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magazine

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Volume 2, Issue 2



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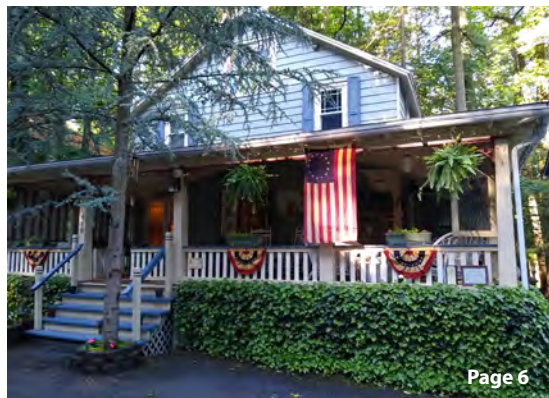
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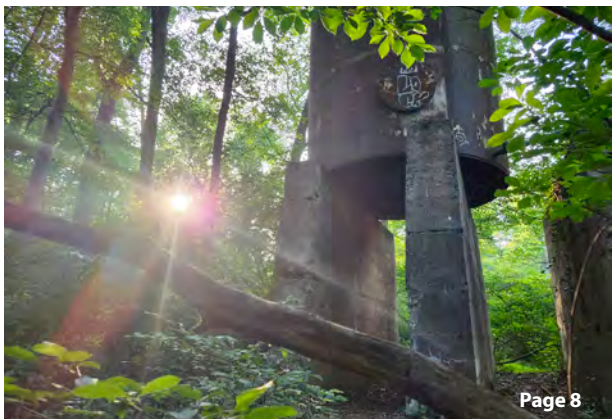
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Photos clockwise from top left:
Shannon Fretz Photography,
Fred Opalinski, Michael Long.
Cover photo: Stacy Schroeder.

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STORIES THAT CONNECT + INSPIRE

Photo this page: Musical group *The Girls of Summer* (left to right, Rachel Hendrickson, Lauryn Obozian, Maria Panvini, and Kate Nice) performs in May 2025 on the porch of the Hall of Philosophy at Gretna's annual Summer Kickoff hosted by the Arts Council. *Photo by Shannon Fretz Photography.*

This year's Kickoff takes place on May 23 from 3-5 p.m. More details on the event calendar at Mtgretna.org.



WORD of the SEASON

Celebrating the beauty
of uncommon words

Murmuration

mer mur AY shun / n.

A large flock of birds — often starlings — moving as one, shifting direction in perfect, fluid synchrony; from the Medieval Latin murmuration.

There's something about the sound and shared motion of a murmuration that feels utterly mesmerizing. It draws us into a moment of collective awe — aware not only of what we're witnessing, but of those around us witnessing it too. We could use more experiences like this: moments that lift us, briefly, into wonder together. Here's hoping this spring in Gretna brings many of these moments.

Thanks to Sue Hostetter for this suggestion. What choice will inspire us next season? Submit your favorite uncommon word at MountGretnaMagazine.org/contact.



Photo at left: The Wishing Tree, a red oak planted across from Gretna's Information Center. Photo by Stacy Schroeder.

The View From My Porch

These are difficult times. There is so much strife and division in our nation and our world. Like many of you, I have opinions about what I am seeing and hearing — and a desire to make things better. How do we do that? I find myself returning to three approaches:

1. **Engaging through activism, voting, and supporting organizations** working toward goals we believe in.
2. **Making time for deep rest, renewal, and inspiration**, both to improve quality of life and to ensure we act from a place of groundedness and clarity. (Aim to work *from* your rest, not rest *from* your work.) I recognize this may not be possible for those under financial or physical threat.
3. **Getting to know and appreciate our neighbors**, which offers truth and opportunity beyond soundbites.

I believe we need progress in all three areas for healthy, lasting change. As a magazine whose mission is to build community through stories that connect and inspire, we are especially equipped to support the latter two.

Thank you to Sue Hostetter for suggesting *murmuration* as our word for this spring (*see page 2*). It is a favorite of mine as well — both for the delightful way it rolls off the tongue and, even more, for the experience it names. While its avian nature aligns with two stories in this issue, it was the sense of collective awe it represents that ultimately sealed its selection for me.

Most of us, I suspect, treasure moments like this. Here are a few of mine: Pausing in silent agreement during a group hike to recline on a steep hill and follow the dance of fast-moving clouds. A lakeside afternoon when a loud rattling in the trees became a line of rain that crossed the water while we stared, forgetting to move until we were already soaked. Singing a favorite song around the campfire with longtime friends as the next generation joined in.

These moments each happened many years ago, yet I still carry them with me. They are times when I felt part of something larger, when extraneous details fell away.

We need more moments like this, moments such as last summer's The Wishing Tree program by Gesauldo Six, when Gretna Music invited concertgoers to write their wishes and tie them to a red oak sapling as part of the event (*see cover photo and above*). That young tree was later planted in the remains of a hollow stump across from Gretna's Information Center — the result of a single, shared activity now living on in a public place, open to further interaction. Consider that image: the remains of an old tree — or an old idea — serving to nurture future growth. Hmmm

Gretna is ripe with opportunities for moments like these to happen. We share some of them here in the magazine. This spring, I invite you to reflect on what nourishes you — and what you would like to help nourish this season. Where can you make a difference?

If you want to be part of creating moments somewhere new, stop by Gretna's May 23 Summer Kickoff (*details on page 2*) to learn more about this community's organizations. While you're there, please visit our table. We'd love to talk with you.



Stacy

Stacy Schroeder
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Gretna TRAIL MIX

Sweet, sometimes nutty, rarely salty — snippets of Gretna life and the stories behind our pages.

Meet the Painter of the Gretna Rock

Related to our Fall 2025 issue



Shannon Fretz's cover photo for our debut issue received lots of love. The painted rock it features has resided in front of the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society's museum for quite some time, though its creator was unknown. That all changed when we teased the cover on social media.

Janelle Warner, a York painter who has spent summers in Gretna for the past decade, reached out to claim her work. Janelle often paints on the Campmeeting porch she rents; giving old chairs new life is one of her favorite projects. She even donated a few pieces of painted furniture to last August's Friends of the Art Show fundraising boutique at the Hall of Philosophy. While Janelle does not have an online presence, she says you can often find her pieces at York garden centers or charity fundraisers.



— Stacy Schroeder

Behind the Scenes with Gretna's Realtors

Outtakes from "Making Gretna Home" (this issue, page 22)

FROM RHODA LONG

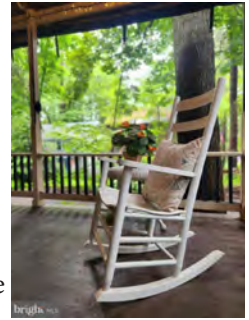
"I've recently had a buyer tell me that they can't drive through Mount Gretna without thinking of [the movie] *Dirty Dancing*."

FROM MICHELLE SHAY

Michelle Shay grew up in Lititz and later settled in Gretna with her husband, Tommy, a Gretna native. "I fell in love with Mount Gretna and a boy at the same time," she says.

"When you buy a cottage, some hidden histories unfold. One of my favorites: People discover the "booze box" — the bottom step of many cottages where they hid liquor bottles. Some people have found the empty bottles."

"I went to New York one year to the Museum of Modern Art with a girlfriend. It was my birthday, a little getaway. You go in, give your ZIP code, pay your \$20. I gave my ZIP code, paid, and started walking in. And this woman comes running after me with my \$20. She's out of breath and says, 'I put your ZIP code in — I spent the best summer of my whole childhood in Mount Gretna, and nobody's ever come through with that ZIP code. Here, it's on me.'"



FROM JOE WENTZEL

"And we have heard — not experienced, but have heard — there might be some cottages in Campmeeting and Chautauqua that might be a little haunted. We've had some renters suggest that to us. We've had some renters run out of their front door. They're all friendly, though."

— Linda Brain Beck



To P.O. Box or to Mailbox?

Related to "You Think You Know Gretna" (Winter issue 2026)

When we bought our home in Timberbridge, we didn't inherit a mailbox. The prior (and first) owner had chosen not to install one because he'd moved here from New Jersey and heard the post office was a way to meet people. I was skeptical, used to the convenience of walking down my driveway. My husband, who grew up in Gretna with a P.O. box, convinced me I'd love it. How right they both turned out to be! And most of all, as a proud resident of Mount Gretna, I want my address to claim it.

— Meagan Cassel

Readers ... this space is for you too! We invite you to share short tidbits and witty observations of life in Gretna with us. We will share as many as we can here, with a light editorial touch. Share stories via our contact form at MountGretnaMagazine.org/Contact.





Photos this page: Twin Cedars Cottage (left) and the Opalinski family (below).

Page 7 (clockwise from top left): Various architectural quirks of the cottage include airplane carvings, unique doors, and stained glass.



Where Peace and Blessings Abound

A visit to Twin Cedars Cottage

Story + Photos: Fred Opalinski

My wife Janet and I first experienced Mount Gretna in the mid-1970s when we were living in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. Friends from Lancaster County invited us to a Gretna Music event at the Mount Gretna Playhouse. After the delightful concert, we strolled along Harvard Avenue, marveling at the trees, the architecture, and the porch gatherings, thinking, “What a fascinating place!” My wife’s aunt had spent a week many summers ago at the Lutheran house in Chautauqua, New York, so we knew about the Chautauqua, but didn’t realize that Pennsylvania had a mini-Chautauqua until that evening.

In 1980, we moved to Latrobe, Pennsylvania, where we remained for almost 24 years. Mount Gretna became little more than a memory in the back of our minds. But in 2003, we moved to Reading and reconnected with Gretna music and theater, attending events, walking the streets, and feeling more and more like we “belonged” here.

Finally, in 2013, during a brief hospitalization, I thought, “What are we waiting for?” We scheduled some showings at a time when quite a few cottages were on the market due to the property tax reassessment. We found the “Airplane Cottage” on Third Street in Campmeeting, which checked many of the boxes for us. It had a great location, a huge porch, and an open floor plan (thanks to some fanciful interior support pillars) with lots of stained glass and other charming features thrown in for good measure. We closed on the cottage that summer and spent a year making the place our own.

The cottage’s name came from a previous owner, an airline pilot. He and his father designed wooden cutouts of all the planes he had flown, lining the porch perimeter with them.

At that time, the cottage had a bland white siding with dark green trim. We decided to brighten the exterior with color, replacing the airplanes with Gothic trim to match the prominent church window on the front second

floor, and selling most of the cutouts at the Memorial Day porch sale. We kept four of them, mounting them above the dining table on the porch in homage to the cottage’s history. We rechristened the place Twin Cedars after the two tall trees on either side of the front steps.

In addition to the church window in the primary bedroom, a second bedroom features a Gothic stained-glass window installed near the roofline, with a lion’s head carved into the bottom frame. Even the smallest bedroom has a door filled with stained glass panes, opening onto a second-floor reading porch.

Beyond stained glass, the pilot owner must have delighted in having doors. All of the bedroom doors were once front doors of Victorian homes, with more stained glass, carvings, and even a brass mail slot. The first floor also has interesting features: a pressed tin door at the pantry, an elaborate tin panel on the kitchen ceiling, double doors with swan handles at the bathroom, and a gorgeous walnut stair railing with a burl wood newel post.



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As if these features weren't enough, exploring in the basement that first year, I found two matching stained-glass doors advertising White Dutch. Online research revealed that this was the name of a type of clover, and perhaps these doors came from a seed company or store. I cut one of the doors in half, hanging the top at the corner of the porch, and bartered the other door for some work being done at the cottage.

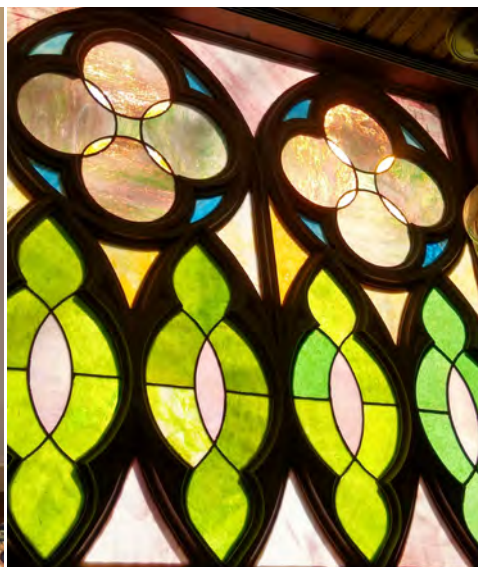
Although we've owned the cottage for over a decade, every trip from our home in Reading still brings a feeling of anticipation and even excitement. Most especially, we enjoy welcoming friends and family to the porch, where, at times, we've had 30 or more for dinner.

Each spring, we compile a list of music and theater events and email it with an invitation to join us for dinner and a concert. We've welcomed friends from all over the United States and also from Germany, France, Spain, Brazil, and South Africa. We've also hosted Gretna musicians from Belgium, France, and Russia. Time and again, we've heard them exclaim, "We've never seen a place like this," and we have to agree.

Behind our cottage are two significant markers: a "peace pole" painted by our daughter Kristen, with the word peace in 42 languages, and a rock cairn that came with the cottage. Since ancient times, a cairn — also called Ebenezer in the Old Testament scriptures — has been a pillar of stones used to mark

a place of significance, often where a life-changing encounter with God occurred. We see both markers as wonderful signs of what can happen when people come to Gretna, where peace and blessings abound. ☺

Fred Opalinski retired after 42 years as a Lutheran pastor, serving in the Mercersburg area, Latrobe, and Reading, Pennsylvania. He's now a licensed Realtor, working in Berks and Lebanon counties. A lover of music, he sings in four Reading choral groups and, a year ago, began studying the cello. He and his wife, Janet, a retired teacher, live in Reading and have two daughters: Megan, a musical theater actor, and Kristen, manager of ecumenical and inter-faith relations for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. They all delight in family member Molly Rey, a 7-year-old Goldendoodle, called by others the "Campmeeting Ambassador."





Images this page: A postcard featuring Mount Gretna's Narrow Gauge Railroad (left) and a scan of a railway history (below) on file at the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society. *Images courtesy of the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society.*
Page 9: Summer flora obscures the remains of a railroad water tank at the Mount Gretna spur of the Lebanon Valley Rail Trail.



A Legacy By Rail

How the Narrow Gauge Railroad shaped Mount Gretna's growth

Story + Photo: Michael Long

More than half a century removed from the days when locomotives regularly chuffed along Pennsylvania rivers and rails, steam engines continue to capture our imaginations.

Steam trains at Lancaster County's Strasburg Rail Road, for example, transport hundreds of thousands of visitors back in time each year. A real-life version of one of America's most beloved childhood influencers, Thomas the Tank Engine, regularly draws massive crowds to the Strasburg rail yard. Even Hersheypark, with its arsenal of cutting-edge, brain-rattling roller coasters, still runs the staid, steady Dry Gulch Railroad and has continuously operated a miniature railroad for more than 115 years.

What endears us so to the steam engine? Is it the billowing plumes of smoke and water vapor that trail behind it like a scarf in the wind or the high-pitched whistle of steam fleeing its boiler? Do we connect with the clickety-clack of cast iron carriage wheels passing over rail

joints or the simple mechanical miracle of converting an oak log or lump of coal into an indomitable horizontal force?

During the late 19th century, when steam-powered mechanical monoliths blazed new trails across the American transportation landscape, trains were as functional as they were fascinating. Moving groups of people or tons of supplies across land meant investing in either real horses or iron horses. For Cornwall iron magnate Robert H. Coleman, an incurable train enthusiast saddled with his family's \$30 million fortune — worth a billion dollars in today's money — the choice was easy.

Building a community by rail

In 1883, Coleman built the Cornwall & Lebanon (C&L) Railroad, connecting Lebanon to the Pennsylvania Railroad main line near Elizabethtown. He established Mount Gretna alongside the route as a tranquil woodland park and fairground. Coleman invested as much love and money in Gretna as he did in his trains. By 1889, he decided Mount Gretna deserved its own recreational rail line, the Mount Gretna Narrow Gauge Railroad.

"When you're one of the richest men in America, and you like toy trains, you're not limited to the dining room table," says Vince Montano, a local historian and member of the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society. In late April 2025, before Gretna's dense foliage had fully emerged, Vince took a band of historically sensitive locals — your author included — hiking along the route of Coleman's long extinct pet project.

The Narrow Gauge Railroad is so named because the distance between its two rails — its gauge — was only 2 feet, less than half the width of a standard gauge railroad. For perspective, Hersheypark's Dry Gulch Railroad has the same 2-foot gauge, but its train looks like a toy compared to the Gretna line's three massive engines. Although they were scaled-down versions of full-size engines, they weighed 14 to 17 tons each and stood as tall as a modern tractor-trailer from rail to smokestack. For more than a quarter century, those engines chugged around Mount Gretna in the summer heat, shuttling soldiers, Sunday school classes, and families on holiday.

By the time the Narrow Gauge Railroad officially launched on July 4, 1889, Gretna had cultivated sufficient infrastructure and interest to keep the trains running. Coleman was in his mid-20s when he cleared the first 5 acres of land for a park at Mount Gretna. Like many young, wealthy entrepreneurs of the Gilded Age, he moved fast. The late Mount Gretna historian Jack Bitner combed through newspaper accounts of those early years, which he captures in his 1990 book, *Mt. Gretna: A Coleman Legacy*. In the book, he chronicles the rapid expansion of the Gretna park and the surrounding area. By the summer of 1885, he writes, “train service to Mt. Gretna was both frequent and inexpensive, and new facilities appeared almost daily. In addition to kitchens, pavilions, (and) a dance floor, there were now a bowling alley, a shooting gallery, and numerous refreshment stands,” including one that served ice cream.

That same year, the Pennsylvania National Guard built a rifle range and established an encampment west of the park that would

bring thousands of men to Gretna every summer for the next 50 years. In June 1885, Coleman ordered the Conewago Creek to be dammed, forming the 17-acre Lake Conewago, also west of the park. In 1886, boats and a bathhouse followed, and the first carousel arrived at the park. Other park additions included a baseball field with a grandstand that seated 500.

The Narrow Gauge Railroad connected it all. With an engine house, a turntable to reposition engines, and a water tank to keep them running, the rail line headed south from the C&L station past the park, then west past the military parade grounds, hugging the northern and western shores of the lake and shooting south across what is now Route 117.

At this point, a little over a mile into the route, a spur split off to the west toward the rifle range while the main pleasure route continued to climb steadily up around what today is the Gretna Chautauqua, crossing Pinch Road and snaking its way up to the Governor Dick overlook, which at the time consisted of only a wooden platform supported by

some chestnut trees. The trip was four miles end to end and cost 25 cents — about \$9 today — or 10 cents from the park to the rifle range. Approximately 34,000 people handed over their Seated Liberty quarters and dimes for a ride on Coleman’s boutique rail line that first summer, with many riding more than once for the fun of it.

The rise and fall of Gretna’s Narrow Gauge Railroad

To understand the broad general appeal of the Narrow Gauge Railroad, consider that, in 1889, locomotion was still largely foot- and hoof-driven. Safe bicycles were beginning to come into production, and central Pennsylvania wouldn’t see its first automobiles for another decade. In fact, newspaper records show Milton Hershey brought the first automobile to Lancaster in 1900, and Palmyra resident J. Daniel Snyder was the first person in his town to order an automobile in 1901.

The train wouldn’t have traveled overly fast. Narrow gauge trains like Gretna’s typically ran in the 10-20 mph range, faster than a trotting horse, but slower



LOCAL HISTORY

than a horse at full gallop. Thrill seekers looking for wind in their hair — the passenger cars were open-sided — might have been a little disappointed. But in an age of rapid industrialization, trains at any speed represented cutting-edge technological advancement.

Novelty draws crowds, and during those first summers, Gretna buzzed with energy. Church, military, and civic groups, by the tens of thousands, populated the park, which added a switchback railway, a predecessor to the roller coaster. In 1890, the park hosted its first Farmers Encampment, a forerunner of the Pennsylvania Farm Show, which included the construction of an exhibition hall that is still standing as the Mount Gretna Roller Rink. *(For more on that part of Gretna's history, see "From Dancing to Roller Hockey" in our Winter 2026 issue available at MountGretnaMagazine.org.)*

A pedestrian bridge was built at the park to conduct foot traffic over the Narrow Gauge Railroad line and west toward the lake and military parade grounds.

By the early 1890s, Gretna was on the upswing, even as the fortunes of the man who built it were tanking. The exuberance of businesspeople like Coleman led to the overbuilding of railroads in the 1880s, and the collapse of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad contributed to the financial Panic of 1893, which decimated Coleman and others who were heavily invested in railroads.

By 1894, Coleman, financially ruined, left Lebanon County for good. In a 20-page booklet detailing the legacy of the Mount Gretna Narrow Gauge Railroad, historian Jack Bitner writes, "When the financial panic of 1893 struck, (Coleman) was forced to sell most of his holdings to the Lackawanna Iron Co. of Scranton. ... A less sympathetic management terminated the Mount Gretna Narrow Gauge Railroad run to Governor Dick that year when Mr. Coleman's personal interest and funds no longer supported it."

The Narrow Gauge Railroad continued making trips from the park to the rifle range for the next 20 years, shuttling guests

and guardsmen about the grounds. A stop was added at the palatial Conewago Hotel, which rose above the western shore of the lake in 1909, but six years later, the rail line shut down for good after an overloaded passenger car tipped over at the rifle range.

Today, only the faintest traces of the rail line remain on the landscape, and those are best seen in the early spring after the snow recedes, and the trees and shrubs remain denuded of leaves. Regular visitors to the Mount Gretna spur of the Lebanon Valley Rail Trail know how to spot through the trees the concrete pylons that still support a water tank. With some bushwhacking, the industrious hiker can trace the circular pit that housed the engine turntable immediately north of the water tank. ☹️

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.

Image this page: A postcard features passengers at Mount Gretna's railroad station. Image courtesy of the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society.



Want to learn more?

For those who really want to go digging, the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society (MGAHS) might be the best place to unearth the Narrow Gauge Railroad story. Copies of the two publications mentioned in this article — *The Mount Gretna Narrow Gauge Railroad* (2009) and the 216-page book *Mt. Gretna: A Coleman Legacy* — can be found there. The historical society and museum itself contain a wealth of information about the rail line, including artifacts. To learn more, call 717-964-1105 or visit MtGretnaHistory.org.

Our thanks to MGAHS for providing resources for this story and other content in this issue.

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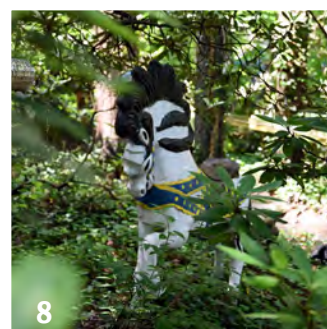
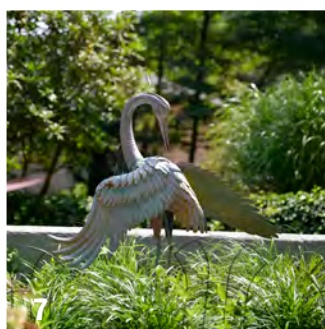
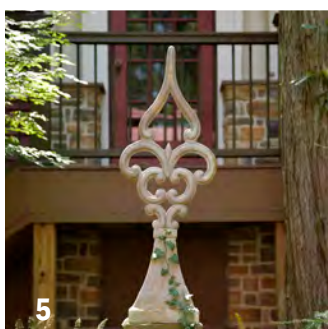
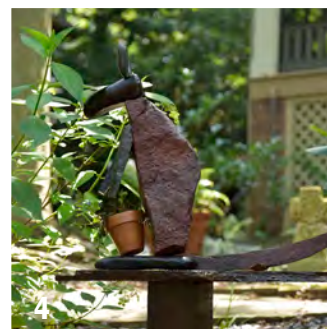
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Spot the GRETNA COUSIN

A SPECIAL MOUNT GRETNA MAGAZINE GAME | THE “GARDEN WHIMSY” 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 in late spring — and the name of the first correct guesser will be listed as well. Submit your answer via our contact form at MountGretnaMagazine.org (and be sure to subscribe at the same time to get notified of the results).

Fridays with Birds



Photo at left: A male pileated woodpecker, our region's largest woodpecker, resides in the Mount Gretna area year-round. Photo by George Tallman.

don't stop to notice or explore, according to Sid, a retired middle school earth sciences teacher.

"It's like a science class," says Lorraine Bell, who has attended bird walks since 2011. "The knowledge of the group is amazing. There's someone who knows about butterflies, someone else about plants, and then Sid with fossils."

A typical Friday morning involves caravanning to two to three stops chosen by the week's leader — often Sid. Most of the stops are in or around Gretna, Colebrook, or the woods around the Governor Dick Environmental Center. The group has ventured to Conowingo Dam near Conowingo, Maryland, to see eagles and to Speedwell Forge Lake in Lancaster County to observe waterfowl.

"Most of us are curious about the environment and the natural world," says George Tallman, an avid birder who once taught in the same school as Sid and was one of the first to sign up for the Mount Gretna Bird Club.

George estimates that, in any year, the club will observe between 120 and 160 of the approximately 400 species seen in Pennsylvania. These species include some that are infrequent visitors to southeast Pennsylvania, such as the peregrine falcon, American bittern, and sandhill crane.

The species present depend largely on their preferred habitat: woodlands, cultivated fields, or lakes and wetlands.

Sid and his wife, Evelyn, began birdwatching and attending bird walks when they lived in the Philadelphia area. When they moved to Gretna, they decided to start a Friday morning bird walk "to give back to the community," Sid explains.

"The more you learn about the outside world, the better you are able to preserve and protect what we have," Sid adds.

Story: Margaret Hopkins

For the past 17 years, the Mount Gretna Bird Club has met every Friday morning to identify and observe the birds passing through, breeding, or nesting on Lake Conewago and in the surrounding woods and nearby game lands.

Anyone can participate regardless of whether they can distinguish a robin from a bluebird or a red-shouldered hawk from a turkey vulture. Indeed, while the club's name suggests an avian focus, often an insect, a flower, or a rock

formation will catch someone's eye and grab the group's attention.

"We don't just look at birds on our walks — we look at everything," says Sid Hostetter, club founder and de facto president. "We study it, we discuss it, and we may even lie on the ground to look at it."

Unlike formal ornithology outings, Gretna's walks are about being outside, sharing information and stories, and observing the hidden features of the natural surroundings that people often

Photos at right, top to bottom: A red-shouldered hawk is a year-round resident that sometimes nests close to downtown Gretna. A female orchard oriole feeds her young. (Orioles migrate from Central America in late April.) An osprey — a raptor with a wingspan of up to 5 feet — fishes at Lake Conewago. A male wood duck can be found year-round at Lake Conewago. *All photos except top image by George Tallman. Osprey photo by Leo Graham.*



Birds are critical to a healthy ecosystem, as they provide numerous benefits. They pollinate plants, feed on insect pests that can attack crops, disperse seeds, serve as a food source for other animals, and recycle nutrients (think vultures and roadkill).

Lose one species, and the fragile interconnection among an ecosystem's living organisms may be compromised. Lose more, and the ecosystem becomes vulnerable to collapse.

Unfortunately, North America's wild bird populations are declining, according to the 2025 U.S. State of the Birds report, released last March and compiled by scientists with conservation organizations and federal agencies.

Of the more than 700 species across the United States, almost one-third are "of high or moderate conservation concern," including one in four Eastern forest birds, such as the American woodcock, Eastern Whip-poor-will, and scarlet tanager.

Destruction of habitat due to land conversion for development and agriculture is one reason. So is the introduction of non-native plants into our landscapes, which has had a cascading negative impact on native insects, particularly caterpillars, the birds' primary protein source for their young.

"The analogy is to musical chairs: If you keep taking a chair away, eventually there is no place to go," says George, paraphrasing a favorite analogy among naturalists. "Every time we remove a natural habitat or a natural food source, we reduce the population, typically without realizing it."

Enhancing awareness of the need to learn, understand, and protect the qualities that support a healthy ecosystem is what the Friday morning bird walks are all about.

"As our small group walks through the woods, we help to spread the word of the importance of our natural surroundings and how to work together to protect them," Sid says.

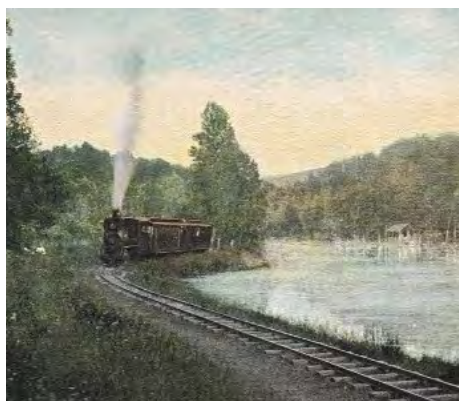
Joining a Mount Gretna Bird Club bird walk is simple — show up at 9 a.m. every Friday at the Chautauqua parking lot off of Route 117. Binoculars are recommended, although loaners are available. Wear sturdy shoes, dress for the weather, and expect to be awed by the magnificence of our environment.

The Bird Club does not impose dues. There are no officers or membership requirements. For more information, email MtGretnaBirdClub@yahoo.com. 📧

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.



From Train Tracks to Rail Trail



Story: Meagan Cassel
Photo: Shannon Fretz Photography

Born in a picnic grove in the woods in 1883, Mount Gretna's humble story began as a recreational stop along the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad. Until that point, the tracks had transported iron products, but it wasn't long before a new passenger service carried flocks of visitors to the blossoming town.

The railroad station expanded as services grew, home to six tracks plus the Mount Gretna Narrow Gauge Railroad (*see story on page 8*). It was the hub of Gretna's connections in its time, welcoming all who enjoyed the growing amusements and arts when railroads were the primary way to access them.

As new transportation evolved over the years, passenger service was discontinued. Decades later, in 1972, Hurricane Agnes flooded sections of the track, marking the line's demise.

As it turns out, though, the railroad's bed would pave the way for new modes of transportation — walkers, bikers, and even horses.

In 1996, Lebanon Valley Rails-to-Trails, Inc. was established. Its mission was to convert the former railroad corridor into a public multi-use trail, providing a safe and enjoyable outdoor space for community well-being.

What began as a five-mile stretch of the Lebanon Valley Rail Trail has expanded to 20 miles and 10 trailheads, with final phases underway to connect one end of the county to the other. An army of 80 volunteers tackles maintenance, including mowing, weeding, and clearing fallen trees.

Watching the trail's popularity grow — most notably since the pandemic — has been heartwarming for founder and president John B. Wengert. "We're up to 300,000 annual users," he says. "It's for all ages and all abilities. We see little kids, strollers, cross-country teams, and Cornwall Manor residents. That's the best part." 🌿

Meagan Cassel lives in Mount Gretna with her husband and two children. They are often found biking and hiking with their dog under the canopy of the Lebanon Valley Rail Trail.

CELEBRATING 30 YEARS

To support the work of maintaining and extending the Rail Trail, you can donate at LebanonRailTrail.com or purchase merchandise at the Root Beer Barrel in Cornwall.

Also, mark your calendar for the trail's 30th anniversary celebration on June 6.

Image above: Postcard courtesy of the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society.

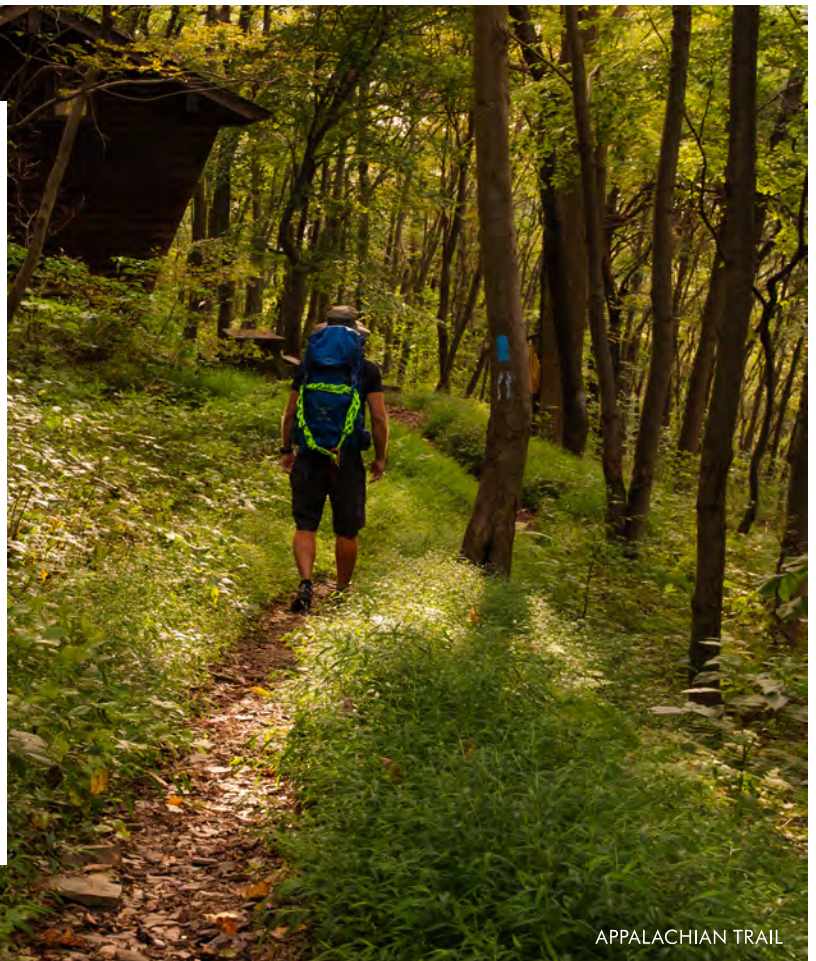
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Time and Trajectory

Story: Karen Hendricks

Photos: Shannon Fretz Photography

Cedar waxwings — with striking yellow feathers — are one of Gerry Boltz's favorite birds.

Appropriately, Gerry notched a golden milestone last August: an unprecedented 50th year as an artist juried into the 51st Annual Mount Gretna Outdoor Art Show. The only year he didn't participate was the show's inaugural year.

"I didn't know about that first one," he recalls with a laugh.

It was during the early 1970s, just as his artistic endeavors were taking flight. By the show's second and subsequent years, he was on board. As a woodcarver focused on birds, Gerry's skills and reputation soared through the years.

Today, at 81, he treasures those 50 years with fondness and gratitude, including

the art, friendships, and relationships that have spread their wings.

Building a nest

"People often say we're a team," says Jeanne, Gerry's wife of 58 years. The Lebanon natives met in first grade and began dating in high school.

Following college, as they settled into married life, Gerry devoted 30 years to teaching sixth grade and 27 years to coaching high school track and field, all within the Palmyra School District. All the while, Jeanne taught first graders in the Cornwall-Lebanon School District.

Gerry's carving talents intertwined with their home and career life, nurtured by a fateful family vacation in 1972. While visiting Jeanne's family along the St. Lawrence River in Canada, the next-door neighbor introduced Gerry to carving.

"He was a river man. He took fishing trips, did decoy carvings — he was quite a character," Gerry says. "Jeanne's dad and I would sit outside, and he explained how he carved decoys — and how we might want to try it."

With a couple of pocketknives and rough-cut wood, they gave it a whirl. Gerry's talents took off from there, leading to painting classes, woodcarving workshops, and birding vacations. Waterfowl carvings led to songbirds, eagles, and hawks.

"It has been amazing to see his talents grow," says Jeanne.

Talents take flight

Gerry meticulously numbers each carving on the bottom — he's surpassed 1,700. Customers are scattered throughout the United States from Florida to Maine and even in Alaska. He's also transported his work to Europe, including Germany and the



Photo page 16: Gerry Boltz at work in his studio.

This page: Two of Gerry's creations, an owl and a hummingbird.

Netherlands, where he created a stork for those customers.

"The most challenging birds were a life-size piliated woodpecker and a full-size red-tailed hawk with its wings out," Gerry says. "But the most popular birds are chickadees, cardinals, and wrens. I'm always sure to tuck nesting material in each wren's beak."

From start to finish, the process begins with basswood, rough-cutting, lots of carving, wood-burning detail work, and painting. It's all accomplished in Gerry's home studio — a small workshop, itself carved out of his garage, all with supplies and tools at his fingertips.

"I try to get each bird as lifelike as possible by using a lot of reference material from pictures and measurements," says Gerry. "I would say my work is Audubon-influenced."

And, under the trees of old Chautauqua, his art has also been influenced by Gretna.

The perfect perch

"In the beginning, the show was around the playhouse," Jeanne recalls. "We simply set up a card table. People didn't have tents back then."

Today, from their home in Cornwall Manor, Gerry and Jeanne recall cherished memories of past Art Shows.

"You could see all the folks — former students, teaching colleagues, and

customers. It was like a big party," Gerry describes.

Through conversation, many customers became friends.

"Everyone seems to have a story about a bird," Gerry says. "We developed bonds with customers through a shared appreciation of birds."

But the relationships didn't end there. For 20 years, the couple owned a Campmeeting cottage and invited customers to stop by after the show for refreshments.

"I would also write and send a thank you to anyone who bought a carving," Jeanne explains. "I think they saw that, for us, it wasn't as much about bringing in money as it was appreciation for Gerry's work."

While Gerry's birds were juried into additional shows, including the prestigious Waterfowl Festival in Easton, Maryland, Mount Gretna's Art Show always felt like home.

"The No. 1 thing is the setting, being in the woods, and the quality of the artists," Gerry reflects.

Last summer, the couple savored Gretna's magical Art Show one last time, with Jeanne appropriately referring to it as "Gerry's swan song."

"It was my best show I ever did, in all the years," Gerry says, as he sold more birds than ever before. But his carving days are far from over: He continues carving special orders and birds to donate to nonprofits.

Ultimately, Gerry hopes his carvings of some of nature's smallest, often elusive creatures have inspired people.

"Birds add beauty to our lives," Gerry says, "and I hope people are more attuned to the real world, to seeing and appreciating nature." 🌿

Karen Hendricks is a lifelong journalist based in central Pennsylvania whose work has garnered more than 20 journalism awards. She enjoys helping central Pennsylvania wake up and prepare for the day as host of WITF's "Morning Edition." Karen is also writing her first book, a memoir about running. Learn more about her work at WriterKarenHendricks.com.





Photo at left: One of Gerry's carvings on display at the Mount Gretna Outdoor Art Show in 2025.

The show goes on

Being juried into the Mount Gretna Outdoor Art Show for 50 years is no small feat. More than 500 artists nationwide apply to the Art Show each year, with 200 accepted.

"While we have some local artists, they do have to jury in on merit," says Art Show director Kerry Royer, "and the fact that Gerry Boltz has been in every show — and the jury rotates every year — is a testament to his talents over the years."

Kerry notes that every lineup is unique, thanks to the Art Show's commitment to showcasing 25% new artists.

"I think his bird sculptures are as pleasant and as peaceful as he is. While we're going to miss Gerry, it's always exciting to see new work by new artists as well," says Royer.

There's more! Carving is just one of Gerry Boltz's talents: Learn more about Gerry's volunteer work as Cornwall Manor's garden coordinator at MountGretnaMagazine.org under the "Stories" section.

Introducing Our First Reader Voices Story

This summer, we're introducing a new story format that highlights your tales. Our first community question is: *"What is the quirkiest element of your cottage?"*



Share your answer by May 1 at MountGretnaMagazine.org/Reader-Voices.

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Photos this page: A home listing photo by Michelle Shay (left) and porch shot by Shannon Fretz Photography. *Page 21 (clockwise from top):* George Leh's bagpipe serenade as captured by Marcie Lloyd; a young fairy headed to the fairy garden by Sally Kirby; and an interior cottage photo by Stacy Schroeder.

Making GREटना

Story: Linda Brain Beck

Buying or selling a property in Mount Gretna comes with a fair share of challenges. It's best to have a Realtor who knows and understands the quirks of the distinct Gretna communities.

That message resounded from three long-term agents who also call Gretna home: Joe Wentzel of Penn Realty resides in Campmeeting. Rhoda Long of Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices lives in Timberbridge, and Michelle Shay of Coldwell Banker Realty calls The Heights home.

"What I call 'geographically competent' matters," says Michelle, who has worked as a real estate agent since 2010.

Joe, who has 43 years of experience, says, "We know the people to talk to. We know where to get answers."

"I put them [clients] in my car, and we drive around, and I describe all the different areas," including the different school districts, says Rhoda, who has been a Realtor since 2007.

'Get' Gretna

All agreed there is no "typical" Gretna homebuyer. Some have longstanding ties to the community through relatives who lived here. Others discover it through visits to The Jigger Shop Ice Cream Parlor, hiking in the area, or traveling here for music and arts events. Others have bought on a whim after a first visit.

Regardless, it's essential for a potential homeowner to "get" Gretna, being part of a community and living in a wooded area.

"If you're new, and if time is on your side, I recommend coming to stay — rent a place or two. Spend a weekend or a

week. Attend some shows. Get a feel for what area speaks to you, if you have that luxury. If not, pair yourself with someone who knows what's what," Michelle says.

Once you've found a preferred Gretna location, consider the different needs of available properties.

Many cottages are "not going to have the most up-to-date features in them. Part of our job as Realtors is to educate them," Rhoda says. "Usually by the time they get to us, they have already spent time here."

What to know before you buy

If you want to make Gretna home, you'll want to keep a few points in mind.

"Maintenance. That's probably the first thing. People underestimate the maintenance of living in the woods," Michelle says.



“A lot of people think you don’t own your land, and you do. Sometimes it’s only 20-by-24 feet, but it’s owned,” Joe says.

“There are so many buyers and sellers who don’t really understand the history back to the Colemans and when the National Guard was here,” Rhoda says.

Structural quirks, lack of air conditioning, scarce parking, steep stairways, and property lines can all contribute to property considerations.

“Inspectors are sometimes blown away by what they see here,” Rhoda says. “If a survey is done, you find out your kitchen sink is on somebody else’s property. That’s been one of the challenges, especially in Campmeeting.”

“We always joke that somebody in Campmeeting sneezes, the neighbor hands you a tissue through the window,” Joe says.

The state of real estate in Gretna

Despite these challenges, Gretna’s real estate market remains stable.

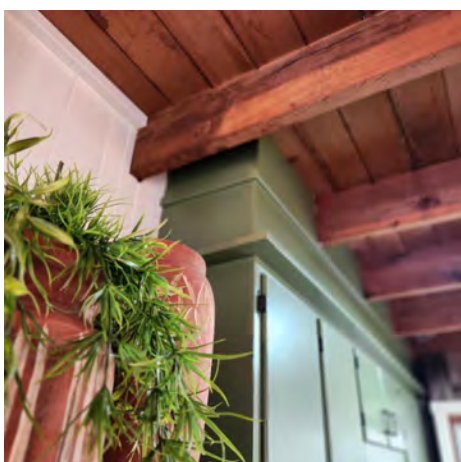
“If things start getting soft in the real estate industry, Mount Gretna is usually one of the last to feel it. And it never lasts as long here in Gretna as it does in other places,” Joe says.

Home





Photos this page: Home listing photos by Michelle Shay, bookshelf photo by Stacy Schroeder.
Page 23: Exterior photos by Shannon Fretz Photography, bottom left photo by Stacy Schroeder.



“Even in 2008, when things were going down the tubes, we were one of the last ones to feel the hurt,” says Rhoda, who began her career right before the housing market crisis began.

Indeed, the market has been quite robust, especially during the last few years.

"I think the record number of times I've sold the same house is four, and that's happened more than once," Michelle says.

"We just put a house on the market on Monday. I had 18 showings by yesterday [Wednesday], and it sold this morning [Thursday]," Joe says.

Interest in Gretna as a year-round community grew in the late 1980s and early 1990s, according to Joe. It accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when homebuyers saw opportunities to stay in less crowded areas.

“They could get outside here. They could walk; they could do things here,” Joe explains.

Growing interest and rising prices have resulted in more frequent turnover as the market evolves.

A 2014 tax reassessment updated property values for the first time in decades, leading to significant tax increases.

“Folks who were paying extremely low taxes — \$600 a year — suddenly went to \$2,500. That changed the landscape,” Michelle says.

Home prices have risen as well.

“When I was working in the title company, I would see transfers in the Chautauqua, which are now going for \$300,000 and \$400,000, happening for \$24,000 to \$30,000,” Rhoda says. “It was mind-boggling.”

While spring and fall traditionally see a bump in sales, now there's more year-round activity than in the past.

With the demand, many offers on Gretna homes are cash with few contingencies.

Joe says he advises buyers to “be prepared to give your best offer possible. A lot of times, you don’t have a second chance to go back.”

And potential homebuyers need to be patient. Sometimes, buyers have a quick turnaround, while others wait years to find the right place.

“Depending on the year, the market, the inventory, some folks get discouraged and move on,” Michelle says.

The demand for housing in Gretna means there are enough opportunities to keep agents busy.

“We live in a small community, and many of the people I ‘compete’ with are also my friends and neighbors,” Michelle says. “If there’s an issue that affects all of us, we come together and collaborate.”

"If we have a house listed and Rhoda sells it, or Michelle sells it, the transaction is so much smoother," Joe says.

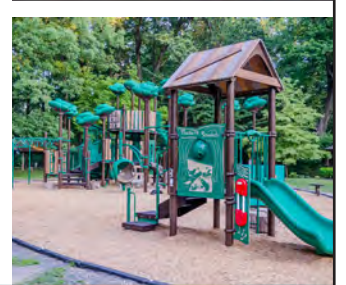
As Gretna residents themselves, Joe, Rhoda, and Michelle bring more than professional expertise to their work — they share the perspective of people who've chosen to make this distinctive community their home. 

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.



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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Learn more about Gretna's neighborhoods by reading "You Think You Know Gretna" in our Winter 2026 issue available at MountGretnaMagazine.org.



Story: Kevin C. Wells

Photos: Shannon Fretz Photography,
except as noted

On a summer evening in Mount Gretna, a concert begins under the open beams of the Tabernacle. Audience members line their chairs around the perimeter. Neighbors greet one another by name. Children weave between porches and pews. It may not look like a constitutional convention, but in its own small and persistent way, it is the American experiment in action.

As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary this summer, historic places like Philadelphia will get attention for foundational ideals

first articulated in 1776. Yet democracy has never depended solely on national capitals. It survives in towns and neighborhoods where people practice self-government face-to-face. In Gretna, associations, traditions, volunteer efforts, and even tensions reveal how the American experiment continues in daily life.

From the beginning, the American project has unfolded more through aspiration than certainty. The nation's founders described principles of equality, natural rights, and self-government, but they did not resolve once and for all what those ideas would require. Each generation must interpret, debate, and practice them anew.

Photo this page: Dusk at a Gretna cottage.

Page 25: (bottom left) Children's activity table at the May 2025 Summer Kickoff. *(bottom right)* Audience members enjoy the inaugural Mount Gretna International Film Festival in August 2024. *Photo by* Leeshaun Musick.

Page 26 (top to bottom): View of art for sale at a past Art Show. People enjoying a summer day on an early Gretna porch. A garden fairy decorated by local children. *Center photo courtesy of the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society.*

Political theorist Hannah Arendt wrote that freedom is not something a nation possesses; it comes into being when people step into public life and take responsibility for the world they share. Democracy, in this sense, depends on citizens who are willing to be visible, to deliberate in public, and to accept the consequences of participation.

That work happens in places like Gretna.

From its founding in the 1890s, Gretna has been shaped by shared purpose. For example, the Mount Gretna Campmeeting Association convenes board meetings where neighbors discuss budgets, bylaws, tree stewardship, grants, cottage ownership, safety, and programming. Committee work is not abstract. It involves real choices about balancing preservation with adaptation and tradition with change, tensions that have shaped the nation from the beginning.

Democracy also depends on the quieter ties that connect people. Political scientist Robert D. Putnam has described this as "social capital" — the trust and familiarity built when people show up regularly and work alongside one another. In Gretna, those ties are visible across the community.

At the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society, volunteers preserve photographs and stories that anchor identity in memory. At the Mount Gretna Playhouse, performers and patrons sustain a cultural tradition that has shaped the community for generations. At Lake Conewago, families gather each summer while lifeguards



The poster for Gretna Theatre's 2023 Season features a large, stylized '2023' in the center. The '2' is red with a musical note, the first '0' is purple with a face, the '2' is green with a sunburst, and the '3' is green with a sunburst. The word 'Season' is written in a blue, cursive font below the numbers. The background shows a stage scene with a man in a vest and a woman in a blue dress. A QR code is in the bottom left corner with the text 'SCAN HERE'.

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train and staff oversee maintenance. What appears to be leisure rests on layers of oversight and volunteer effort, acts of stewardship that reflect democratic life itself.

From Chautauqua and the Mount Gretna Heights ("The Heights") to



porch concerts, potluck dinners, walking groups, and long evening conversations, these threads stitch together the fabric of relationships that make civic life possible. Democracy depends not only on laws, but also on neighbors who remain connected and willing to participate.

Gretna has not been without debate. Questions about preservation guidelines, environmental stewardship, property use, funding priorities, and growth have sparked disagreement over the years. Yet those disagreements unfold in public view, among neighbors who continue seeing one another at concerts, along wooded paths, or in the post office line. Here, participation carries accountability. Decisions have faces.

Even seasonal rhythms reflect democratic habits. The Heritage Festival attracts volunteers across committees. Tree stewards monitor the canopy that defines Gretna's character. Community concerts rely on donations and participation. Maintaining a

cottage, whether repairing a porch or preserving historic details, becomes a quiet expression of collective care. These acts may seem modest, yet together they sustain a shared environment.



Gretna has never been without tension. What distinguishes it is the willingness to stay engaged over time. Civic life here grows out of visibility and memory. The Tabernacle, the cottages, and the winding paths through the woods remind each generation that participation today is inseparable from stewardship of the past.

As America marks its 250th anniversary, it is tempting to frame the moment in



Wanted: Seasonal Shutterbugs

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grand national terms. But the endurance of the American experiment has always depended on places like Gretna. The founders articulated ideals of equality, liberty, and self-government; those ideals survive when citizens gather in board meetings, volunteer for committees, preserve shared spaces, support the arts, debate respectfully, and remain accountable to one another.

In its wooded hollow, Gretna offers a simple reminder: Democracy is not inherited once and for all. It is practiced on porches and stages, in meetings and lakeside conversations, and in formal votes and informal gatherings. Two hundred fifty years after 1776, the American experiment endures in monuments and founding documents and in the everyday communities that continue to show up.

And, in Gretna, we still do. ☺

Kevin C. Wells is a Mount Gretna resident working at the intersection of writing, education, and civic service. He holds a Master of Science in organizational leadership, works in education administration at Milton Hershey School, teaches creative writing at the college level, serves on the Mount Gretna Campmeeting Association Board of Managers, and supports local governance through the Derry Township Board of Supervisors.





The Work Beneath the Mud

Lessons from the wetlands at the edge of spring

Seasonal Contemplations by Vicki Kensinger | Photo by Shannon Fretz Photography



As winter releases its hold and passes into spring, those of us who have been tucked into the quiet coziness of our cottages here in Mount Gretna are drawn forth by the subtle harbingers of spring: the trilling call of the red-bellied woodpecker echoing through bare branches, the scent of thawing earth, or the first hints of warmth in the air kissing our upturned faces.

Suddenly — almost without notice, unless you know where to look — the land itself responds to the invitation. Along the wetlands that flank our little Conewago Creek, a rich, green carpet of skunk cabbage unfurls where only ice and mud had been a week before.

Wetlands are liminal places, much like the edge of the ocean, a vernal pool, or the meeting place of spruce forest with bog. Neither fully earth nor water, wetlands exist in between, holding fertility and possibility. For eons, these saturated landscapes have been the cradle of new life — places where roots first take hold, where fins become legs, and where something learns to breathe differently.

I am particularly fond of skunk cabbage. I love the way it “grows down” before it grows up. Its contractile roots reach for purchase, anchoring themselves firmly in the soggy soil. When nothing is visible above ground, a vast and intricate system is forming below the surface. I love the way it “pushes up” through still-frozen mud and snow, thawing the earth around it with its own body heat. It finds a way to emerge and thrive even when the world above remains inhospitable.

In this way, skunk cabbage reminds me of the beaver, another wetland inhabitant who reshapes its environment to sustain itself. In creating conditions for its survival, the beaver offers gifts far beyond itself, securing the water table and creating a habitat for countless species.

Skunk cabbage does the same in quieter ways. Its deep roots anchor soil, hold nutrients, shape the earth, and filter water. It offers early-season pollen to awakening pollinators and green nourishment for slugs, snails, turkeys, and deer.

Within a week, the winter-barren earth along the creek transforms into a sweep of broad, vivid, heart-shaped leaves, soaking up the sun before the deciduous canopy above has even awakened. The speed of this change stuns me. One day, the tip of a purplish spathe breaks through the mud; the next, hooded blossoms lure pollinators with their heat and pungent scent. Skunk cabbage emits the unmistakable odor of decay—an aroma drawing carrion-loving insects to its flowers, inviting them into the ancient reciprocity that sustains life on Earth.

There is something about making one’s own heat that reminds me that I, too, carry the capacity to thaw what has frozen in me. When I have spent long winters hunkered down in my own roots, drawing deep into the dark, it is heartening to remember how much of life’s labor takes place unseen. Beneath the surface, the work is often far larger, more intricate, and more enduring than what appears above ground. Sometimes what emerges is drawn forth not by sweetness but by what was pungent and difficult to bear.

Skunk cabbage reminds me that what feels dormant on the surface of my life may be quietly preparing to emerge. The same may be true for all of us.

What is thawing in your life right now? Where might you be invited to trust what has been nurtured within you — your deep roots or your capacity to generate warmth from within — through your own long winters? By being who you are, who might you already be offering the world exactly the gifts it needs? 🌱

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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WeaverWeatherization.com

MORTGAGE LENDING

Melissa Mattison NMLS# 446777 — 717-269-7283
Northwest.MyMortgage-Online.com/MelissaMattison.html

PLUMBING

Eberly Plumbing — 717-926-8724
New Construction Plumbing

REALTORS

Michelle Shay, Realtor — 717-813-3880
MichelleShayHomes.com

Rhoda Long, Realtor — 717-304-0248
RhodaLong.Homesale.com

RECREATION

Gretna Gearworks — 717-229-5010
GretnaGearworks.Bike

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Check out Gretna's cottages (*pages 6 and 20*)

Scavenger Hunt! How many of these garden gems can you find? (*page 11*)

In town early on Friday? Join the bird club (*page 12*)

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