



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

The dismantling of the Kelly Road Bridge began in December and a re-erection of portions is expected to be done later this year. While loss of a historic structure is sad, the need for a functioning bridge is vital, and the compromise which will result in its partial preservation is a positive outcome. It further points to the various considerations behind the historic preservation movement. When New York City's grand Penn Station was torn down in 1963, a great outcry erupted, and a National Preservation Act was passed three years later. Before that, saving historic buildings from the wrecking ball generated little public attention: the idea of progress was paramount and sleek modernity was valued over what many thought were the fuddy-duddy styles of the past.

The costs and benefits of historic preservation are perhaps easy to weigh in the case of a magnificent building like Penn Station. For humbler structures or those with significance only to a local area or a particular feature, though, how do we as a society decide what to save and at what cost?

Steel truss bridges similar to the Kelly Road Bridge were once a familiar sight throughout the Shenango Valley, but over the years they have been replaced, mainly by concrete highway bridges. Surviving structures, while they have their own aesthetic merit, are valued more as examples of particular types of bridge engineering. (For those of you taking notes, the Kelly Road Bridge is a pin-connected, Parker through-truss bridge.) Built in 1897, it gains significance by being one of only three 19th century examples of that type to survive in Pennsylvania.

So, worth saving—but what are the trade-offs? The old structure had been deemed unsafe and closed for years. One-way traffic across the river was not practical for visitors to the Dam, and the handful of households on the Hermitage side need a passage that would allow fire trucks. One option was for the State to strengthen and repair the bridge, even though the cost would be much more than building a new bridge. Another was for it to be demolished, even though history may be lost. What was ultimately decided was to save the two end sections (including their dedicatory plaques) and place them with some of the stonework in the newly created riverside park on the left side of High Street Extension.

It should be recognized that the preservation of this part of our local history is due to the multi-year, tireless, and mostly lone efforts of Sharpsville's Rod Alexander.

Upcoming Events

GAMBLING SPREE BUS TRIPS

Live! Casino Greensburg, May 18th

MGM Casino Northfield Park, June 22nd

Seneca Niagara Casino, July 20th

Call 724-813-9199 for info and reservations



Check our Facebook page for the latest information on events we have planned.



**Our historic headquarters is open to visitors.
Come see our displays on the first and third
Saturday of the month.**

1:00pm to 3:00pm



As always, interesting items may be viewed under the Archives section of our website
www.sharpsvillehistorical.org

Contact Us

website: www.sharpsvillehistorical.org

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see our website for officers' phone numbers

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Mailing address: 955 Forest Lane,
Sharpsville, Pa. 16150

Meetings are held the First Monday of the Month
at 7:00pm at our headquarters

Traces of Old Sharpsville

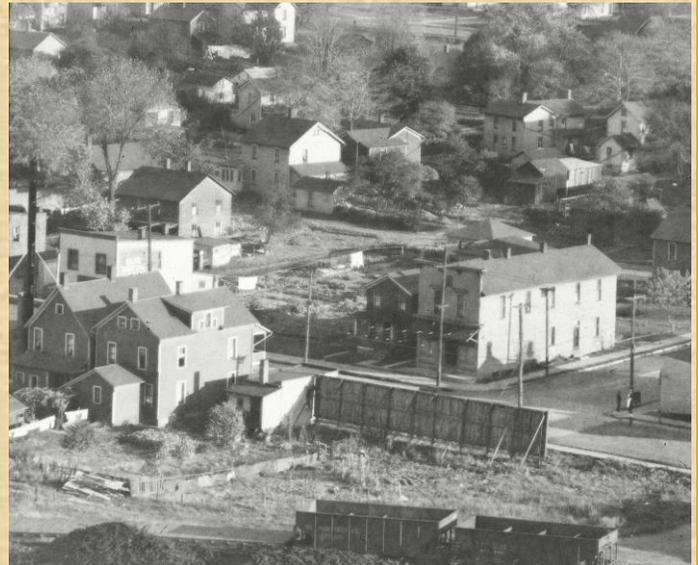
The Rossi Barber Shop

The Rossi Barber Shop, where Seventh Street meets Main, is a familiar sight to residents. Out-of-towners, however, are quite intrigued by this tiny building from another era, seemingly situated on an island surrounded by the plant of the Sharpsville Container Corp. (formerly the Sharpsville Steel Fabricators). It is indeed unchanged from a remodeling in the 1950s: insulbrick siding covers the original wooden clapboards, with the inside featuring leatherette wall coverings and the two Koken barber chairs. Indeed, when walking into the shop a newspaper reporter from 1998 was greeted by Jimmy Durante playing on the radio. (Over a decade later, this editor can attest to the same interior décor and the same music playing; though it should be noted that Virg Rossi was an accomplished clarinetist and saxophonist, and so, unsurprisingly, would be partial to the music of the Big Band era.)

The shop was run by two brothers, Virgil (1924-2015) and Ralph Rossi (1927-2011): Virgil entered into the business begun by their dad in 1945; Ralph became a partner after the Korean War. Sentimental memories from generations of customers of course attend these long-time fixtures in the community.

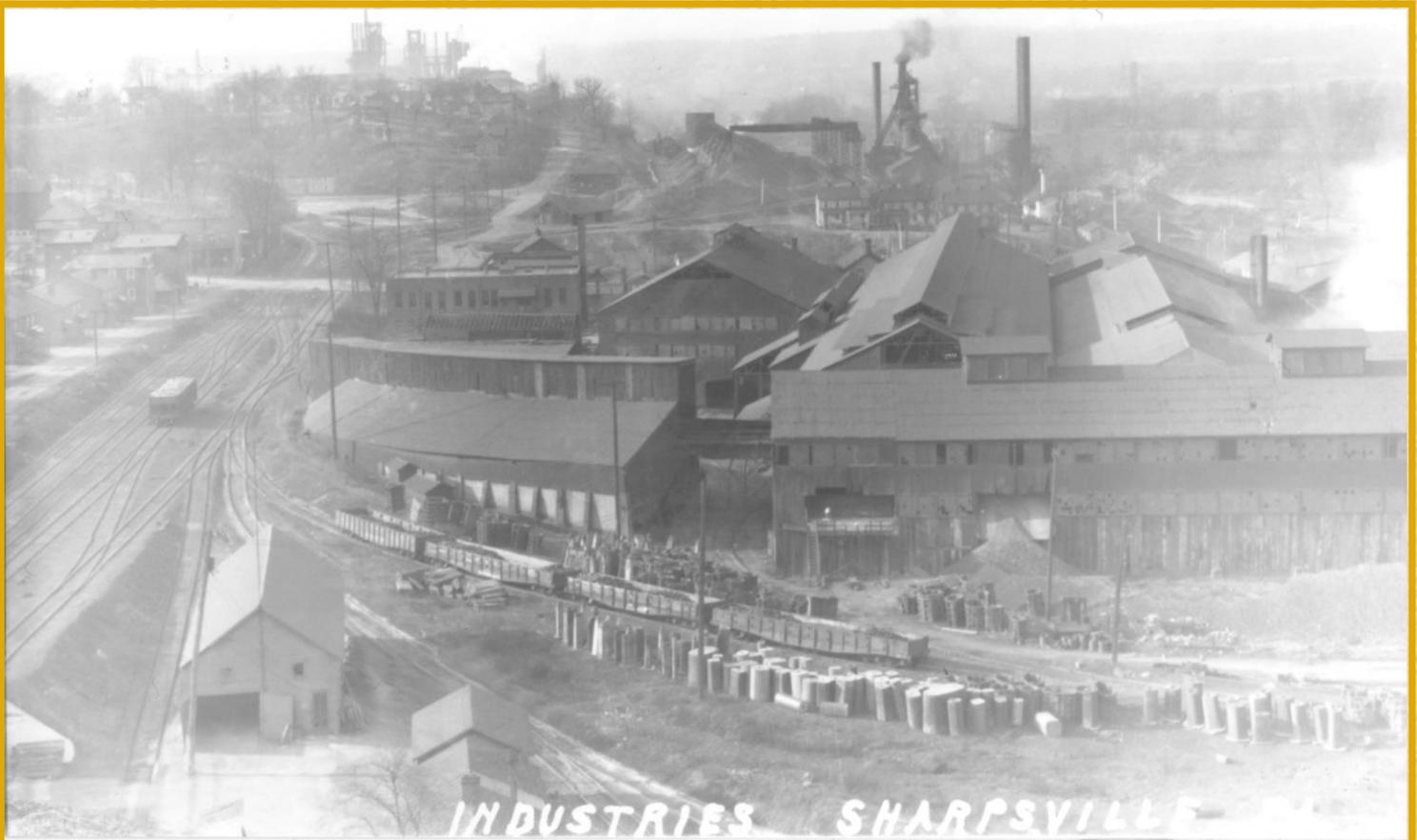
What may be surprising is this artifact from the 1950s is much older and was located elsewhere. The Rossi brothers' father Virginio, after apprenticing for Nick Mehler, opened his own shop at 333 Main Street, around 1922. That location would later be home to the Chick Driscoll barber shop.

A building which had housed the Mylott Bros. Grocery Store was originally located at 435 Walnut Street, behind the Mylott residence, in what was then known as Irishtown or the East End. In a September 18, 1925 newspaper account, we learn that "Vergie Ross [sic] has moved the store building, which he purchased from Mrs. My[lo]tt in the East End, to his lot near the corner of Main and Seventh street. Mr. Ross will move his barber shop from his present location to this building." The moving of this structure was accomplished by a Mr. Lamont and his three sons. They, with a team of horses, pulled it on wooden rollers. While the father drove the horses, the sons picked up the rollers behind and tossed them in front.



This view from atop one of the blast furnaces dates from about 1930 and shows the barber shop squeezed between houses on the left and a large billboard on the right.

Virgil and Ralph Rossi in front of their shop, 2000.



Only a few are old enough to forget, with most of us are too young to remember, the concentration of blast furnaces and foundries that were once in Sharpsville. This view, from around 1925, shows the sprawling plant of the Valley Mould & Iron, at the time the largest ingot mould foundry in the world. (The moulds and patterns are stacked up in the foreground.) The railroad tracks to the left occupy what is now High Street, with Mercer Avenue running left-to-right about three-quarters up in the photo. The three blast furnaces of the Shenango Furnace Co. are on the hill in the upper left; the Old Sharpsville Furnace is belching smoke in the upper right. The Alice Furnace (owned by the Valley Mould) is out of the frame to the right. The photo was apparently taken from the top of the stack of the Claire Furnace.

Endowment

A donor has expressed interest in establishing an endowment to cover the Historical Society's fixed expenses. These average out to around \$4,000 yearly, and are basically the utilities and insurance for our historic headquarter building. Be assured that there is zero fat in the budget of our all-volunteer organization.

While the energy and enthusiasm of our present membership is able to run fundraisers to generate this income, an endowment would allow the preservation of our town's history to be extended into the future. (New members, with initiative and new ideas, of course are also vital to the Society's continuance.)

If you are interested in contributing to our endowment, the anonymous donor has pledged matching funds. Please contact us for more information.

Commemorative Bricks

Please consider an "In Memory of" or "In Honor of" brick for a loved one.

4" x 8" bricks with three lines of inscription—\$75

8" x 8" bricks with six lines of inscription—\$125

The bricks would be placed in the town park.

**Stop at Mehler Insurance or call 724-962-2392
or email sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com**

Items for Sale

Natural Stone Drink Coasters \$8 ea., 4 for \$30

Cat's Meow Keepsakes \$15

**DVDs of 100 photos of old Sharpsville in slide show
format—2 volumes \$10 each**

T-Shirts with Historical Society logo \$10

Odds & Ends

“Thribble X”

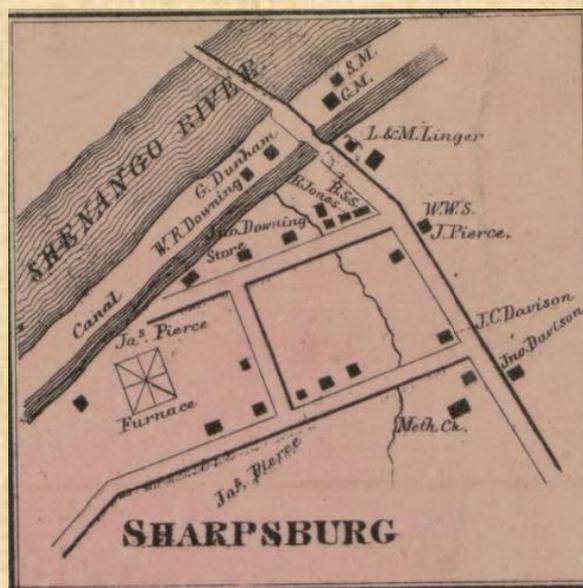
The First Universalist Church of Sharpsville, though its congregation has long since disbanded is important to the town because its building is recognized by the National Register of Historic Places for its architectural significance and because it is home to the Historical Society. It is, moreover, one of the links to the family of “General” James Pierce, through whose influence the church here was founded, and through their munificence the building was erected.

The church first met in the fall of 1870 or the early winter of 1871. Charles L. Shipman came down to preach occasionally and then, beginning in June 1873, was engaged to preach alternate Sundays. He oversaw the formal organization of the congregation on February 27, 1876 and remained there until a resident pastor was engaged the following year. This was all before the present church was built, with the congregation then meeting in Pierce Hall. (That was originally Jonas Pierce’s dwelling until he moved into the present Italianate mansion behind the Rite Aid in 1868. Pierce Hall later became the Pierce Hotel until it was converted into the Parkway Apartments. The building was torn down in 1972.) Shipman delivered the sermon at the funeral of James Pierce in December 1874.

Shipman was born in Gustavus, Trumbull County, Ohio in 1818. He first preached at age 19 and was ordained in 1842 and was initially assigned to serve congregations in Chenango County New York. Around 1850, he returned to Ohio where he served as pastor to several congregations in Trumbull and Ashtabula counties. As in New York State, and later in Erie and Crawford counties, his pastorships were likely as a “circuit preacher”; that is, not residing in the parish but alternating visits so as to serve several small, remote congregations. In 1864, he moved to Girard, Pa. where he served as pastor of the Universalist church there and elsewhere on his circuit. After his pastorate in Sharpsville, Shipman returned to Girard; he was called again to Sharpsville where he served from 1880-1884.

Of particular interest is Shipman’s involvement with the Underground Railroad. While that involvement long predated his time in Sharpsville, the Society is often asked whether were any Underground Railroad stops in Sharpsville. While routes to the west, in Trumbull County, and east, through Mercer and Sandy Lake, are recorded, none are documented here. This, in turn, leads to the larger question of the extent of ante-bellum abolitionist sentiment in Sharpsville. It must be remembered that the anti-slavery movement was not particularly widespread in the North. While support for abolition grew in the 1850s, what was originally a small-fringe movement, had its own divisions:

whether emancipation should be gradual or immediate, or whether blacks should be resettled in Africa. An even smaller portion sought the full equality of African-Americans. On the other hand, the old Western Reserve of northeast Ohio, and Crawford and Erie counties in Pennsylvania, home to large migrations of Yankees, were hotbeds of abolitionist sentiment. John Brown, of Harpers Ferry fame, for example, lived in Meadville from 1825 to 1835. Generally, though, those in Mercer County and further south were less likely to report the runaway slave, though many did not hesitate to raise the banner of freedom: the Presbyterian congregation in Clarksville split over the issue of slavery and Mercer had its own Anti-Slavery Society. But whether there was anti-slavery sentiment here in Sharpsville, the question is essentially moot. It is often forgotten, but until the late 1860s, Sharpsville was just a village and hardly one at that. The inset to this county map, published in 1860 on the eve of the Civil War, shows the extent of what was then termed “Sharpsburg.” It was only



in 1864 that we merited a post office be established here—in an era when every little burg and hamlet seemed to have one. (Compared to 21 today, in 1866 Mercer County had 34 post offices—including such obscure locales as Balm, Hill, Indian Run, Irishtown, North’s Miller, and Satterfield.) Since so few people lived here (no population statistics are available since we were then part of Hickory Township), tracing division over the slavery question are essentially meaningless.

“Thribble X,” cont’d.

At the time Shipman returned to Ohio, around 1850, he built up anti-slavery sentiment in the communities where he preached. His home in Gustavus was a well-known station on the Underground Railroad, “Station 1001,” and he was considered the superintendent of the network in northeast Ohio as well as in western Erie County, Pa. Tests, signs, and passwords were necessary among the people working the Underground Railroad due to the fines and imprisonment specified by the Fugitive Slave Act. Shipman signed himself as XXX, which led others to refer to him as “Thribble X.”

Colorful accounts of Rev. Shipman’s days as a conductor on the Underground Railroad are given in *From Dixie to Canada: Romances and Realities of the Underground Railroad* (published 1894).

Two men were standing in their respective doorways in the village of Andover, Ohio, on a November afternoon. The one was a broad-shouldered, full-chested man, with a flowing beard, a merry twinkle in the eye, a kind of devil-may-care negligence in his appearance, with a physique that betokened great power and endurance. This man had long been known technically as “Thribble X” of station “1001,” at Gustavus, Ohio, from which place he had migrated to Andover to proclaim the principles of the Universalist faith, and was known among his people as Elder Shipman, or more familiarly, “Uncle Charley.”

The other gentleman was of slimmer build, sandy complexion, thoughtful mien, and the very manner in which he handled his pipe would guarantee that he was of “Hinglish stock.”

As they thus stood, a buggy [driven by Mose Bishop] came driving from the east at break-neck speed, and dashing up to the parsonage the driver exclaimed, “Elder, can you do anything for this duck, for they’re after us hotter’n h—ll.”

“Don’t you know there is no such place as that, Mose?” was the calm reply. [Shipman was Universalist minister, with the distinguishing tenet of Universalism being salvation of all souls and a rejection of Hell.]

“Well, well, I’ve no time to discuss theological matters now; all I know is if there is no such place, there ought to be a new creation at once for the sake of two fellows that must already be this side of the Shenango.”

“So near as that? Set him out.”

Immediately the colored man [Jack, who was hidden in the buggy] was bidden to alight, and whilst he and the elder struck out for the woods a short distance to the southwest, the buggy was turned and driven rapidly toward Richmond [north of Andover, Ohio].

Soon afterwards, two slave-catchers came galloping into town and questioned the Englishman who had just seen the escapee transferred to Shipman’s care. They asked if he had seen a buggy driven by Mose Bishop come by. He truthfully told them he saw it go north toward Richmond, though omitting that its cargo had gotten off and was headed east. But Shipman and Jack were not yet out of danger, and we learn that the clergyman was not shy about using vigorous methods to fulfill his mission.

Watching the departure of the others, Shipman and his charge crossed the road to the eastward, and were soon threading the woodlands bordering the Shenango, and about midnight sought quarters at a friend’s of the elder, not far from Linesville. Arming themselves with heavy walking sticks, just before evening of the next day they set out for Albion. They had not proceeded far before they saw they were to encounter four sinister-looking fellows. “Now, Jack,” said the elder, “You have endured too much to be taken back. I do not wish to pay a thousand dollars fine nor go to prison for your sake. We may have to use these canes. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Massa, you can trus’ dis Jack.”

A call to halt was answered by so vigorous a charge and such effective use of the walking sticks that two of the challengers soon lay upon the ground and the others beat a hasty retreat. Taking advantage of circumstances the little train [i.e., “train” on the Underground Railroad] switched, and under the pressure of a full head of steam reached the “Old Tannery” station near Albion [Pa.] before daylight.

The conductor was now on strange ground, but knowing there was an agent in the vicinity named Low, he hunted him up and received such information as enabled them to make a little clump of hemlocks on the bank of a ravine not far from the residence of Elijah Drury, of Girard [Pa.], the following night.

Farmer Drury was a stalwart, standing little less than six feet in height, always ready for any good word and work, and had been for many years engaged in the *transportation* business. Always wary, however, he was not to be deceived when, in the morning, our bewhiskered conductor presented himself and asked for something to eat.

“O yes,” said Mr. Drury, “I can always furnish a man, though a stranger, something with which to satisfy hunger.”

“But I want something also for a friend.”

“Thribble X,” cont’d.

“A friend! What do you mean?”

“I mean that I have a friend down yonder in the thicket, who is both weary and hungry.”

“Mister, do you know what I think?”

“I am not a prophet, sir.”

“Well, it is my opinion that you are a horse thief.”

“Will you come down and see the last nag I trotted off?”

Together the two men went down to the little thicket, and there the Elder not only exhibited the passenger, but to remove all suspicions, showed him the scars that indicated the floggings to which the slave had been subjected, a sight which Mr. Drury often afterwards said came very near making him swear outright. Thus commenced a friendship between the two men long continued and fraught with many acts attesting the generous nature of both.

Another recollection tells how Shipman assisted an escapee, George Gray, whom the network code named “white rabbit.” Shipman transported Gray to Jefferson, Ashtabula County, to the home of Ben “Buff” Wade, later Senator from Ohio. The reminiscence continues with an account of a chance reunion of Shipman and Gray several decades later:

A company of persons awaiting a western bound train stood chatting with the veteran Seely upon the platform at Girard, Pa. Among them, evidently well up in the sixties, was a man of unusually muscular frame. His countenance was open and pleasant, but mostly enveloped in a heavy beard of almost snowy whiteness. Judging from the appearance of his eyes, he was endowed with a more than average gift of language. Indeed he was the central figure in the company. The “Toledo” rolled up and as the group passed into the coach a colored man seated a little back took a close survey of this individual. As they seated themselves in his rear, the negro arose, passed to the front of the car and turning round placed his eyes squarely upon the face of the old gentleman. Thus he stood until Springfield [Pa.] was passed, until Conneaut [Ohio] was nearly reached. Feeling annoyed himself, and noticing that the gaze was attracting the attention of his fellow passengers, the gentleman arose and going forward said:

“Stranger, let us have this out. I can tolerate this impertinence no longer.”

“No ’pertinence, massa, no’ ’pertinence at all,” responded the negro, “I knowed yer the minit yer comed aboard.”

“You know me? I never saw you before that I remember.”

“Bery like, bery like, massa, you’s named Shipman, and doan yer remember the ‘white rabbit’ yer crawled on the hands and knees wid through the tater patch arter you’d got him out of the cellar whar the old Parson had stowed him. Dis chile hab never forgot that face though it had no whiskers then. The Lor’ bress yer, massa, doan yer ’member so long ago?” and the overjoyed man held out his hand which was grasped in a hearty shake by that of his whiter brother. Seating themselves together, the colored man told the story of his early servitude, and how, armed with no weapon but a butcher knife for defense, he had made that long flight across the mountains without one sense of fear until he had crossed into Ohio and learned that men were there watching for him to claim the reward offered for his return.

“But how,” queried the venerable Shipman, “did you get along after I left you?”

Gray tells how Ben Wade passed him off to Quintus Atkins, who quartered him at his American Hotel (code named Anno Mundi), in Jefferson, Ashtabula County. With the slave-catchers hot on his trail, Gray was sent to Erie, while the slave hunters were misdirected to Ashtabula. The “white rabbit” was able to stow away on the steamer *Thomas Jefferson* and make it safely to Canada.

“And what then?” said Uncle Charley.

“An’ den, Massa Shipman, George Gray went to work to earn money to buy his old mother, but when he had enough he learned she was dead, so he bought him a little home, and then the great wah comed and set all his people free, an’ so now he’s jus’ agoin’ down inter that country to see if Massa Jones hab eber heard from dat ‘deah chile’ who was ‘drown,’ or ‘killed hisself’ or ‘runned away.’ [Gray had escaped from Samuel Jones’ James River, Virginia plantation and sought to confront the old slaver who had whipped him so cruelly.] But here am my stoppin’ place, an’ may the good Lor’ bress and save Massa Shipman forever, am the prayer ob de White Rabbit.”

There was another hearty hand-shaking, amid the cheerings of the little throng who had been attentive listeners to the conversation, mutual pledges to meet on the “other shore,” and the old ex-conductor from “Station 1001, U. G. R. R.,” and his sable passenger parted company under far pleasanter circumstances than they did in the long ago on the doorstep of Anno Mundi in the village home of Giddings and Wade.