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**McCAIN HOUSE TOUR**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS: (page numbers to be added later)**

* **INTRODUCTION**
* **McCAIN HOUSE STORY**
* **FIRST FLOOR CIVIL WAR EXHIBIT ROOM**
* **FIRST FLOOR PARLOR**
* **FIRST FLOOR GATHERING ROOM AND HALLWAYS**
* **FIRST FLOOR KITCHEN**
* **SECOND FLOOR NATIVE AMERICAN EXHIBIT ROOM**
* **SECOND FLOOR EARLY ARMSTRONG COUNTY ROOM**
* **SECOND FLOOR FRONT DISPLAY ROOM AND HALLWAY**
* **SECOND FLOOR REAR DISPLAY ROOM**
* **SURROUNDING GROUNDS**
* **FLOOR PLAN**

**INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to the McCain House, a Federal-style building that serves as the home of the Armstrong County Historical Museum.

In 1924, a few local community leaders recognized that steps should be taken to preserve the early history of Armstrong County. As a result, the Armstrong County Historical and Museum Society was formed with Judge James King as president. The Society survived for 40 years until becoming inactive in 1964. It was reactivated in 1967 and then incorporated three years later in 1970.

The McCain House, centrally located in the Borough of Kittanning, became the Society’s home in 1971.

A few bits of historical information must also be noted. The history of Armstrong County, as a county unit, began with the Legislative Act passed on March 12th, 1800, which, in Section VIII, defined the new boundary of a separate county to be henceforth called Armstrong County. This new county was formed out of parts of Allegheny, Westmoreland, and Lycoming counties. The place of holding the courts of justice for the said county were fixed by the Legislature and were to be located on the Allegheny River, at any place at a distance not greater than five miles from the old Kittanning town. Section XIV of the Act provided for the appointment of John Craig, James Sloan, and James Barr as Trustees for the County of Armstrong.

It is important to note that this newly established county derived its name from Colonel John Armstrong, who led a band of Pennsylvania Regiment soldiers who destroyed the Delaware Indian village of Kittanning on September 8, 1756.

**McCAIN HOUSE HISTORY**

The current building was built in two stages. Robert E. Brown, a local entrepreneur, businessman, and land owner, purchased the property from the Armstrong County Commissioners and started to build his house, the front portion of the current building, in 1842.

Before the house was completed, Brown sold it to Thomas McConnell and his wife, Olive Robinson McConnell, in 1842. Mr. McConnell was a banker, businessman, and investor in oil. It is not known when the original, modest two-story brick house was completed. The original house most likely extended back to the beginning of the existing gathering room and was quite plain. It had no shutters, grand porch, wrought iron fence, or sweeping lawn to the street.

Reverend H. L. Chapman, while serving in the Kittanning area from 1853-1854, described the McConnell home as follows: “a large brick house with ample grounds surrounded by fruit and shade trees and other indications of wealth and refinement.”

Mrs. McConnell was the daughter of Elisha Esq. of Parkers Landing. The McConnell’s had five children – Thomas McConnell, Elisha Robinson McConnell, William H. McConnell, Olive McConnell, and Elizabeth R. McConnell.

After the death of Thomas McConnell in 1888, the property was handed down to his daughters, Olive and Elizabeth, with each holding one-half interest in ownership. Olive McConnell married Oliver W. Gilpin and their daughter, Adele McConnell Gilpin, married Samuel McCain and here enters the McCain family name. After the deaths of Olive McConnell Gilpin and Elizabeth McConnell, Adele Gilpin McCain and her husband Samuel McCain became joint owners with Oliver W. Gilpin. The McCains held one-half interest and Gilpin held the other half. Upon the death of Oliver W. Gilpin, his interest was willed to his daughter Adele Gilpin McCain, who was also the granddaughter of Thomas McConnell. She then conveyed one-half interest to a group of trustees: Henry E. Moesta, Calvin E. Dunmire, and Calvin E. Miller. These trustees were designated as the judgement lien creditors of the deceased Oliver W. Gilpin.

The original house was enlarged during the late 1800s or early 1900s when the existing gathering room, kitchen, pantry, hallway, back stairs, grand porches, and porte-cochere were added. The modest two-story house was transformed into an elegant “mansion” with manicured lawns and wrought iron fencing. The addition more than doubled the size of the house.

In the past, there was another house located at the rear of the original property. That portion was sold to the Atlantic Richfield Company, who built a gas station there. The former gas station is now an automobile repair shop.

At one time, a bar was located in another building on the original property near the existing carriage house. Benefactors of the Society purchased that property and had the building torn down.

Adele Gilpin McCain, her husband Samuel, and trustees Henry E. Moesta, Calvin E. Dunmire, and Calvin Miller sold the property to the Kittanning borough school district in 1944 for the sum of $27,500. The McCain family, who were residing in the house at the time it was sold, may have had financial issues since the contents of the house were sold at auction at the same as the property was sold.

There is only one stained-glass window left in the building and it is located on the landing to the second floor (part of the original house).

The Armstrong School District sold the property to the Armstrong County Historical Museum and Genealogical Society on May 17, 1984. From 1971 to the date of purchase, the Society occupied the former elegant “mansion” under a rental agreement for $1.00 a year.

**FIRST FLOOR CIVIL WAR EXHIBIT ROOM**

The left front room on the first floor houses the Society’s “Armstrong County in the Civil War” exhibit, which focuses on the County’s involvement in the Civil War. An estimated 3652 men from the County served in the war to preserve the Union, preserve states’ rights, and abolish slavery.

The exhibit endeavors to honor the long-ago soldiers who were the ancestors of many of today’s Armstrong County residents. Visitors can travel back in time to see Civil War artifacts such as the Company G Morning Reports book and a General Orders book associated with the 78th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry regiment; a diary carried by a local soldier who survived the conditions of the prison in Andersonville, Georgia, while serving in the 103rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry regiment; antique battlefield maps; first edition regimental history books; muster rolls from several regiments; documents and personal items from several soldiers who served in the 14th Pennsylvania Volunteer Cavalry and other units; and period musical and medical instruments.

Included in the exhibit are numerous information boards. Some enumerate the facts and figures of the County’s involvement in the Civil War and others include summaries of regimental/company units such as the 62nd PVI – Company D; 78th PVI; 103rd PVI; 139th – Companies B, C, E, and F; and the 155th PVI – Company K. The faces and stories of the soldiers are remembered through the photos and other items on display.

The exhibit is the home of the original painting “*The Wheatfield – Whirlpool of Death”* by local artist Larry Smail.Smail captures on canvas the heroic actions of the 62nd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry against the Confederates on July 2, 1863. That deadly battle occurred in Rose’s wheat field just outside the village of Gettysburg.

On permanent loan to the Society from the Kittanning ELKS Lodge No. 203 is the remaining portion of the militaria once owned by Dr. Charles Jessop, founder and organizer of the Kittanning General Hospital. Civil War muskets, swords, sabers, and various soldier’s accoutrements from the doctor’s collection are on display in the exhibit.

Included in the exhibit are items once owned by Colonel William G. Sirwell, commander of the 78th PVI. These items were donated to the Society by Ron Gancas, great-great-grandson of Colonel Sirwell.

Items on display that were obtained from the Armstrong County Court House are the Armstrong County Record Book - Statements of Weekly Relief Payments to Soldier’s Families during the Civil War and soldier Burial Records. The relief records indicate the amount of monies paid out by the County Treasury to aid the soldier’s families that remained at home while the soldier was at war.

The veterans, sons of veterans, and orphans of the Civil War are not excluded from the exhibit. A portrait of Private John F. Croll hangs on display. He was killed in action during the war, and the Grand Army of the Republic Post No. 156 in Kittanning was named after him. Information on the Soldiers’ Orphan’s School in Dayton is included in the exhibit. Other items related to the GAR are on display as well. On display is a hat and coat that would have been worn by members of the local Camp of the Sons of Veterans of the United States of America, the John T. Crawford Camp No. 43.

**FIRST FLOOR PARLOR**

The parlor was the best room of the house, reserved for special occasions and time with guests. Treasured possessions such as family heirlooms and photographs were often on display. Wealthy families may also have had a piano or an organ. Usually the furniture, while the nicest the family could afford, was made for looks rather than comfort.

The McCain House parlor, first floor right room, is furnished today like a typical parlor of years past. An operating pump organ made by Weaver Organ and Piano Company in York, Pennsylvania, is located near the front entrance. An 1878 Emerson Square-back Grand Piano made in Boston, Massachusetts, sits in the right rear corner of the room.

The parlor is the home of the Society’s prized possession, an original 1878 landscape painting of Kittanning done by artist George Hetzel. A past director of the Westmoreland Art Museum informed the Society that Hetzel was a well-known painter of the Scalp Level School of painters, who painted in the same style as the more famous Hudson School. The Scalp Level name was given to a group of painters who met to paint at a favorite spot known as “Scalp Level,” located in Fayette County, Pennsylvania.

The County’s Court House, two church spires, a bridge spanning the Allegheny River, and a large field (located in present day Applewold) are clearly visible in the painting. This is one of few items still in the building attributed to the McConnells and the McCains. The painting, discovered in 1984, had been badly damaged as a result of being stored in the attic for many years. The Westmoreland Art Museum authenticated the artist, restored the painting, and returned it to the Society in 1986 for display. The painting is registered with the Library of Congress.

This particular painting is rare because Hetzel, known for still life and nature scenes, did not typically paint villages. It may have been commissioned by the Gilpin family or some other wealthy patron.

The parlor is also furnished with antique chairs and a settee in addition to paintings, portraits, a Rishell gramophone, record cabinet, library table, and other miscellaneous items typical to the Victorian era.

**FIRST FLOOR GATHERING ROOM AND HALLWAYS**

The Gathering room is furnished with a hutch, dining table and chairs, and several display cases. The hutch contains dishware made at the W.S. George company in Kittanning, Armstrong County.

The first display case on the left contains dishware made by local potteries Wick China and Ford China, located in Kittanning and Ford City. Histories of the potteries can be found on the plaque. Items from local businesses are on display in the second case on the left.

The Daugherty Visible typewriter exhibit is located in the case on the back wall. The type bars strike the front of the platen, making the words “visible” during typing. More information can be found on the plaque in the display case.

Other items on display include a child’s tea set made by Wick China for Miss Margaret McKee. After the tea set was made, the molds were destroyed, making this the only set of its kind. In front of the fireplace is a statue titled “Worker at Forge.” To the right is a 5 o’clock tea set, circa 1890, manufactured by the Bradley and Hubbard Company in Connecticut.

Above the dining table hangs an oil lamp that has been converted to use electricity.

**Main Entrance Hallway:**

**Side Entrance Hallway:** As you exit the parlor and enter the side entrance hallway, hanging on the wall to the left you will see a Simplex Time Recorder clock that was once in use at PPG in Ford City. To the right is a case displaying the glass salt collection once owned by ???

**BUTLER’S PANTRY**

Historically, a butler's pantry (or scullery) was used to store, count, and polish the family silver. This room also had storage space for numerous sets of china and large serving dishes like platters, tureens, and coffee urns. In order to prevent theft of these heirlooms, the butler would keep the cabinets locked.

Various pottery is displayed on the shelves and a "Flow Blue” soup tureen sits on the counter. A feather duster and a sweeper hang on the wall.

**FIRST FLOOR KITCHEN**

The kitchen is furnished with appliances and other domestic tools typical to the period. The candle mold on the windowsill is one of the few items possessed by the Society that belonged to the McConnell family.

The two-door icebox was manufactured in Illinois. Large blocks of ice, placed in the top compartment, kept the food in the bottom compartment chilled. Several items are placed on top of the icebox, including a butter mold, an early piece of Yellow Ware, and butter paddles. The cookstove was made by Wincroft Stove Works of Middletown, Pennsylvania. Several “sad irons” are placed on top of the warming ovens. A toaster, waffle iron, and water kettle are displayed on the cooking surface.

The baker’s cabinet, manufactured in the state of Indiana by the G.I. Sellers company, features a work surface to roll out and knead dough, a few cabinets above, and “possum belly” drawers below to hold flour and/or meal. Oftentimes the drawers were lined with tin to protect their contents from rodents. Wick China is displayed on the top and the shelves on the left. Several items relating to the journalist Elizabeth Cochran Seaman (better known by her pen name Nellie Bly), born in Cochran’s Mills, Armstrong County, are displayed on the work surface. Above the cabinet is a framed sack from the Buffalo Woolen Mills, established in Worthington, Pennsylvania, by Peter Graff in 1865.

An apple butter kettle stands in the corner, and various pottery is displayed on the corner shelves on either side of the window. A kraut cutter hangs on the wall on the right of the stove, and a coal scuttle, clothes agitator, and clothes dryer are to the left. Other items on display include a rug beater, ironing board, wash tub and wash board, cheese box, egg shipping crate, dozen egg carrier, tea box, cider press, apple peelers, wall telephone, cast iron shoe lasts, and a work table. Above the work table hangs another oil lamp that has been converted to use electricity.

In the small room off of the kitchen, there is a large sink and the shelving above it holds various pieces of bakeware. Pie lifters and an enamelware tub hang on the wall to the left.

**SECOND FLOOR NATIVE AMERICAN EXHIBIT ROOM**

The second floor, left front room houses the Society’s Native American exhibit. This exhibit focuses on the history and heritage of the Native Americans that resided in the county in the 1700s and earlier.

Larry Smail, a local artist, historian, and author, has been curating the Native American exhibit since 2007. Smail turned his childhood fascination for Native American history, specifically the 1700s, during and after the French and Indian War, into a lifetime of research and accepted the opportunity to create this exhibit.

Many of the items depicting Native American life and culture in the exhibit were either collected from past and current collectors or were hand-made by Smail to represent items used by the Lenni-Lenape or Delaware tribe that lived in the county during the 1700s. One of the display items made by Smail is a hoe made from the shoulder bone of a bear. Stone implements and other various stone artifacts are found throughout the exhibit.

Several framed prints of Larry Smail’s paintings hang on the exhibit walls. One entitled ‘Home to Kit-Han-Ne’ depicts a Delaware raiding party returning to its village. Another entitled ‘Evening Smoke - Delaware 1755’ shows a typical Eastern Native warrior.

Included in the exhibit are images painted by Larry Smail on the upper part of the walls in the room. These images depict actual petroglyphs (rock carvings) discovered north of Kittanning near Parker, Armstrong County. The actual carvings are found along the Allegheny River and were believed to have been created by an Algonquian speaking people related to the Monongahela tribe. Most of the carvings were believed to have been carved between 1000 B.C. to 1500 A.D.

The exhibit houses an extensive collection of Native American artifacts donated to the Armstrong County Historical Museum and Genealogical Society by Bernard C. and Ferne Snyder. Snyder was born in Wayne Township, Armstrong County, and spent much of his life enjoying archeology as a hobby. He and his wife gathered the large collection of arrowheads and other items throughout Armstrong County.

Larry Smail’s mural of the Allegheny River is located on one wall. The river is shown from the upper regions of Armstrong County to its confluence with the Monongahela River where they form the Ohio River in present-day Pittsburgh. The tributaries of the Allegheny River, along with the name and locations of various historic Native American events/battles, are shown.

Several photos taken by Ruthie Wolfe hang on the walls. One is a photo of two Eastern Warrior reenactors clothed in native attire and another is of a typical small wigwam used as a seasonal hunting abode.

The exhibit includes an older oil painting done by Esther Crum from Kittanning, Armstrong County. The painting shows an Armstrong County scene that includes John Baker’s Map of Kittanning.

**SECOND FLOOR EARLY ARMSTRONG COUNTY ROOM**

**SECOND FLOOR FRONT DISPLAY ROOM**

**SECOND FLOOR REAR DISPLAY ROOM**

**SURROUNDING GROUNDS**

**Cornerstone and Bell:** In August 2019, ninety-nine years after the official ceremony to lay the cornerstone of the former Kittanning Central School was held, the Armstrong County Historical Museum and Genealogical Society reset the cornerstone directly across the street on the museum property. The school was closed and demolished by the Armstrong School District due to the recent construction of the new Armstrong Junior/Senior High School in 2017. The Society secured the bell, 300 brick, and the cornerstone from the school district for historical purposes.

Society and museum volunteers decided to place the cornerstone on the front lawn of the museum so that the community could remember their former school building where so many memories were made. The cornerstone was secured on a foundation surrounded by the original brick from the school with the restored cast iron bell placed on top. Museum Preservationist Larry Vorpe designed the monument and restored the bell to its former glory. Harvey Jack and his son, Jack, laid the brick and stone. The Society plans to ring the bell on special occasions.

**Carriage House:** Located just north of the museum is the Society’s carriage house. This historic two-story building is the home to the Mildred Lankard-Thomas Genealogical Library, which was founded in 1973. The library has an outstanding collection of family, county, community, and church records used for genealogical research and is open for use by Society members and visitors from May through October.