

mount GRETNa

magazine

EXPLORE
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Lesser-Known
Neighborhoods

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1926
Cottage

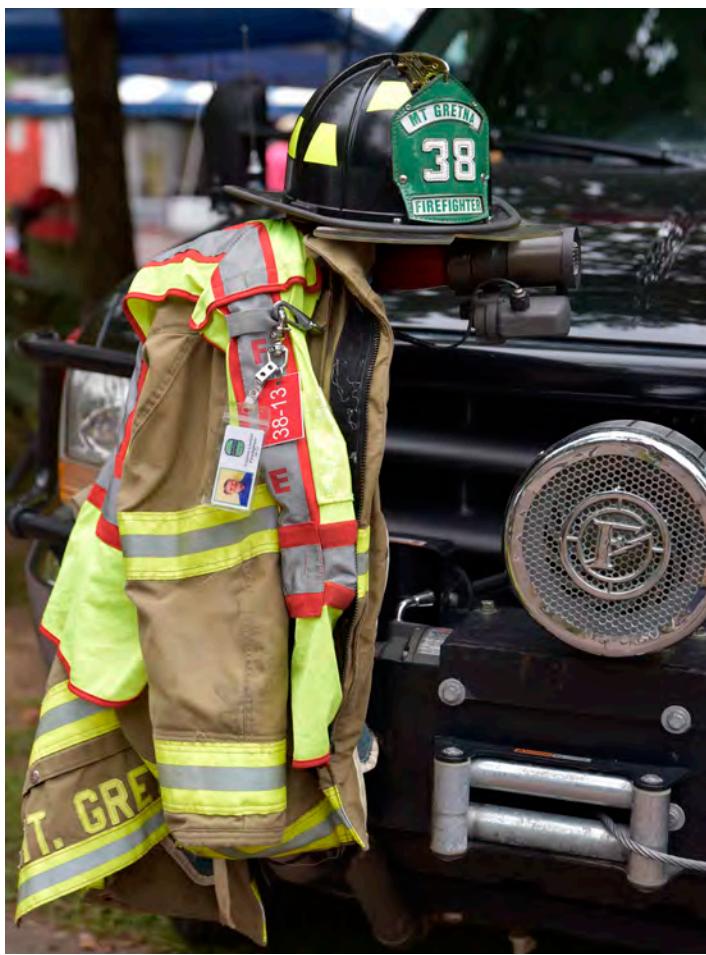
PLUS ...

A Holocaust Survivor's Story
Art as Community
First Responders' Call to Service
Spot the Gretna Cousin: Postcard Edition
... and much more!

WINTER 2026



Volume 2, Issue 1



mount gretna magazine

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MOUNT GRETNA MAGAZINE

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 Homeowner Lynne Davies; young Victor Bokjo and family; MG Mercantile dressed for winter. *Image at left by Stacy Schroeder. All others by Shannon Fretz Photography.*
Cover photo: Shannon Fretz Photography.
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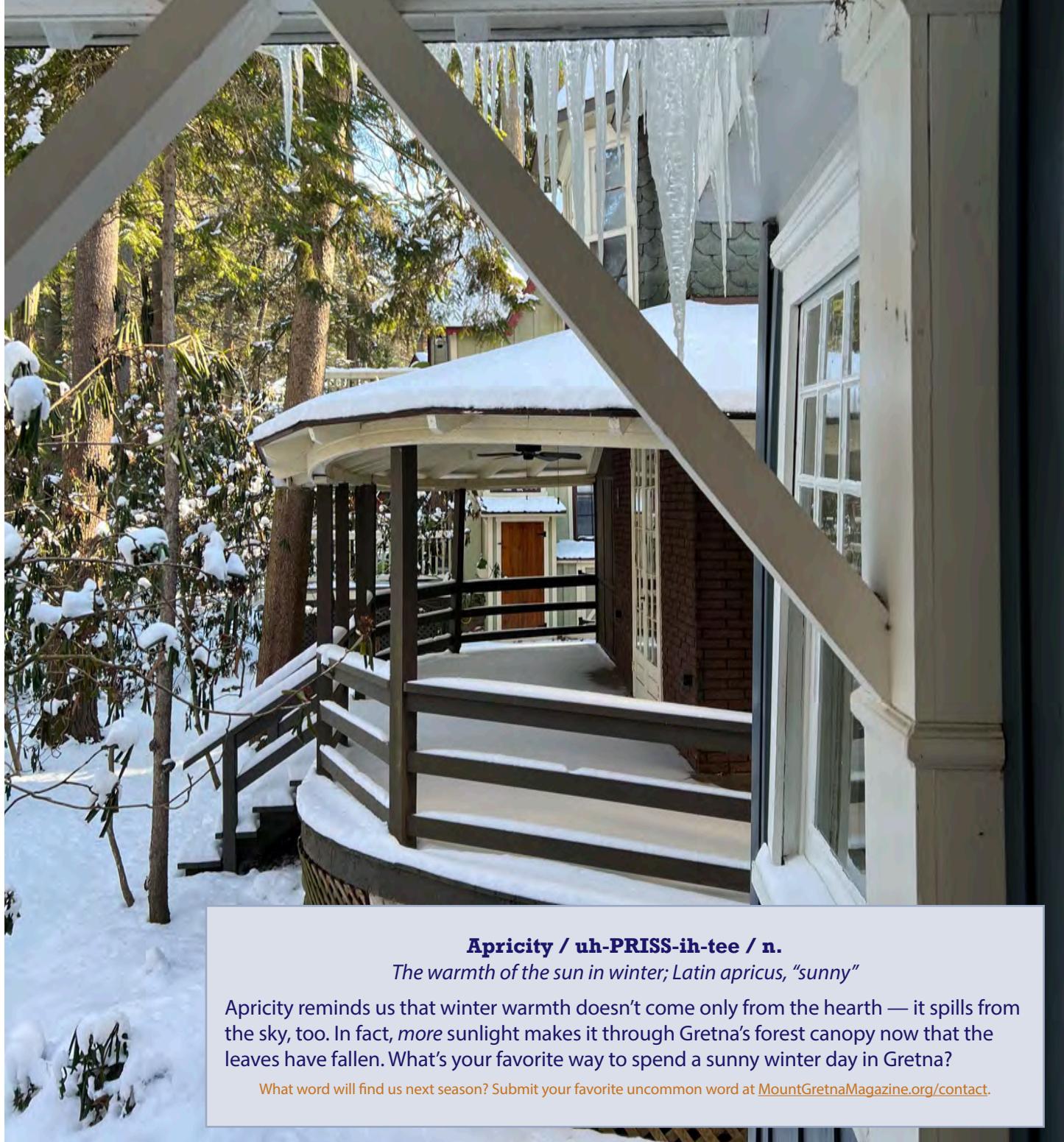
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STORIES THAT CONNECT + INSPIRE

WORD OF THE SEASON

A quarterly feature celebrating the beauty of uncommon words

Apricity



Apricity / uh-PRISS-ih-tee / n.

*The warmth of the sun in winter; Latin *apricus*, “sunny”*

Apricity reminds us that winter warmth doesn't come only from the hearth — it spills from the sky, too. In fact, *more* sunlight makes it through Gretna's forest canopy now that the leaves have fallen. What's your favorite way to spend a sunny winter day in Gretna?

What word will find us next season? Submit your favorite uncommon word at MountGretnaMagazine.org/contact.



Photos this page and page 2:
Stacy Schroeder.

The View From My Porch

October 4, 2025 was a spectacular Launch Day.

It was the first time most of our magazine team — who often work independently — were gathered together in one place. The group was getting a first look at the debut issue before we shared it with the public. The excitement was palpable. My heart swelled as people began to make connections with each other and share why they had chosen to invest their time in *Mount Gretna Magazine*.

And then we opened the doors. By our (admittedly loose) count, more than 100 people gathered at Porch & Pantry that day to pick up a copy of the Fall 2025 issue. We had expected curiosity would lead to folks stopping by, but the pleasant surprise was that so many of you lingered, with laughter and conversation spilling out onto the porch, down the steps, and around the restaurant.

That connection continued, as we continually needed to restock copies at the post office, and as kind messages filtered in via our website, email, and socials, and encounters with people across town. You said:

“For a first issue, you knocked it out of the ballpark. I expected it to be good and it was even better.”

“People are hungry for this kind of positivity!”

“I just read it cover to cover. It was absolutely EXCELLENT! Every article, every photo, every everything! Kudos to all!”

With our first issue as a foundation, we look forward to continuing to grow and improve. Share your ideas! We're listening.

We've got good things in store this year, including these ways for you to be part of building community that connects and inspires. Subscribe to our e-news to stay informed.

- **Community Events:** We're planning a few exciting events in 2026, some low-key and some over-the-top fun — including The Great Gretna Plate, a brand-new cooking competition scheduled for March 29.
- **Seasonal Shutterbugs:** Love snapping photos of Gretna year-round? Share your perspective with us! We're collecting images now for *next* winter's issue. Drop me a note (email below) for more info.
- **Reader Voices:** This summer, we're introducing a new occasional Q&A story format that shares your stories. Our first community question: *“What is the quirkiest element of your cottage?”* Answers are due by May 1 via the form on our [homepage](#).

I am deeply grateful for this community, this magazine, and for each of you. Together, we are building something beautiful.



Stacy

Stacy Schroeder
Founder + Creative Director
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A GRETNA GATHERING PLACE

From Dancing to Roller Hockey



This page: A skater enjoys Mount Gretna Roller Rink's vintage charm. Owners Eunice and Brian Heist (inset). *Page 5, clockwise from top left:* Antique skates. A shot of the roller rink today and a postcard of its dance pavilion days. *First and third photo courtesy of Mount Gretna Area Historical Society.*

*Story: Margaret Hopkins
Photos: Shannon Fretz Photography
(except as noted)*

The history of the Mount Gretna Roller Rink offers a glimpse into the popular pastimes of the 19th and 20th centuries. Dancing, moving pictures, and roller hockey all took place in the only building remaining from Mount Gretna Park.

Robert H. Coleman created the park in 1884 as a stop on his Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad. Initially a picnic grove, the space evolved into a park with dining halls, playing fields, and pavilions for dancing. In 1890, when Robert was asked to host a weeklong farmers' encampment with machinery and livestock, he agreed. Within months, 30 acres of woodland were cleared, and 110,000 square feet of platforms were constructed.

Robert also had a "mammoth auditorium" built that could accommodate between 3,500 and 5,000 people, according to news reports from that time. The roofed but open-air auditorium eventually became the encampment's exhibition hall, featuring horticultural and floricultural displays, along with items ranging from sewing machines to organs.

Whether the building was used for other events is unknown, though Coleman offered it in August 1892 to the Mount Gretna Campmeeting for worship services.

When Ferdinand Gremminger bought Mount Gretna Park in 1917, he added new flooring to the auditorium to introduce the "popular sport" of roller skating. For the next 10 years,



the building hosted skating, boxing exhibitions, and nightly dancing to music by "Loser's Xylophone Orchestra" or Prof. Sourbeer's seven-piece orchestra or full orchestra.

"Moving pictures" were shown in what news articles called the "apartment," but it's unknown where this "apartment" was located.

In 1926, the building underwent another round of renovations. Advertisements for the park's grand opening highlighted roller skating in the now-named Coliseum Building, which featured 300 pairs of "chic" roller skates, a Wurlitzer organ, a gentlemen's smoking room, and a refreshment stand. Each night featured different moving pictures — "See You



in Jail" and "Sensation Seekers" were two titles — with 25-cent admission for adults and a penny for children.

Park advertisements promised that the Coliseum offered "everything you need to have a good time without leaving the building."

Roller hockey came to the renamed Mount Gretna Auditorium Rink in late 1930. The Mount Gretna Tigers played in the Western Division of the Eastern Roller Hockey League and won the Tri-State Championship in 1939. In 1941, the Tigers were considered "one of the outstanding amateur roller hockey teams in the eastern section of the U.S." according to the "Lebanon Daily News." When the league revised

rink specifications to exclude posts — they hold up the building's roof — roller hockey had to find a new home.

From the outside, the Mount Gretna Roller Rink today looks much the same as in the past, and roller skating remains a popular pastime for families, school groups, and parties. Eunice and Brian Heist, who skated there when they were growing up and who bought the business in 2018, appreciate the rink's history and have added photos and memorabilia to document its past.

"Skating is something every age can do," Brian says. "Your grandparents did it, your parents did it, and now you can do it." ☎

Margaret Hopkins is a fourth-generation member and full-time resident of the Mount Gretna Campmeeting Association. She enjoys learning about Mount Gretna's history and has written stories for the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society newsletters.

Our thanks to the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society (MGAHS) for providing resources for this story and other parts of this issue. Learn more about MGAHS and its offerings at MtGretnaHistory.org.



THE DANCE PAVILLIAN BEFORE IT BECAME A SKATING RINK

COMMUNITY IN EVERY CORNER

Meet the Mount Gretna couple fostering connection across cottages and continents

Story: Katy Sher0

Photos: Shannon Fretz Photography
(except as noted)

Cory and Christy Wanamaker sit on their cottage porch, taking in the serene green leaves, warm sunlight, and crisp breeze that personify a late summer Mount Gretna afternoon. They laugh as they recall a memory of the time two others sat across from them on the porch, their good friends from Glasgow, Scotland. Another memory arises when the pair recall the time they spontaneously joined their taxi driver for an underground

cooking feast in Fiji — a Fijian Lovo. There's also the year they lived in Buenos Aires, got to watch Argentina win the FIFA World Cup, and celebrated with the locals for two days straight.

The Wanamakers say recalling such eclectic stories still feels unreal to them, but these memories are very much real. They have a lifetime of them, going as far back as high school.

"We first met when we went on an American Music Abroad tour, a music tour, all over Europe together," says

Christy, an Eastern Lebanon County High School alum. "We would have never thought that during our big adventure abroad then, several lifetimes later, we would be back in some of those places together."

An education in world cultures

Cory, a Northern Lebanon High School alum, says the couple began dating six months later. The initial trip "was a precursor to what was coming."

Both attended Millersville University to pursue careers in education.



Cory and Christy Wanamaker relax on their Campmeeting porch with close friends and neighbors Bryon and Allison Kaster.



Cory focused on art, and Christy concentrated on music. After graduation, they began teaching at Manheim Central School District and building their life together in central Pennsylvania. However, the travel bug, or as Cory calls it, the “precursor,” didn’t fade away.

“We did the American Dream thing. We had the starter house in Lititz, and then had our son, and then we started thinking, ‘This is pretty cool, but what else can we do?’” Cory says. “And so Christy came home with this idea of a Fulbright Fellowship for International Education.”

“We applied for the Fulbright teacher exchange, where you exchange lives with a teacher, and ended up going to Cory’s placement,” Christy says, alluding to the town of Otley in Northern England. “We spent a year there in their house, and we exchanged cars, phones, families … It was amazing. It would have made a great reality TV show.”

After returning home, Cory and Christy continued to teach at Manheim Central while Cory devoted himself to creating art in his studio, Airy Hill Studio. But the idea of moving again resurfaced — the next adventure was Moscow, Russia.

The Wanamakers spent three years in Russia, immersing themselves in the culture and navigating the uncertain transition to full-time expat life.

“I think it was really hard at first because there were a lot of growing pains with it. … We took [language] lessons for a while and got to the point where we called it ‘Taxi Russian,’ where we could order things or get places. This was all before Google Translate,” Christy says. “It was a big culture shock, but overall, I would say it was just so amazing.”

One of the biggest culture shocks that Christy and Cory agree on was the philosophy on education in the international school their son attended, which they also taught at.



From top: Cory uses firecrackers to mark his canvas outside of his Shanghai studio. The Wanamakers share a commissioned art piece created from smashed wine glasses from drinks across the world. Christy conducts at a music festival in China. Photos courtesy of Cory and Christy Wanamaker.

“Teaching there, like an art or music teacher, it was never questioned that this was a major subject. It wasn’t like, ‘Oh, this is an extra subject.’ It was, ‘This is part of what a whole child should be,’” Christy says. “My son was learning to ice skate during his PE classes in third grade and sledding during recess.”

Moscow, as a whole, is a culturally rich city, according to Cory, and he says this aspect allowed him to take his growing art career to a new level while living there. He had the opportunity to open a studio in Moscow and received an invitation by the Russian Ministry of Culture to exhibit his work in one of the state museums alongside a Russian artist.

“We were like, ‘Yeah, we can’t go back after this opportunity to make connections through art, music and culturally, for the whole family. We have to keep going,’” Christy says.

This motivation led to several more moves, including Prague, Czech Republic; Shanghai, China; and their most recent trip before moving to Mount Gretna in 2025, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Nurturing a cross-cultural community

Despite several continental moves and many changes throughout the decades, one thing has remained constant for the Wanamakers: community.

“In Fiji, we ended up meeting a taxi driver who picked us up at the airport. He said he wanted to pick up a family that day because he had just lost his son the year before. We ended up connecting with him, and he invited us to his house to do what’s called Lovo,” a type of underground oven cooking, Cory says. “Lovo is when you dig into the ground, wrap food in banana leaves, and use palm leaves to tie the wrapping. We went out, and we shopped for all this food with him … and spent the day doing this.”

Christy adds, “After our dinner was over, we were like, ‘We have all this food. We had a Lovo,’ so the community came,



From top: Cory uses firecrackers to mark his canvas outside of his Shanghai studio. The Wanamakers share a commissioned art piece created from smashed wine glasses from drinks across the world. Christy conducts at a music festival in China. Photos courtesy of Cory and Christy Wanamaker.

THE GREAT GRETNA PLATE

March 29 | Mount Gretna Fire Hall

Three teams. One plate. Pure kitchen drama.

Get the heat on Gretna's new cooking showdown at MountGretnaMagazine.org.



all these people, and it was a beautiful exchange. We've just had so many exchanges like that."

The Wanamakers now have friends from all over the world.

Creating a home in Gretna

Today, with more than 50 countries and four continents under their belts, Cory and Christy bring to Mount Gretna an encyclopedia of lessons they say can strengthen any community — whether you're as far away as Shanghai or in your own backyard in Gretna.

"I think the biggest lesson is staying open. ... Go out of your comfort zone to leave your space, even if it's just for a week ... and try not to live the life that you have in your comfort zone," Christy says. "Embrace others and culture and learn from it. Bring some of that back with you to share. ... When you see people walking down the street, and you think they look different or sound funny or something, there's a great opportunity there to get to know them and exchange culture."

Cory says that "taking risks" is also essential and can help you grow as an individual and a community member.

As far as what's next, the Wanamakers plan to take a gap year, enjoy the "cool Gretna air," and focus on creating art and being educators. Cory is currently doing commissions in the area and recently designed "The Guardian of the Arts," a 12-foot bronze sculpture to honor Miriam "Mim" Enck and those who support the arts in Mount Gretna.

This year is meant to be a "breather" for the couple. "We have been enjoying the rare opportunity to be back in the States and reconnect with friends and family on a regular basis," Cory says. "We are now beginning the search for our next adventure.

"One of the things that the Fulbright said to us was, 'If someone invites you, you say yes because you can sleep when you're dead,'" Cory says. "We're trying to do this while we're at home, but we're like, 'Well, we're gonna die,' so we're going to do crazy stuff."

As Cory and Christy strive to continue to build a life around community and art, Mount Gretna remains the most natural contender for their latest move.

"It provides an energy, whether I'm playing or singing on the porch, and the neighbors come and sing along ... it's like a magnet for that energy," Christy says.

"I think it's a haven. It's a place not where you put your political views on

show, but you sit on the porch and get to know each other," Cory says.

"And we're all equal on the porch," Christy says. ☺

Katy Sheri is a freelance writer, professional journalist, and editor. As a Palmyra native, she has many fond memories of visiting Mount Gretna while growing up. She most recently worked as the editor-in-chief for Susquehanna Style magazine before moving to Durham, North Carolina, in May 2025.

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The Art of Community

Using community to inspire art, Cory and Christy Wanamaker spoke with *Mount Gretna Magazine* about how Cory incorporates community into his works.



The Wanamakers celebrate Christy's 50th birthday in Shanghai's waterfront Bund district, across from the Shanghai Pearl. *Photo courtesy of Cory and Christy Wanamaker.*

Mount Gretna Magazine: Tell us about how the community inspired you in your recent Mount Gretna piece, "The Guardian of the Arts."

Cory: "The president of the Mim Enck Charitable Foundation wanted to do a piece that represented Mim because she was a huge guardian of the arts and really gave a lot to the arts in Mount Gretna ... it turned into the idea of honoring everybody that gives to the arts in different ways. ... Then it became an idea of, 'OK, if we're going to talk about the community, can we involve the community?'" There are elements in there that represent Mim directly, but also elements that represent the community.

The base of the piece — there's green smashed glass, and it looks like moss when the sun's not on it, and when the sun hits it, it looks like glass. Mim and her husband had a great wine collection. We put a call out, and the community brought green wine bottles. Then, we took them locally and had them smashed down. The community's wine bottles are actually the base of the piece."

Mount Gretna Magazine: What's the final step before you part with a piece?

Cory: "I always sign a painting, but I don't sign paintings in private. I only sign it when people are around. I do this ... it's sort of a ritualistic thing because we don't want to sign a piece and wish it on its way unless we have friends that toast it. When I sign a painting, everybody has a glass of something, and whoever's in the studio that night can toast it."

Mount Gretna Magazine: What inspires you to create art?

Cory: "I use my art as a conduit for cultural understanding. Everything I create is from where we live at the moment, and when I leave that country, I don't do any work from that country again. I think it's important we try to embrace the culture."

Mount Gretna Magazine: Describe how culture or country is incorporated into a specific piece.

Christy: "Something that Cory does with his artwork is he takes elements of the culture or the place we're living, and he combines that into his artwork. He did a piece from the Moscow River, and he went out and actually got water from the Moscow River. He got dust from Red Square, and it was a collective where all the teachers went out, and people at the school brought it, and he mixed it with the paint."

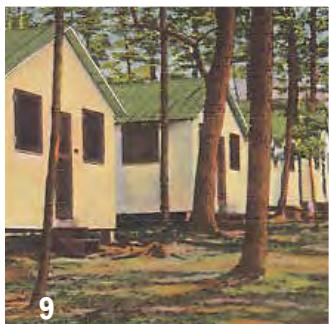
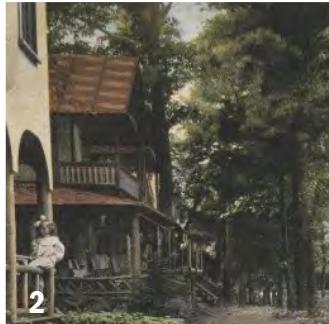
Learn more about the work of Cory Wanamaker on his website, AiryHillStudio.com. Watch Christy Wanamaker describe her life as an expat in her TEDx talk: TED.com/talks/christy_wanamaker_the_extraordinary_life_of_an_expat.



Photo by Shannon Fretz Photography.

Spot the GRETNA COUSIN

A SPECIAL MOUNT GRETNA MAGAZINE GAME | THE “POSTCARD” EDITION



Gretna is full of one-of-a-kind charm, but even unique places have cousins. One of these images isn't from here, but it feels like it could be.



HOW TO PLAY: Can you spot our out-of-town cousin? Send us your best guess! The answer will be revealed on our Stories blog a few weeks after this issue's release — and the name of the first correct guesser will be listed as well. Submit your answer via our contact form at MountGretnaMagazine.org (and subscribe to be notified of the results).

Bringing Up the Band



Meet the members of the Mount Gretna Community Music Collective

Story: Linda Brain Beck

Photos: Shannon Fretz Photography
(except as noted)

What do you get when you combine intimate house concerts with wide-ranging open-mic nights and a diverse mix of participatory events? You get the Mount Gretna Community Music Collective.

The Collective emerged over the last year, beginning with its founders' individual interests.

Each of the three founders had developed different offerings to fill gaps left by the drop in residents and visitors during the September-to-May off-season.

Chris Kiehne has hosted sing-alongs. Tom Cook and his wife, Marilyn Mamone, have offered house concerts. Deb Simpson has organized Christmas caroling, envisioning Gretna as a festive, Victorian-style Christmas village.

Together, these Gretna residents formed the Collective, a team with complementary skill sets. Tom is the promoter; Deb has the social media and IT skills. Chris considers himself the "sweeper," moving things along.

But don't look for titles, bylaws, or articles of incorporation. "We fly by the seat of our pants in a communal, fun way," Tom says.

"In the off-season, with a less-intense focus, people can just relax. We try to keep things as simple as possible," Deb says.

Erasing boundaries between performers and their audience

Open-mic nights offer local musicians the opportunity to showcase their skills. Anyone with musical talent can sign up for a spot.

The house concerts focus on regional performers of original music. "We

offer eclectic music choices," Deb says. "It's not the same old stuff. People trust us that it will always be interesting and unique."

The group's shared mission emphasizes two critical components: community and participation. They want to erase the boundaries between performers and the audience.

"Everyone should have an art form because it helps you escape yourself," Chris says.

The sing-alongs, caroling, and, now, the Mount Gretna Community Music Collective Marching Band offer opportunities to join regardless of experience. Several of the marching band members have returned to playing instruments they haven't touched in decades. Others have never played an instrument before. And, if they have, chances are they never marched.

"We're more of a strolling band," Chris says.

MEET THE ARTIST

the marching band. Various “angels” have underwritten the cost of using the Mount Gretna Fire Company’s social hall, where most of the programs take place.

The group posts upcoming events on multiple Facebook pages, including the Mount Gretna Community Music Collective, Mt. Gretna, and Mt. Gretna Neighborhood Association pages.

“For me, the core of this was community building through music,” Chris says.

“Music is magic. It will take you to places you never expected to go,” Tom adds. And, in Gretna, everyone is invited on the journey. ☎

Linda Brain Beck's diverse career spans corporate and academic realms. She teaches communication courses for HACC, Lebanon Valley College's MBA program, and Dale Carnegie. A seasoned speaker, she delivers keynotes and has given a TEDx presentation. With her husband, Ed, she co-manages a communications and leadership training company.

Stay up-to-date on Mount Gretna Community Music Collective's activities and programs by subscribing the group's online mailing list at: MountGretnaCollective.Mailchimpsites.com

Page 12: The marching band plays at the April dedication of the improvements to Soldiers Field. **Below:** An April 2025 house concert featured central Pennsylvania alt-rock group Rivers. Photo courtesy of Deb Simpson.

Deb exemplifies that participatory spirit. While Chris and Tom are longtime musicians, Deb has always liked music but never played an instrument. Now, she's the bass drum player in the marching band. When the band wore various shades of purple for the annual Mount Gretna Turkey Buzzard Drop on New Year's Eve in 2024, she dressed up as Prince and played the xylophone.

Over time, others have stepped up to take on various leadership roles. Martha Levine has become the emcee for Collective gatherings. Rick Thorne volunteers as the marching band team lead and conductor.

The group has also expanded into an “Off the Page” session, where participants recited original writings or exhibited their artwork in a mini art gallery. Julia Herman has taken the lead on that effort, as part of the group's goal to expand into other areas beyond music.

At Tom's urging, Martha, a former flute player, first joined the marching band's percussion section and has transitioned into her role as the group's emcee for other occasions.

Connecting Gretna through music
The impact of the group's work comes through the small moments of joy created. “People laugh. People smile. If people are singing, clapping, and dancing, we've met our goal,” Chris says.

“It's also just an excuse to get together,” Marilyn adds.

Lorrie and Frank Gentile have attended many of the Collective's offerings. “For us, it goes back to our coffeehouse days,” says Frank.

These events “are such a welcome part of our community,” adds Lorrie. They “have a feeling like a coffeehouse and are set up beautifully with candle lights and tablecloths. The atmosphere is very homey, cozy, and intimate.”

Lorrie and Frank agree that the Collective offers the opportunity to see outstanding performances from local entertainers. “If you like music at all and you're

looking for something to do, just walk on down,” Frank says. “You'll be blown away by the quality.”

Growing and evolving through outreach

The Collective's efforts have created additional offshoots as “unintended consequences.” For example, the marching band often performs during the summer months. Another group, The Small Frogs, has formed out of other Collective happenings. This group debuted at Play Music on Your Porch Day in August. Additionally, the Collective has worked with the MG Mercantile to offer unplugged performances on Saturday afternoons.

“We have evolved from just cooperating on our various individual activities to working jointly and developing new concepts,” Chris says.

Future offerings include choral music, fine arts programming, and a waltz club.

“There's a role for everyone,” Tom says, even if that means being an audience member for some of their activities.

The Collective's sessions attract about 25 to 50 people, with room to increase attendance and maintain the intimate setting. Anyone, regardless of where they live, is welcome to attend.

Donations cover the costs of the programming. Many programs have a suggested donation for attendees. In the past, the group has raised funds for two bass drums and a set of tenor drums for



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Photo: Stacy Schroeder



This page, from top: Postcard of the 1899 Campmeeting fire. Newspaper clipping about the 1949 fire, also in Campmeeting.

Right: Winter photo courtesy of the Mount Gretna Community Volunteer Fire Company.

Story: Kevin C. Wells

Photos: Courtesy of Mount Gretna Area Historical Society (except as noted)

On a cold winter night, when the wind whistles through the trees and the scent of wood smoke permeates the air above cottages, a siren sounds. In Mount Gretna, that familiar wail does more than announce an emergency. It echoes a century-old promise of neighbors protecting neighbors.

Roots in resilience

Gretna's story is interwoven with fire. The wooden cottages and narrow lanes that give the town its charm also makes the community vulnerable to disaster. Fires in 1899, 1922, and 1949 destroyed homes and reminded residents of the fragility of their wooden haven. Each generation rebuilt and renewed its commitment to safeguarding Gretna's heart.



Answering the Call to Service

From those lessons, the Mount Gretna Community Volunteer Fire Company grew. What began as bucket brigades evolved into a modern company whose firehouse on Boulevard Avenue stands as a symbol of resilience and unity.

A modern department with deep roots

Today, Fire Chief Travis Haak leads a dedicated team of about 35 volunteers — firefighters, EMTs, and fire police — who are committed to far more than the sound of the alarm.

"When that siren goes off, it means someone's in need," Travis says. "We're small, but our reach is big. We respond not only in Gretna, but also to Cornwall, Quentin, and into Lancaster County."

Under his leadership, the department has modernized nearly all of its equipment. In 2023, the company purchased a new rescue engine, paying for it in full without any debt. "We paid cash," he says. "We didn't ask the township for a bond. Gretna might be the only department around that's done that."

The \$793,000 engine represents more than fundraising; it reflects unity. "We did it together," Travis says. "It's about the team and the community that supports us."

Changes in emergency response

The Mount Gretna Community Volunteer Fire Company functions as an all-hazard department, a designation



commonly defined in *Firehouse Magazine* as one capable of responding to nearly any type of emergency — fires, vehicle accidents, medical emergencies, and severe weather incidents.

In a town of century-old cottages, dense trees, and winding roads, this readiness matters. “We’re not just firefighters,” says Joe Shay, who serves as the company’s president and safety officer. “We’re a Quick Response Service, which means we handle medical calls too. In a community with older residents and narrow roads, we’re often first on scene.”

Travis agrees. “It’s not always dramatic fires. Sometimes it’s checking on a neighbor or making sure a furnace exhaust isn’t blocked by snow. Every call matters.”

As winter approaches, Joe emphasizes prevention. “Have your chimneys cleaned. Don’t overload fireplaces. Keep walkways clear of ice, and if you see downed wires, call us.”

Neighbors helping neighbors

In a town of approximately 200 year-round residents, volunteerism keeps the fire company alive. Travis and Joe stress that there’s a role for everyone.

“You don’t have to run into a burning building,” Travis says. “We need people to serve food at events, organize fundraisers, or wash trucks on Monday

nights. Join as a general member. Be part of the team.”

For Joe, who joined more than 30 years ago after the fire company once saved his life during a medical emergency, service is personal. His family’s firefighting roots stretch back a century to Lebanon’s Rescue Hose Company. “It’s the love of my community,” he says. “I wanted to give back.”

Even after 25 years serving as Mount Gretna’s mayor, Joe continues to serve. “I haven’t done any of this for recognition,” he says. “I did it because it needed to be done, and I enjoyed it.”

A fire company and a family

The bonds formed in a volunteer fire company run deep. Members train together weekly, respond to unpredictable emergencies at all hours, and share the quiet, unspoken trust that only comes from facing uncertainty together.

“We’re one big family,” Travis says. “The youngest member is 14; the oldest is around 77. Everybody looks out for each other.”

That closeness, he adds, also extends to emotional well-being. According to the *Journal of Psychiatric Research* (2025), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affects an estimated 5.6% of trauma-

exposed populations worldwide. First responders, such as firefighters, carry a particularly high risk of exposure to traumatic events and are at increased risk of PTSD, with a reported prevalence of 12.3% to 32.5%.

“Everyone in the fire service carries a little PTSD,” Travis says. “We talk; we help each other through. This isn’t your full-time job; you choose to volunteer because you care.”

Training is ongoing, covering everything from hazardous materials to CPR, and teamwork is essential. “When you’re on a call,” Travis says, “you rely on each other’s strengths. Those who’ve been here longer teach the new ones the ropes.”

That culture of mentorship has been vital in sustaining membership and morale at a time when volunteer fire service numbers continue to decline across the state. According to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, more than 90% of Pennsylvania’s 2,400 fire companies are volunteer-based, and the Commonwealth is experiencing a significant shortage of volunteer firefighters.

“Manpower is the biggest challenge in any department,” Travis notes. “But Gretna has something special — people who care.”



Top: Image of an old fire hose from Mount Gretna Area Historical Society archives. *Above:* Firefighters serve food at a July 2025 community picnic they host each year. Photo by Shannon Fretz Photography.

Leadership legacy

For decades, Joe's steady leadership as mayor and fire company president has reflected Gretna's cooperative spirit. "The sections of Gretna used to feel separate," he says. "Now it feels like everyone's part of one community."

His successor, Mayor-Elect Kerry Royer, has Joe's complete confidence. "She knows everyone, knows the council, and she'll do great. It's a seamless transition."

Still, his heart remains at the firehouse. "Being part of the Fire Company is one of the proudest achievements of my life," Joe says. "If something needs to be done, I do it."

Preparing for tomorrow

Both Travis and Joe are preparing for the future. The company's next goal is to replace its aging attack vehicle, a small engine that is vital for navigating Gretna's narrow lanes. "The current attack is over 20 years old," Joe explains.

"We're looking for one with a four-man cab to make it safer and more efficient."

Travis is also exploring partnerships with neighboring departments to strengthen training and coverage. "If we collaborate, we're all stronger," he says. "The goal is to keep Mount Gretna safe while staying true to who we are."

Community support through one shared mission

The Mount Gretna Community Volunteer Fire Company remains debt-free and deeply connected to the people it serves. Fundraisers like the annual Pig Roast, pancake breakfasts, and Fire Prevention Night not only fund equipment but also strengthen community bonds.

That partnership between volunteers and residents keeps the company thriving. In an era when many small-town fire departments face uncertain futures,

Gretna stands as a model of what can happen when service is shared.

As winter deepens and chimneys glow across Gretna, the volunteers of the Mount Gretna Community Volunteer Fire Company stand ready — quiet guardians of this place we call home.

"Volunteerism is the backbone of our community," Joe says. "Gretna is built on the people who live here and the people who care." 

Kevin C. Wells is a Mount Gretna resident, writer, and community volunteer. He works in education administration and serves on the Mount Gretna Campmeeting Association Board of Managers. Passionate about service, leadership, and storytelling, Kevin highlights the people and traditions that strengthen the spirit of community life.



More to Explore

Every year between mid-February and mid-March, one of Pennsylvania's most impressive natural phenomena occurs; the migration of snow geese and tundra swans. During this time, over one hundred thousand snow geese migrate north and stop at Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area.



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This page, starting at right: Victor Bojko in the late 1940s and with wife Judy in Mount Gretna, summer 2025.

Page 19, from top: Clipping from a story featuring Victor's mother, Charytyna. Its caption reads: "A broadcast that moved the world: on Christmas Day, 1951, this Ukrainian widow was reunited, for a few precious minutes with her two small sons in America." Victor and brother Paul at Bad Aibling with their beloved dog, Pipsy.



Story: Michael Long

Photos: Courtesy of Victor Bojko
(except as noted)

Victor Bojko knows a long lifetime covers a lot of ground, some of it treacherous.

From the screened-in front porch of the two-story cottage he shares with Judy, his wife of 55 years, Victor's life and surroundings appear idyllic: sunlight sifting through maples, squirrels casually surveying the woodscape, and stately blue jays stopping by the bird feeders to feast on peanuts the Bojkos buy from Costco.

The serene Mount Gretna Campmeeting retirement sustaining Victor's later years could not be farther from the chaos of his youth, from which he is now three generations and more than 5,000 miles removed.

A quarter century into the new millennium, the mention of Auschwitz still conjures images of horror. World War II historians estimate that the German Army, between 1940 and 1945, deported 1.3 million people to the Auschwitz concentration camp in German-occupied Poland, of whom 1.1 million were killed, 90% of them Jews.

But 4-year-old Victor Bojko survived that camp, along with his 6-year-old brother, Paul, and his parents, Gregor and Charytyna (Zelynska) Bojko. (See contents page for a photo of the four family members.)

Several years before he died in 2023, Paul Bojko recorded an interview with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum detailing his experiences during the war. The recollections of Victor and Paul paint a picture of a harrowing childhood.

Born in a village outside Kremenchuk, in central Ukraine, the boys lived with their parents and grandparents in a typical countryside farmhouse made of stucco with a thatched roof. As peasant farmers, the members of the Bojko (pronounced "boy-co") family were not Jewish, but Ukrainian Orthodox.

The family lived off the land and without electricity. They grew potatoes and wheat, which they threshed by hand. Victor recalls eating watermelon and cantaloupe



Above:
Photo by Shannon Fretz Photography.

The FAITH to Make It Through Adversity

in the summertime. Paul recalled digging potatoes and listening to the German and Russian armies battling in the distance.

In the summer of 1943, the war came to their doorstep. German soldiers loaded the Bojko family into trucks at gunpoint and shipped them to Auschwitz. The Nazis would force millions of foreign civilians, like the Bojkos, to work in their factories to replace German men who had been conscripted into military service.

"The Nazis were going to put us all in the furnace unless my parents worked for them in the factories," Victor says.

At Auschwitz, the boys' father worked as a carpenter, building new barracks like the ones the Bojkos stayed in. Their mother cleaned barracks.

The Bojkos would spend only a few months in Auschwitz — their ultimate destination was a work camp in Nuremberg, Germany — but it was enough time to know something awful was happening there.

Paul recalled watching an officer shoot a man, who ended up dead in a ditch. Victor remembers the smell of death and the sniping of the German guards: “*Schnell, schnell, schweinehund!*” (“Faster, faster, you dirty dog!”)

When the Bojkos and other families with those capable of working were finally rounded up into cattle cars to be shipped by rail to Germany, the boys’ grandparents were forced to stay behind and were presumably killed. They never saw them again.

In Nuremberg, the boys fended for themselves while their parents worked in the factories. British and American forces bombed the city day and night.

Victor recalls hearing the whistling of the bombs and becoming inured to the fear the sound should have awakened in him. He remembers putting his head in a barrel during an air raid and getting shrapnel in his backside. And he recalls the strength of his mother.

“When we were running from shelter to shelter, she would take Paul under one arm and me under the other, and she would take us to safety somehow.”

When the war ended in 1945, the Bojkos found refuge in a Red Cross camp for displaced people. The cold, fear, and



hunger that plagued the boys for two years receded, but trials of a different type awaited them.

Both of their parents took ill. Charytna had a stroke and was bedridden in a hospital, and Gregor died of illness in 1947. That year, the boys were sent to the International Children’s Center at Prien am Chiemsee, Germany, and the following year, they moved to the International Refugee Organization Children’s Village in Bad Aibling, Germany, where they remained until it closed in 1951.

Victor recounts his time at Bad Aibling with great fondness. Run by an international collection of house parents, including Americans, the orphanage was well supplied, and the boys wanted for nothing. They had plenty of food, clothing, and even a dog, Pipsy.

In particular, Victor had comic books, which he adored. He read Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, and Roy Rogers comics.

Left to their own devices in the German countryside, the boys would explore tunnels dug during the war. They would take the guns and ammo they found to an ammunition dump and trade them in for a few Deutsche Marks, which they spent on pastries at the bakeries in town.

When the orphanage closed, Victor and Paul, ages 12 and 14, and another pair of brothers the same age were placed unsupervised on a ship headed for America. The sailors took care of the boys, who found ways to amuse themselves. Occasionally, Victor says, they would lean over the railing and pretend to be seasick so sympathetic passengers would give them extra lunch tickets.



(Above) A broadcast that moved the world: on Christmas Day, 1951, this Ukrainian widow in a refugee hospital in Germany was reunited, for a few precious minutes, with her two small sons in America. (Photo: Fritz Hier.)

Pulling into New York Harbor, they could make out the Statue of Liberty in the distance and buildings dozens of stories high, the likes of which they had never seen.

In the city, “our heads were up all the time,” Victor says, and their feet were safely on the ground in America.

The boys stayed briefly at a Jewish center in New York before being placed with foster families around Baltimore. Their mother, having recovered from her stroke, came to America, too, and settled near Lebanon, which is how Victor came to the area to start his own life.

Victor’s road to Mount Gretna was long, circuitous, and fraught with peril.

“When I think about what happened,” Victor says, “there’s one of two ways you can make it through: Have faith enough that you can do it, or else you give up and say ... ‘I’m just going to sit here and take what’s coming.’”

Victor chose faith, and that faith paid dividends. ☐

Michael Long is the deputy editor of the Investigations and Enterprise team for LNP | LancasterOnline and WITF. He and his family hail from northern Lancaster County and still frequent Mount Gretna.

Storybook Charm,



Gretna-Style

Story: Stacy Schroeder

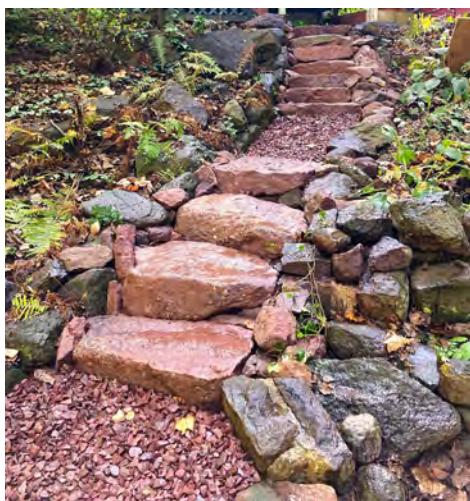
Photos: Shannon Fretz Photography
(except as noted)

Lynne Davies purchased her 1926 Mount Gretna cottage almost 13 years ago, moving from nearby Annville. Though she had brought her daughters to swim in Gretna's lake many times, she did not know much about the community.

In fact, Lynne almost did not enter her current home when touring with the real estate agent because it did not have the prerequisite number of bedrooms. Once she did, however, she was smitten.

"It reminded me of our family cabin in the Poconos," says Lynne, who named the cottage Secret Garden.

The cottage is a three-bedroom, two-bath home nestled on a tenth of an acre in Gretna's Chautauqua neighborhood. When asked to name her favorite place in the cottage, Lynne quickly lists the kitchen, the sleeping porch, the deck, and then right in front of the fireplace (featured as this issue's cover photo). She also points out the private back garden



This page, clockwise from top right: One of the cottage's three bedrooms. The cozy living room with stained glass windows added by Lynne. Stone steps in the back garden, installed this summer by Ryan Fretz Arts. *Photo courtesy of Ryan Fretz.*
Page 20: Lynne's stunning kitchen, where she cooks up curries and chutneys and all types of culinary delights.



tucked into the hillside that gives the cottage its name. And then she states that Thanksgiving in the cottage is a personal highlight, with the cozy adjoining rooms embracing up to 35 people in small conversation circles.

Lynne has been a loving caretaker, embracing the cottage's history while adapting it for her needs and style. She's involved local craftspeople, including carpenter Steve Wentzel and landscape

artist Ryan Fretz of Ryan Fretz Arts. Lynne has found life in Gretna delightful and without significant challenges.

"Winter here is magical," says Lynne, who declares that the borough takes better care of the roads than most surrounding municipalities.

"But what has surprised me the most is the people," says Lynne. "I know my neighbors. People walk everywhere."

COTTAGE LIFE



Above: A doorway view captures those whimsical details that give Gretna cottages their appeal. *Above right:* The renovated sleeping porch, which Lynne loves so much that she has slept in it every night since its completion. *Left:* Hank greets diners. Photo courtesy of Porch & Pantry.

Neighbors John and Marianne Spychalski hold a special place in Lynne's heart for a kindness offered when she was new to Gretna. "They sent me a card with a note that said, 'You are part of our world now,' which meant so much to me," Lynne says.

Lynne has welcomed in a dog and several cats, including a tabby named Hank, who inspired Cultured Heat's "Hank's Red-Hot Sauce," available at nearby Porch & Pantry restaurant. While nomadic Hank has since taken up residence with a neighbor, chef Guido Michael still gifts Lynne the occasional bottle of hot sauce in recognition of her former feline.

Neighbors sometimes wander by as well. "People just stop over," Lynne says. And with a cottage like Secret Garden, is it any wonder? ☀

Stacy Schroeder is the creative director of Mount Gretna Magazine and the co-author of a local history book. This is the third magazine she has designed. She also brings over 30 years of nonprofit leadership and over four years as a spiritual director to this role.



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YOU THINK YOU KNOW Gretna

Story: Meagan Cassel

Photos: Shannon Fretz Photography
(except as noted)

Map: Bob Harding

Mount Gretna is fondly regarded as one small town nestled into the woods, flanked by forest, and accessed by only a few roads. It unites around one tiny post office and a handful of homey restaurants, and it bubbles to life amid the arts in the summertime.

Many would never guess that the town consists of seven “neighborhoods.” Admittedly, the idyllic Pennsylvania Chautauqua and Mount Gretna Campmeeting make up the “downtown” that visitors encounter first. But Gretna’s

full story spreads out farther into the woods and further back in time. Five additional areas are carved into the trees, some of whose origins predate the renowned tiny streets and Victorian cottages.

Timber Hills, Conewago Hill, Timberbridge, Mount Gretna Heights, and Stoberdale — essentially all residential areas — share many of the same appeals of living in Gretna as Chautauqua and Campmeeting. It’s the sense of seclusion blended with fresh air, access to the arts and recreation, and small-town services. But they generally also draw upon newer home styles, larger lots, and forested privacy. Each of them has a unique story to tell.

Left: A wintry view of The Heights.

Page 25, bottom left: A monument to the 16th Pennsylvania Infantry, who used land now part of Gretna for various war mobilization efforts from April 1898 through July 1917.



Timber Hills

*Approximately 150 homes
South Londonderry Township
Palmyra Area School District
No corporation/homeowners association*

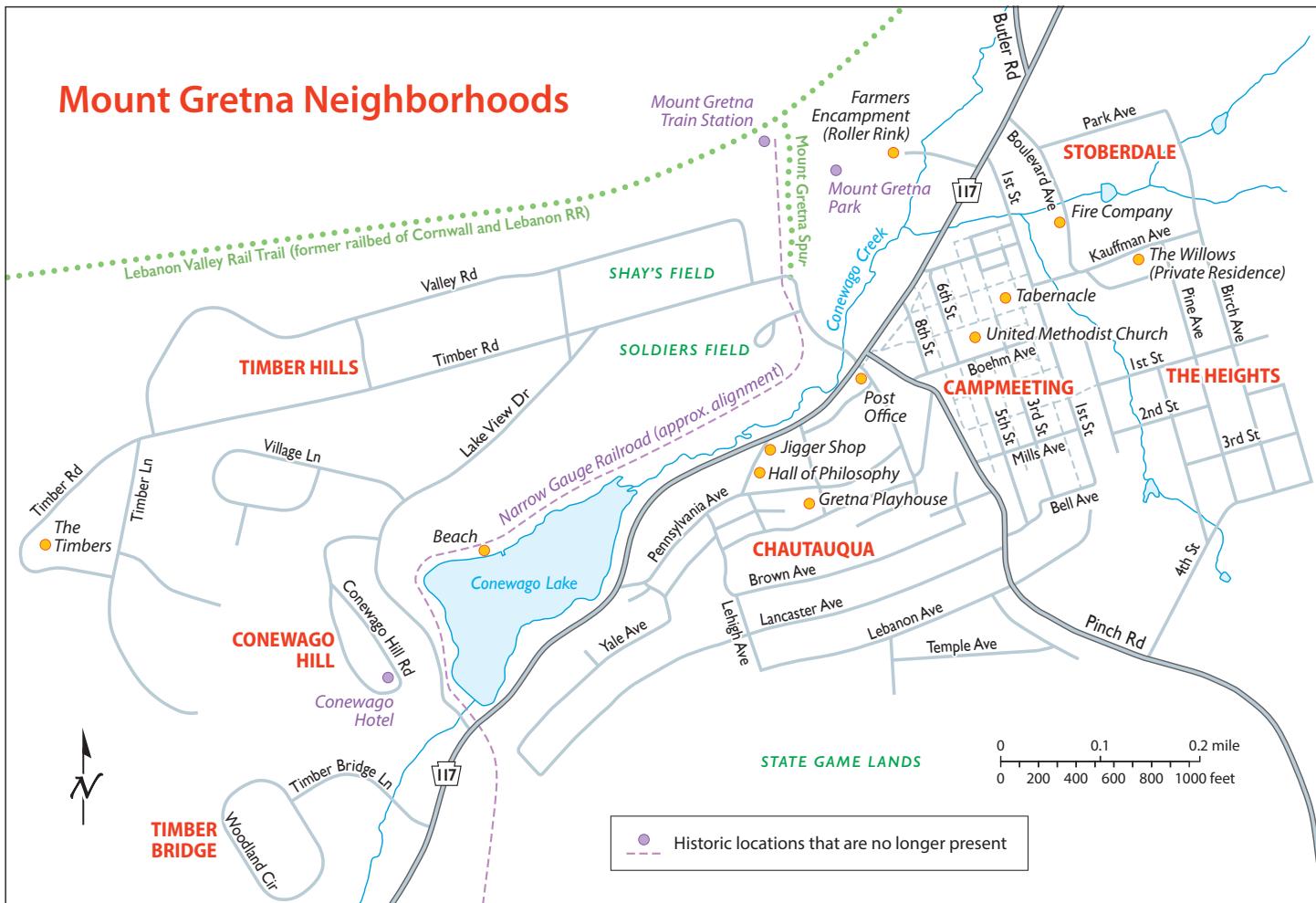
Journey from the center of town up Timber Road to find a collection of homes mostly built around 50 years ago, combined with a series of apartments, Lake Conewago, and the Timbers Restaurant and Dinner Theatre. This location along the Lebanon Valley Rail Trail — and expansive field spaces — is no coincidence, for this span of land is where Gretna got its start.

In 1883, local iron magnate Robert Coleman was in search of a picnic grove along his Cornwall and Lebanon Railroad, and Gretna’s trees and stream were chosen as the ideal spot. In no time, the picnic grounds flourished into a bustling Mount Gretna Park. In fact, curious onlookers can still find remnants of the amusements, the grand fountain, and the railroad station adjacent to Timber Hills.

The 15-acre lake was created in 1885, the same year that Robert cleared 120 acres and welcomed the Pennsylvania National Guard to set up a complete military training encampment. It wasn’t until 1892 that Chautauqua and Campmeeting took shape.

Today’s paved streets originated as “company streets” lined with tents. The present oval-shaped Village Lane was once a quarter-mile race track for quarter horse racing and personal training, while “Soldiers Field” served as the parade

Mount Gretna Neighborhoods



grounds for reviews and band concerts. Today, several monuments serve as a reminder of the military's more than 50-year tenure in Gretna, as do the bullets and soldiers' buttons that residents have found on their properties.



In 1952, more than a decade after the encampment moved to its present location at Fort Indiantown Gap, the Timbers was built on the gentle rise that had once been the site of the National Guard headquarters. Over the next few decades, the neighborhood that developed on the small surrounding hills would adopt its name.

The reasons for this neighborhood's appeal have not changed much through the years. Residents enjoy a bit more of a "suburban" yard for children to play and a little extra elbow room for gardens and sunshine — all while being near town.

"I don't hear anything except the sounds of joy of the kids at the lake," says Sarah Ellis, who moved to Timber Hills in 1983. "I love the woods and being a little bit separated from people right next door."

Ralph Zimmerman, who has resided here since 2009, agrees. "It's the best of both worlds for us. We can walk to the post

office and do all the activities, but we have a sunny acre of land to enjoy from our deck," he says.



Conewago Hill

15 homes

South Londonderry Township

Palmyra Area School District

Conewago Hill, Inc. established in 1950

Adjacent to Timber Hills, a quiet loop of houses occupies a steep rise alongside the lake. Once upon a time, though, it was home to the grand Hotel Conewago. Overlooking the town from 1909 to 1940, the elegant hotel was built at the height of Gretna's tourism and military activity,

then dismantled with the advent of the automobile and the Great Depression. A decade later, the land began to take shape as a residential point, with several homes said to share a foundation with the basement level of the old hotel.

Residents have noted finding other hotel remnants among the trees, including the stone staircase off Lakeview Drive.

An unusual concentration of log-style homes occupies Conewago Hill. Some say developer Samuel Light may have sought to preserve the very chestnut forests in which Gretna was born, after a blight nearly eradicated the species.

Jennifer Schlener-Thomas and her husband, Roy Thomas, specifically sought out that very log style. They moved to their home — the first built on Conewago Hill — in 2015, after 20 years in Campmeeting. “Roy and I had admired this particular log home for many years,” she reflects, “and the opportunity to buy it was the only thing that drew us away.”

Neighbor Jim Burchik is also a Gretna transplant; he lived in Timber Hills before moving to Conewago Hill in 2016. “I’ve had people say they never knew the houses were up here,” he says. “We’re kind of out of reach, but very close.”



Timberbridge

19 homes

*South Londonderry Township
Palmyra Area School District
Timberbridge Homeowners Association,
Inc. established in 1996*

Rounding out the trio of neighborhoods on the “lakeside” of town is Timberbridge, the youngest addition to Gretna. It’s conveniently located along Route 117, yet nestled into the woods along Lebanon

County State Game Lands. Originally plotted as a final phase of Timber Hills, builders later made it an independent development and named it for the bridge spanning Conewago Creek. Its timber material rumbles under crossing tires.

While homes in Timberbridge are newer, the surrounding forest is far from it, offering stately mature trees and multiple access points to nature trails. In fact, many residents trek a network of trails directly across Route 117 that harbor a nod to Gretna’s past. They once intertwined with the scenic Mount Gretna Narrow Gauge Railroad that Robert Coleman built in 1889, winding from the old train station, around the lake, and up to the top of Governor Dick Hill.

Jared Rodriguez, Timberbridge’s newest resident, grew up in Conewago Hill and returned to town with his family last year. “The main reason we moved back to Gretna was because I envision my daughter growing up here,” he says. “Timberbridge was on our radar since we started looking a couple of years ago. I really liked how it was within walking distance to the lake but simultaneously reclusive.”

These scenic blessings are shared among Timberbridge, Conewago Hill, and Timber Hills, all at once a peaceful perk and a frustrating nuisance. Deer meander from the Game Lands and through the woods that connect the neighborhoods, feasting on landscaping along the way. And so it goes with Mother Nature’s other gifts that become burdens for the homeowners to bear, like fallen trees and mounds of leaves, without a pickup service. More sunshine peeking through often means more grass to mow, too.

Residents here love it anyway. So much, in fact, that many in these three neighborhoods choose to purchase a post office box rather than install a mailbox so their mailing address can tout Mount Gretna. Otherwise, the provided truck service would result in a Lebanon address. Not to mention, as Jennifer references, “Frequenting the post office is such a part of Gretna culture!”



Mount Gretna Heights (The Heights)

72 homes

*West Cornwall Township
Cornwall Lebanon School District*

Mt. Gretna Heights, Inc. established in 1931

On the opposite end of town, adjacent to Campmeeting, is a quiet residential haven bordered by the beauty of Clarence Schock Memorial Park at Governor Dick. Its homes are formed in a wooded grid of streets named by numbers and trees, gently rising up the hill. Today, Mount Gretna Heights (“The Heights”) is a peaceful retreat, but its beginnings boasted a lively resort and commercial complex dubbed “The Willows.”

Beginning in 1907, aspiring entrepreneur Abraham Kauffman constructed the Kauffman Hotel, a general store and ice cream parlor, an ice house, a dance hall, and a movie theater. These attractions occupied the area around the current Mount Gretna Hide-a-way Restaurant Tavern and Deck parking lot and were a popular spot for Campmeeting attendees seeking entertainment.

Kauffman also developed an adjacent amusement park and million-gallon swimming pool, plus lots up the hill from The Willows. He also designed and built many homes that still stand today. The small summer colony — chartered initially as Kauffman Heights — grew as residents built large year-round cottages. While the attractions fell by the wayside over the years, Kauffman’s original homestead remained. It has served several functions, including the Mount Gretna Inn.

The neighborhood is also known for its cozy Heights Community Building and playground, a tucked-away fishing



Left: The Mount Gretna Hide-a-way Restaurant Tavern and Deck is known by locals as simply the Hide-a-way.

and Chautauqua. “We’re affectionately known as the land of the free. We’re connected, but a half step removed.”

Jeff acknowledges related drawbacks, such as multiple trash services in the absence of an HOA, but it’s not enough to deter his crew of outdoor enthusiasts. They enjoy Stoberdale’s easy access to hiking, biking, and trail running, as well as its small-town feel. “It’s a smaller neighborhood; you get to know each other better. And there are trees, but also open sky,” he says.

Seven Neighborhoods, One Town

In the end, privacy prevails as a unifying value among these residents — privacy, that is, in combination with proximity to their Chautauqua and Campmeeting neighbors. Collectively, they form a town sometimes challenged by its invisible lines: three municipalities, two school districts, numerous property associations, and countless arts organizations.

But visible connections are reminders of the town’s unity, nonetheless. They include a beautiful new lit path and bridge linking Soldiers Field to downtown. One also sees these connections in the Mount Gretna Borough maintenance team clearing snow from many non-Chautauqua streets and witnesses the new friendships made over flower stands, library books, and mountain bikes. These connections are also shared through this magazine, passed from hand to hand among neighbors and visitors alike, expressly created to share the charm of the full community. ☕

spot called Frog Pond, and the signature wooden flamingos that have been adorning properties since Max Hunsicker started the tradition in 1991.

“[The Heights] is perfect for us,” says Deena Golgowski, who moved to Gretna in 2020. “Close, friendly neighbors, but enough room for our family of seven. It’s still an easy walk or bike ride to any attraction in Gretna, so although we may be out of the hustle and bustle during the season, we are still able to head down in a few minutes to be a part of it. Being surrounded by beautiful nature and kind people has given us the peaceful home of our dreams.”



Stoberdale

22 homes

West Cornwall Township

Cornwall Lebanon School District

No corporation/homeowners association

Down the hill from The Heights is an eclectic blend of homes known as Stoberdale, where, like its neighbor, some

roads and yards seem to meld right into Governor Dick.

Stoberdale is commonly mistaken for Stoverdale, a United Brethren Campmeeting location near Hummelstown, from which members departed to begin Gretna’s Campmeeting. But its name actually derives from Jack Stober, who established Stoberdale in 1930 and made it the only Gretna neighborhood to be named for its founder.

Stober purchased a section of the former Willows to build entertainment and homes for family and friends. His dream was realized via the Stober House Restaurant, now known as the Hide-a-way.

The popular deck and its live music aren’t a bother to Jeff Spangler and his wife, Claire de Boer, who moved to Gretna in 2018. Instead, they take it in from their backyard oasis, and their dog, Milo, howls along to the neighboring Mount Gretna Community Volunteer Fire Department sirens.

“We don’t have any [homeowners association] rules, which is kind of my favorite thing,” Jeff says, referencing the ability to have a fire pit anchoring his outdoor patio, plus the lack of noise ordinances that govern Campmeeting

Meagan Cassel is a digital marketer, namely in the travel and tourism industry. She and her family have been proud residents of Mount Gretna’s Timberbridge neighborhood since 2012, yet she enjoys exploring the entire town and telling its stories.

Winter's Grace

Seasonal Contemplations by Vicki Kensinger | Photo by Shannon Fretz Photography

The streets of Mount Gretna have a magical feel after a snowfall. With a fresh blanket of softness tossed over the village, the already quiet season feels even more hushed. The rhododendrons so many of us cherish catch the accumulation in their outstretched arms, with the snow highlighting their grace. Hemlock and pine boughs bow under the weight, while each delicate needle is traced to invite wonder at the intricacy.

Objects passed by without a sideways glance during a summertime walk, with all of its green busyness distracting or hiding, suddenly draw your eye. Every surface seems to beg your notice — the line of a birdhouse roof, the detail of a cottage trim, the finialed tip of a lamppost, the wreathed head of a fairy — as if in the covering they are at the same time uncovered.

Even the concrete can become a wonderland. I remember the time my granddaughter marveled, with sparkling eyes, at the way she could see the individual snowflakes, likewise sparkling, in the sunlight that was kissing the snow-covered basketball court in the Chautauqua.

Mostly, it is the silence here in winter that invites a complementary interior one, the slowing of activity that evokes a quieter attention. Except for the plow — which is both welcome and always too soon — mechanical noises are stilled.

Something in me realizes I have been holding my breath for such stillness as this, recognizing how the background noise in my life has prevented me from hearing. It's like when you are living with physical pain, and suddenly, it is relieved. You realize just how loud that pain has been in your life, how much energy you have been expending to manage it.

Some find the season of wonder to be the holidays of December, but, for me, this quieting that unfolds and blankets the earth in the weeks and months following those busy days soothes and fills my depleted spirit.

A slow walk through the magic of a fresh January snowfall allows me to also take that gentle walk through the inner terrain of my life — to notice what I have been trampling right over or ignoring in my beeline, summertime pace from here to there — to wonder at the intricate grace of life.

These delicate details, which I fail to acknowledge in my ordinary way of (not) seeing myself, are in fact stunningly exquisite. Even that which I want to label as inelegant in myself is seen afresh, with a gaze such as this. They are the rough edges I want to despise, blanketed in gentle curiosity and compassion, the raw and ragged edges softened.

May you have space in your own life for such softness this winter, for slow walks and quiet noticing, for attending to what has gone unnoticed or unloved for far too long, for reclaiming the beauty of who you are. May you accept winter's invitation to stop chasing the light and to notice how it is sparkling right where you live. May your eyes see with amazement the delicately woven patterns of your own life, blanketed by grace. ☺

Vicki Kensinger is a lover of the healing power of the written word and the natural world. Her daily journaling practice takes her into the wild terrain of the inner landscape, while her wilderness excursions carry her deep into the backcountry of Ontario via canoe. Mother of five and Gaga to 10, she lives in Mount Gretna with her husband, Don. She blogs at EmmaatLast.wordpress.com and AnAlgonquinAffair.wordpress.com.



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