

SPOTLIGHT

A Page in History Hays, Craig lead efforts to build Sewickley Bridge

"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 highlights the critical role the Sewickley Bridge plays in the life of the valley and remembers some of the determined individuals who worked to secure it.

The Ohio River hereabouts was a barrier as much as a highway until the first Sewickley Bridge was constructed in 1911.

In Indian times the river by what would become Sewickley was a natural place to cross in a canoe, if conditions allowed. The river was untamed and would remain so until the 1920s when a system of dams would guarantee the consistently deep pool we see today.

The Indians could not cross during a flood, low water or against floating ice. Narrows Run was the connecting link between two heavily traveled paths paralleling the river on the south and north banks. The southern path was widened into a military road by Col. Daniel Brodhead when he was commandant at Fort Pitt from 1779-1781, and it bears his name today.

The path on the northern bank was improved in the summer of 1792 by Gen. "Mad Anthony" Wayne to facilitate travel between Fort Pitt, Legionville, where he was training an army, Fort McIntosh (present day Beaver) and points west. This is our Beaver Road.

The settlers crossed the Ohio via ferries. There were two at Sewickley. Lashell's at the Chestnut Street landing went across to where the old RBW plant is, and Stoops' left from Ferry Street and crossed to the bottom of Narrows Run where Mr. Stoops had a home and a general store.

If the ferryman was not there, you shouted across the river, "Over," and he would row over and get you, pennies for the round trip.

Neither Stoops nor Lashell actually operated their ferries. Both had interests elsewhere. Stoops was a steamboat

captain and owner. Lashell was qualified as a mate on steamboats, but he also put together flatboats of fresh lumber, loaded vegetables from Neville's Island on board, and floated downriver to sell both. One time he gathered a string of horses together here and drove them over the mountains to Philadelphia for sale.

The ferry business was profitable as the Sewickley and Coraopolis sides of the river grew apace but separately. The need for a wagon bridge over the river was obvious. Ferry service was often interrupted by river conditions. There was no bridge between Pittsburgh and Wheeling, W.V., a distance of 100 miles.

But why would a bridge be constructed at Sewickley with so many other locations to choose from?

The answer lies in the unflinching determination of citizens to move their government to do the public good. It took 17 years of cajoling and insisting to finally link the shores at Sewickley. The names of two individuals who rest in Sewickley Cemetery are prominent among those who gave us our bridge, Gilbert Adams Hays and Joseph Watson Craig.

Gilbert A. Hays (1854-1934) was the son of Gen. Alexander Hays, who died at the Battle of the Wilderness in May 1864. His mother was Annie McFadden, a direct descendant of John Alden of Plymouth Colony.

Hays was in the insurance business. He resided at 530 Academy Avenue in Sewickley (where a Hays lives to this day). He chose not to lie with his illustrious parents at Allegheny Cemetery in Lawrenceville. He is in Section B, Lot 65 in Sewickley Cemetery.

Joseph W. Craig (1860-1912) was an executive in the Chartiers Oil Co. and lived at 290 Broad St. He was for a time president of the cemetery.

The Craig family mausoleum with the green terra cotta tile roof constructed in 1899 can be found in Section D. The pink North Carolina granite entrance gate to the cemetery on Hopkins Street was given in memory of Mr. Craig by his family in 1948.



The Sewickley-Coraopolis Bridge as it appeared on a color postcard in the 1900s.

The impetus that would result in a bridge arose at a meeting in 1894 in the Hays' home. A group gathered there listened as speakers lamented the stifling of commerce and the inconvenience of the water barrier.

The upshot was the formation of a bridge committee including representatives from the south shore. In spring 1895, the committee petitioned the Hon. John W. F. White, a resident of Broad Street, and judge of the Court of Common Pleas, for a new bridge.

Allegheny County commissioners reviewed the project and made two visits to the site, and said: "only a small section of the county would benefit" from such a bridge. There the matter officially rested until 1906.

A bridge across the Ohio between Pittsburgh and Wheeling did open in January 1897, 20 miles downstream from Sewickley, connecting Rochester and Monaca, but that was too far away. Residents here still needed a bridge.

The same individuals who had organized in 1894 revisited the issue. This time around, Sewickley Borough, led by Burgess Joseph W. Craig, took the lead in proving the valley's support for a bridge by raising \$10,000 for a bond to cover lawsuits against the county by landowners affected by bridge approaches.

The borough contributed \$2,800, Craig personally contributed \$2,800, and the balance of donations came from 50 other concerned citizens.

A petition for a bridge was presented to the court in November 1906, and to the delight of all, the county commissioners voted in favor.

Secretary of War William F. Taft approved the project in February 1908, and in July 1909 contracts were let,

\$98,907 to Adam Laidlaw Masonry for the bridge piers and \$372,400 to Fort Pitt Bridge Works for the superstructure.

The cantilever bridge was to have a lacy post-Victorian look, would be 28 feet wide bounded by sidewalks, and would span 1,852 feet, some 81 feet above the water. The roadway was to be wood paving blocks. All steel was to be painted green.

The new bridge opened on Sept. 19, 1911, at 10:30 a.m. as Burgess W. Kennedy Brown of Sewickley shook hands with Burgess A. D. Guy of Coraopolis in the middle of the bridge.

Hays was chairman of an elaborate three-day celebration. A lengthy parade crossed the bridge and wound through the decorated streets of both towns. There were fairs, athletic contests and fireworks.

Souvenirs commemorating the event were created. Sewickley artist Audley Nicols painted a poster showing three Indians marveling at the new bridge from the south side of the river. This theme has become the logo for the Sewickley Valley Historical Society, and Sewickley Borough uses a war-bonneted Indian from this poster as its symbol.

A Mademoiselle Oneida clad in gauze wings glided on a wire from the top of one of the 132-foot towers of the bridge to the beach "suspended only by her teeth." A new era had dawned; both sides of the river could prosper in concert.

The 1911 Sewickley Bridge served its purpose until old age forced its closure in May 1980. Once again, resolute citizens led the fight for a new bridge. A new Sewickley Bridge, costing \$16.5 million and constructed by American Bridge Works of the U.S. Steel Corp., opened to traffic on Oct. 21, 1981.