. Access now has been unfortunately, and necessarily, restricted.

When the Rev. Charles Thorn, White's father-in-law, died in 1874, he bequeathed \$15,000 to the Methodist Church for a new sanctuary.

The congregation raised an additional \$30,000, and in 1884 a new church and chapel replaced the 1854 building at the corner of Thorn and Broad. This structure included a tower topped by a steeple that stands 172 feet above the ground and can be seen for miles around.

White, in the thick of things as usual, donated a four-faced clock for the tower visible to the whole town and a new bell. The structure has been lovingly maintained since. In 1953 new faces were installed on the tower clock, and the borough took over its maintenance.

In 1963, repairs were made to the

steeple, and part of the tower was covered with white aluminum.

In 1995-96 almost \$400,000 was raised by the church and community to entirely restore the clock tower and steeple to its original appearance sheathed in beautiful copper.

White had much to do with managing the Mount Sewickley Camp Meeting grounds in Leetsdale. (This site is today across from the D. T. Watson facility on Camp Meeting Road.)

A camp was built there by the Methodists in 1868 in an oak grove overlooking the river, they being fond of the stimulus to the faith afforded by revivalist preaching in the tradition of John Wesley.

Initially, people lived in tents for the several week session of preaching, prayer, concerts, sports and socializing, but later individual families built more than 70 cottages there. The camp meetings lasted well into the 20th century.

There were many tributes in the press and from the pulpit to the judge when he died in 1900.

The Pittsburgh Daily News wrote: "That phrase about 'he was a man among men' fitted him closely. Dignified to the extreme when on the bench, off it he was easy to approach, and the commonest looking beggar got the same pleasant greeting as did the highly polished man of letters.

"He was a friend of the unfortunate, and kind to all, and in his rulings and decisions was guided more by principles than precedents, and always decreed according to his own ideas if right, even though it was plainly apparent that the higher courts would take a view opposite to his.

"He was a man who believed that God made mind to think out its own ideas, not borrow them from others, and therefore he seldom sought advice. He was learned, and he knew it. He kept his own counsel. Frequently he was misrepresented, but he cared not for public opinion. He was absolutely fearless."

The Rev. E. M. Wood of the Fifth Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh said: "Judge White was humbly devoted to his church, and intelligently religious. He was faithful to what he called the 'little work' of the church. He was a Sunday School teacher all his life.

"For many years he was leader of the church choir, and in the years gone by was a leader of the singing at camp meetings and was a great believer in the power and usefulness of the standard hymns of the church.

"As a delegate to the highest councils and conventions in the church, his utterances always had a commanding influence and power. His upright life, his clearness of conception, his force of point and argument, his wonderful self-possession, his large wisdom, gave him great advantage in every assembly."