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Hello from

The Wissahickon Valley Historical Society





Holiday Greetings!

WVHS is grateful for your support, and we will all make history together as we embrace each other in person in 2021. May the holiday season bring you love and joy!

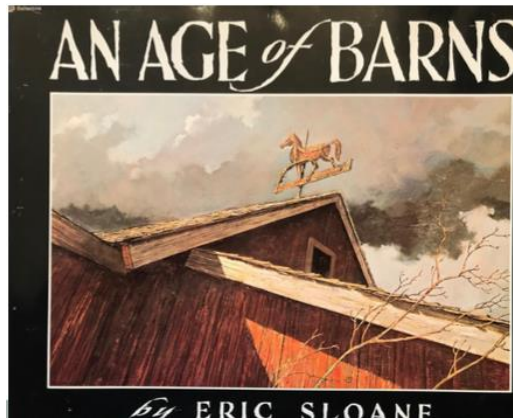
Meet Eric Sloane

Imagine my recent surprise to find myself asking like-minded history buffs (history nuts, really) if they've ever heard of the author, artist, and illustrator Eric Sloane, only to receive deadpan stares in return! How was it that only I knew about this man—not just an author, artist, and illustrator, but himself also a self-described history buff (history nut, really)! Then again, I only stumbled across him recently myself—while rummaging through a pile of old books at one of my favorite antique-shop haunts (“The Archive” in Lansdale if you're wondering—a



true emporium of ancient ephemera, and a place I highly recommend to those who like to “rummage” as I do)!

Eric Sloane (born Everard Jean Hinrichs, 1905-1985) made it a substantial part of his life’s work to document in drawings and words what he described as “the vanishing American landscape”—the vestiges and vernacular of a bygone era

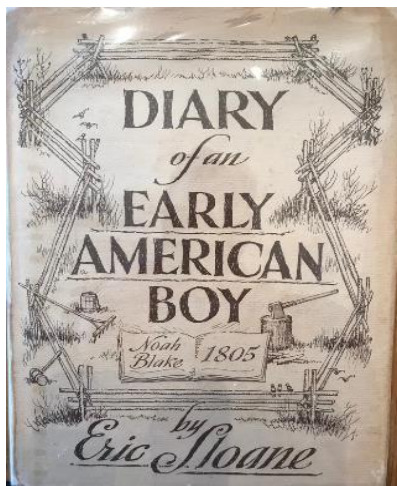


that many of us pine for today: barns, tools, mills, churches, taverns, and covered bridges, as well as the origins of words and phrases, such as turnpikes, toll roads, and milestones.



These “documents”

took the form of over forty books full of detailed descriptions and precise renderings. Some of his more widely read and regarded books include *Our Vanishing Landscape* (1955); *A Reverence for Wood* (1965); *An Age of Barns* (1967) [see photo]; *A Museum of Early American Tools* (1973); and *Diary of An Early American Boy: Noah Blake-1805* (1962) [see photo], a semi-biographical account of the life of young Noah Blake, taken from his actual diary dating from the early 1800s.



Sloane began his artistic career as an itinerant sign painter, primarily creating tobacco advertisements on the sides of barns and covered bridges. With experience and additional training, he became known for his landscape and weather paintings, and he painted the mural titled “Earth Flight Environment” in the Independence Avenue lobby of the National Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian Institution.

His love affair with old tools culminated in an extensive personal collection that became the nucleus of the Eric Sloane Museum (formerly the Sloane-Stanley Tool Museum)

in Kent, Connecticut. The museum also houses his recreated artist's studio and a number of his original artworks. (Read more about old tools later in this issue.)

Perhaps you've already met Eric Sloane—perhaps not. Regardless, I hope this short introduction will encourage you to visit or revisit his life and work and enjoy again or anew. WVHS

Gary Fuess Donates Unusual Tools, Preserves History

The tools we use for cooking, cleaning, and raising food have certainly changed over the decades. This was demonstrated during one 70-degree afternoon in November, when Ambler's Gary Fuess, a WVHS member, met with a small group of WVHS volunteers, organized by WVHS member Joan Duxbury. They met to accept his collection of about two dozen farm and domestic tools, including a corn planter and a rare vacuum cleaner, both run on "muscle power." The group, wearing masks, sat socially-distanced outside as Gary unloaded the vintage items from the back of his truck and explained the origin and use of each one. The tools are being accessioned and will enhance our domestic and agricultural displays.

Gary, a graduate of the present Delaware Valley University, now retired, spends his time preserving local history. He told the group about the recent harvesting of



a heritage rye grain, called Rosen rye, using a century-old method. Just one small bag of the precious old rye had been found. First, the seed was re-propagated, organically, to finally create a quantity large enough for last fall's planting of an entire field of the extraordinary grain. Then for July's harvest, the university's farm manager, William Bryce Cannon, went into its museum of antique farm equipment and

located a mule-drawn thresher. Gary recognized the town in upstate New York where the thresher was manufactured about 1850 and contacted the Hoosick Falls New-York Historical Society. He relates that they had never seen this piece of equipment operating before! A short video of the old equipment, cutting Rosen rye, appears online: <https://vimeo.com/441110043>

Gary explained that the Rosen rye grain was originally used by Pennsylvania growers to make rye whiskey (today's distillers use mostly barley or wheat), but that use of the grain, which creates a sweeter flavor, went out of favor with Prohibition. (Historians remember that whiskey meant much to Pennsylvania farmers, who threatened to secede in 1791 when the federal government created an excise tax on one of their best sources of income, whiskey!) Note that the Delaware Valley University works to keep old farming methods alive, operating the nearby Roth Center for Sustainable Agriculture (see photos), the living farm museum located in Lower Gwynedd at Hancock Lane and Route 202.

WVHS appreciates all Gary has done to preserve local history. In addition to his donating farm equipment to the Worcester Historical Society's Farm Museum, Fuess added to WVHS's collection several years ago when he helped obtain a complete set of the old Amchem News, company newsletters from Ambler's Amchem Products. It was a time-consuming task.



Fuess helped to retrieve the files belonging to James Harvey Gravell, the 1914 founder of American Chemical Paint Company, which later became Amchem. After months of sorting, Gary and other volunteers sent parts of the files to appropriate historical societies. Gravell's honorary doctorate diploma, for example, was returned to Widener University. The Amchem newsletters and an article describing the Roth Living Farm Museum are both available on the WVHS website. **WVHS**

Tell Us Your Pandemic Stories

Because George Washington's orders were all written down, we know much about his military tactics. But we know less about the local farmers in the Wissahickon Valley who sold him their food for his troops. Often the history of institutions is preserved, but the stories of individual citizens are lost. So it is important for you to help preserve the Wissahickon Valley's history of the pandemic. We need your pandemic stories. For example, we have already collected photos of the signs in business windows: "Closed for COVID" and "Please Wear a Mask."

Please tell us about your experience: What have you been feeling? How have you been coping? What stories will you tell your grandchildren? The big question is how has your life changed?

Continue to contribute your experiences and, as our last newsletter pointed out, “Consider collecting pertinent ephemera that relates to this time. This might include notices/articles about businesses, churches, organizations, as well as letters and photos. For instance, a local senior center posted a set of letters from neighborhood children - complete with jokes and words of encouragement.”

Please share your contributions with us at info@wvalleyhs.org

Because this is an archives project, please include names, dates, locations of photos, and permission from anyone in the photos that you share with us. WVHS

Like Us on Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/wissahickonvalleyhistoricalsociety>

If you are a Society member and are “on” Facebook and you haven’t “liked” our Facebook page, please do... and share the page with your Facebook friends! Sharing with others is a great way to improve the visibility and vitality of WVHS. Please help us!

Launched in 2018, the page is administered by Emma Siegel, a Wissahickon High School senior and the Society’s “social media” intern, and by Joe Langella, a new Society board member and its current Vice President. Emma and Joe often come up with original text and images, and more are planned.



Future content will include updates on Society happenings, local historical “facts and non-fiction,” as well as features on important Society artifacts and collections. We also encourage members and friends to submit for posting any items (with photos preferably) of historical interest—Emma’s email is emmarsiegel@gmail.com and Joe’s email is jwlangella@logancapital.com

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What Ended the 1918 Flu? History warns us to stay home and wash our hands.

The History of the 1895 Public School... by Bob Whittock includes the fact that the school closed on December 22, 1918, for a week due to the “Influenza Epidemic [with] so many of the children sick.” (The 1895 Public School is today the WVHS museum.) Called the Spanish Flu, although it did not start in Spain, the CDC reports that the virus brought suffering and death to about a third of the world’s population and death to 675,000 Americans! In the United States, it began in the spring of 1918, seemed to go away during the summer, and then returned in continuing waves, finally ending in 1919. The movement of troops during World War I (1914-1918) probably helped its spread. An expert at the American History Museum, quoted in Smithsonian (Summer 2020), explains that the virus “ran out...[due to] new sanitary practices, based on growing acceptance of germ theory, ... along with the end of the war, which made it easier for populations to stay in place.” WVHS

100th Anniversary of Prohibition. Send Us Your Local Stories.

Prohibition began in 1920 with the passage of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, which banned “the production, importation, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages,” and WVHS is preparing to mark this anniversary. As a result, we have been researching citizens’ experiences, especially in the Wissahickon Valley. Police and court actions, published during Prohibition in the Ambler Gazette, offer helpful data. For example, the April 6, 1922 edition tells us that the first woman in our area to serve on a jury was in 1922 - at the trial of a druggist charged with bootlegging.

We want to collect and preserve the local stories, the “gossip!” Do you know anything about our area’s bootleggers, speakeasies, or temperance efforts? If so, please contact us at info@wvalleyhs.org. WVHS

America 250, Celebrating a USA Milestone.

On July 4, 2026, our country will be 250 years old, and national and neighborhood programs are being planned! In fact, local historical societies are being encouraged to hold an event each year leading up to that important date.

The celebration is being planned by a Congressional Commission not just to mark the Revolution, but also to commemorate the full history of the U.S. leading up to the 250th Anniversary. Official meetings (the first in 2018) are held at



Independence Hall in Philadelphia. The Commission, according to the America 250 website, “is charged with orchestrating the largest and most inclusive anniversary observance in our nation's history.”

It is being called the “Semiquincentennial.” (That’s half of 500, called “Semiquin” for short. It is a made-up word, with “semi” meaning half; “quin” meaning five; and “centennial” meaning one-hundred.) In six years, the word will sound familiar. And in six years, today’s twelve year olds will be eighteen and voting for their first time, an example of why our efforts to honor our heritage are important. If you have ideas about programs WVHS could take on, please share with us: info@wvalleyhs.org
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Board Selects Interim Officers

It is with tremendous gratitude for his service, that the WVHS Board of Directors has accepted the resignation of Society President and Acting Secretary Russ Bellavance. Over the years that Russ served as the Society’s President, he has been the driving force in making the Society a vibrant organization, dedicated to serving the community whose history it is our mandate to record and preserve.

The good news is that Russ plans to stay on the Board as an at-large Director and will continue to volunteer as a Society researcher and speaker. As a result of his resignation, the following individuals have stepped in as interim officers until the restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic have ended and the Society can meet to hold permanent elections: ***President Carol Kalos; Vice President Joe Langella; Secretary Marie Goldkamp; and Treasurer Tom Goldkamp.***

Volunteers Continue to Preserve History, In Spite of Pandemic

Like other organizations this year, WVHS is finding new ways to fulfill its mission. Now our volunteers work at home or enter the museum to work alone. At this writing, with a vaccine soon available, it appears we may be able to hold programs in the fall of 2021. In the meantime, our knowledgeable, dedicated volunteers are still committed to our museum: Our building receives almost daily oversight, researchers still contact us with questions, and artifacts are being preserved. Some examples appear here.

WVHS member Joan Duxbury says she has been working mostly from home. Besides having organized the meeting with Gary Fuess (See the article about him), she is communicating with Bob Bradley, our computer expert, about placing more photos and items on our website. The photos will accompany The King's Daughters WWII Newsletters, which contained news for and about local servicemen and women. Be sure to see these gems on our website. They can lead to hours of history-reading. Board Members Tom and Marie Goldkamp stop by the 1895 Public School often to check the heating system, water the plants, and meet with service people. At the front door, they displayed lovely summer flowers and have added some pumpkins. They also check the Franklinville School regularly.

Curator Peg Johnston sometimes works at home but travels about once a week to safely meet with donors or to accession their contributions. Each item, connected to our local history, is tagged, measured, described, and cataloged. Over the summer, she acquired four outstanding farm implements, and their narrative will appear in our next newsletter. Johnston is currently accessioning

the recent donation from Gary Fuess, detailed in this issue. Here she tells about two other acquisitions:



“Nancy Schaller, whose family lived on Fort Washington’s Madison Avenue (Yes, that’s right, Madison Ave.), donated a school desk from the original Fort Washington Elementary School. Her sister had used this older-style desk. Years later, in 1959, Nancy started first grade with ‘new desks.’ Her sister’s desk, made of wood with an aluminum frame, complements our collection of desks.” (See the photo and note the desk’s ink well. And see those shiny 1895 floors? Joan Duxbury polished those.) “Nancy did offer the desk to the Historical Society of Fort Washington, but they decided not to accept the desk since their collection does not focus on schools. Due to the

pandemic, Nancy drove from her home in Massachusetts, dropped off the desk with us, made one other stop in the area, and drove back to her home state in one day!”

“Mr. and Mrs. Ross Gordon Gerhart, III, of Ambler, donated a collection of letters and documents from the early 1800s that represent the Joseph Detweiler family. The Detweiler family were early settlers of the area - with a home near the corner of Butler Pike and Morris Road. Perky Detweiler was a beloved early member of the WVHS. The collection is from the Estate of Ross Gordon Gerhart, Sr., who was a long-time Ambler antiques dealer. Former Curator Emmy Simon has agreed to process the documents, accessioning the papers and making sure they are properly stored.” WVHS

Franklinville School, Water Damaged, Desperate for Funding

The Franklinville School, owned by the WVHS and appearing on the National Register of Historic Places, is a one-room school, built in 1858, and located on Morris Road. It offers the opportunity to teach children about education and local history from over a century ago. The little building looks pristine standing beside the road, surrounded by its little white fence. However, it has massive water issues! A large pond of water sits under the building (a sump pump is needed) and some floors are rotting. The repairs will amount to thousands of dollars! As a result, WVHS is looking for individual donors and corporate sponsors to help save this important part of local history. To donate, please see our website. And if you can offer us advice about sponsors or how we can proceed with fund-raising, please let us know: info@wvalleyhs.org. WVHS

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www.wvalleyhs.org 215-646-6541