

Hunterdon Historical Record



HUNTERDON
COUNTY
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

hunterdonhistory.org

The Great HCHS Book Sale Returns April 27

Don't miss our HCHS book sale on Saturday, April 27 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. outside our Archive Building, 67 River Road in Raritan Township.

Our upcoming spring sale will feature an astounding selection of books about townships and counties in Hunterdon County and throughout New Jersey, histories of other states, biographies, volumes on the American Revolution, the Civil War, World War II, antiques, old barns and homes and so much more.

This year, we'll also have a selection of antique picture frames along with reproductions of historic maps and posters.

Arrive early for the best selection. Rain date is Sunday, April 28.

Please remember to bring cash or a check as we cannot accept credit cards.

All proceeds benefit the Hunterdon County Historical Society and our mission to preserve, protect and share our county's history.

Let Us Now Praise Eccentric Couples

By Rick Epstein



The house James Agee and Alma Mailman occupied in Frenchtown. It now serves as the borough police station.

Not-yet-famous writer James Agee (1909-55) resided at 27 Bridge Street in Frenchtown from the spring of 1938 to the summer of '39. He came there from New York with fiancée Alma Mailman to write his book about Alabama sharecroppers in the Depression and to await his divorce from his first wife.

Gloria Sipes Paleveda, a nostalgia columnist for the *Delaware Valley News*, remembered the bohemian couple that had fascinated her 13-year-old self. "She wore high boots even though it wasn't snowing, and long, flowered skirts. The young man had a lean, brooding Gothic look.

"Whenever I saw them, I would stare at them intently. Especially when they were together because they looked as if they were sharing some private joke in their own private world. They never seemed to blend into the town; they stayed as visitors from some exotic place." But Gloria didn't know the half of it.

In Alma's memoir, *Always Straight Ahead* (1993), she tells about living with him while he was spending his nights writing the book.

The couple's sparse furniture included a four-poster bed, bought at auction. It proved too big to be maneuvered into an upstairs bedroom, so the kitchen would double as boudoir. There, Alma would observe the mice who emerged from the walls to dine on the kitchen trash. Alma learned to tell them apart and determined that there were six of them. Yes, she was bored.

When James wasn't writing, the couple played checkers, took walks, went for drives, made drawings of each other, and played chamber music—he on a battered upright piano and she on violin. After James' divorce took effect, he and Alma were married on Dec. 6, 1938, at the Hunterdon County Courthouse.

One summer night, with James in an exultant mood after a successful bout of writing, they went for a drive in their Ford touring car. With James driving as fast as the deserted country road would allow, Alma stood on the running board holding onto the car door with one hand. With the other, she took her clothes off, throwing them into the car and letting the warm wind blow through her hair and caress her body. (Unfortunately, Ford would do away with running boards in 1949.)

Another time, fully dressed and strolling through town, they encountered a cute, little goat on the sidewalk. Enchanted, they found its owner and bought it. The kid's backyard antics delighted them, but it would bleat at night, disturbing James' nighttime writing.

So, they bought it a companion, but that only doubled the night noise, which "became intolerable," recalled Alma. "After days of trying to find a home for our goats, we put them in a car and drove, silent and ashamed, to the local butcher, who was naturally pleased with the gift."

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 of two days prior to the event.

Acquisitions

Artifacts and documents on the history of Hunterdon County and the families who resided here are welcome additions to the Society's Collections. Donated materials may not be available for research until they have been processed, an ongoing activity. The Society thanks our donors for these acquisitions.

Archives:

Anonymous. A photograph album documenting the demolition of the Court Street School in Flemington, NJ, by Russell Mannon & Son, 1954.

Berlin, Robbie. A collection of materials including photographs of a Byram farm; buildings, river scenes, and people from the River Towns in Hunterdon County; 4 notebooks of weather data; and records of Robert W. Filler, 1930-2000.

Browne, Margaret W. A large collection of photographs of the Higgins family of Hunterdon County, ca. 1880-1930.

Chiu, Jeffrey S. One box of genealogical materials on the Chiu family, ca. 1980-2010.

Goodell, Peter. One album style book of original poetry, 1841-1880, with works signed by members of Hunterdon families.

Karrow, Marcia. A book of corporate records and ephemeral documents from Karrow Distinctive Clothiers, 1965-1977, and a panoramic photograph of the Flemington H.S. Class of 1934 reunion in 1949.

Kinnaird, Carol. Items related to the Flemington

H.S. Class of 1947, including directories, biographies, and reunion photographs, 1947-2002.

Kuhl, John. Multiple donations, as follows:

Assorted family records, church and cemetery records, and published organizational histories; assorted ephemera and manuscript documents, newsletters, county and municipal publications, brochures, and directories; 25 original photographs of various families and subjects, and a manuscript ledger from an unknown business, 1884-2000. A self produced manuscript by Frank Curcio, "Ribbons of History: How Roads Define and Unite Us Across Time and Space, The Hunterdon New Jersey Experience," 2017.

Langley, Catherine. A number of boxes that document the activities of the Large Foundation, including grants, awards, minutes, by-laws, and other documents, 1992-2012.

Ngai, Peggy. Two framed maps of Hunterdon County; a fragment of the 1898 National Map Company version of Hunterdon County, and the High Bridge Quadrangle map, 1905.

Nicolett County Historical Society, % Ruth Einstein. One carte-de-visite, Jennie Creveling (Mary Jane Creveling Sliker), 1864.

Mennel, William. Genealogical research notes, family manuscripts, and compact disks of notes on the Danberry family genealogy, n.d.

Mortola, Lizzie. Two framed photographs of the John T. Matthews family, ca. 1910.

Rozier, Lou. The "family book" of Marston David Trefren of Lebanon, NJ, recounting births and deaths of parents and siblings with a lock of hair from each, 5 November 1846.

Smith, Julia Herr. Items from the estate of the Honorable Marilyn Rhyne Herr, including photographs with judges and clerks, and the Hunterdon Bar Association, as well as judicial appointments, drawings, museum objects, and Judge Herr's Law School Thesis paper, 1967-2016.



Judiah Higgins

Continued on next page

Let Us Now Praise Eccentric Couples — Continued

With two weeks left on their lease, a hobo knocked on the back door and begged a meal. Walter Clark, age 59, had been hopping freights, doing odd jobs, and panhandling for more than 20 years. His gentleness and serenity endeared him to the couple, and they made him their house-guest.

One evening they took him out on the town. Sitting in a booth in a restaurant, probably the Candy Kitchen when it was at 40 Bridge Street (currently Casa Bizarro), he was overwhelmed by the array of menu choices and ordered his old go-to: pork & beans.

At the cinema, very likely the Gem Theatre farther down Bridge Street, he didn't react to the glamorous Hollywood feature, but he was completely alive to the misadventures of Mickey Mouse, Alma recalled.

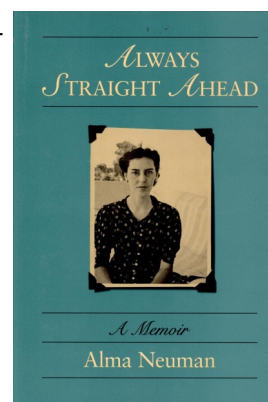
As their time in Frenchtown drew to a close, "I wanted to adopt him," wrote Alma, and take him along to the summer place they'd rented near Flemington. But James didn't want this extra responsibility.

So, they just bought the hobo two quarts of whiskey, a half-dozen cans of pork & beans, a tin plate and cutlery, some candles, and matches and left him "pretty much as we found him." Walter was delighted with their gifts.

And the mice? Fearing the next tenants would exterminate them, the Agees decided to take them along. A "ketch-em-alive" trap, set in the kitchen, caught the mice as they emerged from the garbage bag. They were contained in a tray covered by a piece of window screen. Alma held it on her lap on the drive to their next rental and freed the mice upon arrival.

Epilogue: The couple's happiness was short-lived; they were divorced in 1941, the same year the share-cropper book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, was published. Its brilliance would be unnoticed for almost 20 years. Three years after his death at age 45, his novel, *A Death in the Family*, won a Pulitzer Prize. The house they'd rented is currently the borough police headquarters.

Rick Epstein is Frenchtown's historian, a trustee of the Hunterdon County Historical Society, and the author of *Frenchtown: Fires, Flood, Fads, and Felonies* (2023).



Acquisitions continued

Stevens, Stephanie. Multiple donations, as follows:

A small collection of slides from around Clinton, NJ, including Lime Kiln, schoolhouse, and bridge, n.d.; A binder of Hunterdon County slides, n.d.; A ledger of Tax Duplicates, Readington Township, 1906; Notes on the Early Settlers of Kingwood Township; a report entitled "Architectural Survey of Early Barns in Readington Township, NJ", 1977.

Stewart, Lois. Programs from Lambertville public celebrations and photographs from Lambertville, 1948-1950.

Thomas, Anne Moreau (estate). A large collection of scrapbooks, slides, photographs, assorted manuscripts, books, and museum objects assembled by the late Anne Moreau Thomas that document Flemington and Hunterdon County history as well as the Moreau and Thomas families, ca. 1930-2018.

Uhl, Lori Piatt. A large collection (30+ boxes) of materials comprising the Richard O. Piatt Family History Collection, including a book collection, periodicals with notations, Stackhouse family files, Piatt family genealogical binders, publications and newsletters of the Piatt family conferences, Joseph Kearney research files, census records, various maps and oversized documents, and family photographs; ca. 1880-2015.

Verity, Joan. A series of homemade binders, similar to scrapbooks but unmounted, that document aspects of Hunterdon County and family history. 32 Binders, varying subjects, 1990-2020.

Library:

Darrow, Annie Pearson. *Crispin Pearson of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, 1748-1806: A Genealogy* (1932). Donated by John O'Brien.

DeSapio, Elizabeth. *Our Lady of Victories Church, Celebrating 50 Years as a Parish, 1973-2023, Baptistown, N.J.* Gift from the author.

Epstein, Rick. *Frenchtown: Fires, Floods, Fads, and Felonies! A Newspaperman Tells the Story of a River Town* (2023). Gift from the author.

Franklin As We Were: Franklin Township, Hunterdon County, New Jersey (2023) / edited by Lora W. Jones. Donated by Lora W. Jones.

Gabriele, Michael C. *Colonial Taverns of New Jersey: Liberties, Liberty & Revolution* (2023). Society Purchase.

Kochan, James J. and David Rickman. *The United States Army 1783-1811* (2001). Society Purchase.

Kochan, James J. and David Rickman. *The United States Army, 1812-1815* (2000). Society Purchase.

Map [Atlas] of Sussex Co. New Jersey from Actual Surveys & Records . . . (b&w reprint of 1860 publication). Donated by John O'Brien.

Mills, Beverly and Elaine Buck. *African Americans of Central New Jersey: A History of Harmony and Hostility* (2023). Society Purchase.

United States Army Headgear to 1854 / Catalog of United States Army Uniforms in the Collections of the Smithsonian Institution, Volume I (1969). Donated by Pam Robinson.

The Other Lindbergh Trial in Flemington—Part 2

By Jim Davidson

Part one of this article appeared in our fall 2023 newsletter. It covered the Lindbergh baby kidnapping on March 2, 1932, and how Norfolk Yacht Club President John Hughes Curtis became enmeshed in the crime. Curtis said in early March a gang member involved in the kidnapping approached him and said the baby was on board a boat off the Virginia Capes. The kidnapper asked Curtis to serve as an intermediary. Lindbergh, who was already dealing with the kidnappers through John Condon, ignored Curtis initially. Once Lindbergh realized his efforts with Condon were useless, he reached out to Curtis in mid-April. For three weeks Lindbergh and Curtis tried to make an exchange for the baby at sea. On the night of May 12, 1932, when they thought an exchange was imminent, State Police Chief Col. H. Norman Schwarzkopf Sr. contacted them at sea with the news that the baby's corpse had been found outside of Hopewell.

Schwarzkopf took over the investigation and literally kidnapped Curtis, keeping him under lock and key at Lindbergh's home. For a week, state police grilled Curtis, who was sleep deprived, fed little and confined to a boiler room. Schwarzkopf demanded Curtis confess that the whole thing was a hoax. Finally, Curtis was told if he confessed he could go home and no one would know the better. Finally, at 4:30 a.m., he signed a confession.

But Schwarzkopf reneged on his word, arrested Curtis and took him to the Flemington jail. Curtis's Virginia attorney, William Pender, sought local help and interviewed Harry Stout, a famous local attorney who laid out a strategy for the defense. Nevertheless, Pender hired a young C. Lloyd Fisher. Harry Stout was enraged and vowed to get even.

The Trial

The Hunterdon County Grand Jury convened, and Curtis was charged with a misdemeanor for being a hoaxer. He pleaded not guilty, and the trial was set for June 27, 1932. When defense attorney C. Lloyd Fisher entered the courtroom on the trial's first day, he was astounded to find Harry Stout sitting at the prosecution table along with Assistant Attorney Thomas Lanigan, Prosecutor Anthony Hauck, Jr, and -- Charles Lindbergh.

Fisher immediately made a motion to exclude Stout and Lindbergh from the prosecution table, but the motion was denied. Stout, furious that he had not been chosen to be on the defense team had visited Lindbergh's home the night before the trial. He told Lindbergh and Col. H. Norman Schwarzkopf Sr. (the New Jersey State Police Chief was visiting Lindbergh) that the defense had a very strong case, and the prosecution would lose.

The next day the trio walked into the courtroom and had the indictment changed. Curtis was not a hoaxer – he actually was in contact with the kidnappers – but had



Outside the Flemington Courthouse during the first Lindbergh trial.

shielded them from being arrested. Fisher was flabbergasted. His whole defense had been that Curtis knew the kidnappers and now he had to prove he hadn't known them.

The jury of seven men and five women were seated and Leila Alpaugh was selected as forewoman. It was the end of June and the courtroom was stifling.

Every day the courtroom was packed with newsmen, photographers and hostile spectators. They filled the seats, some sitting on top of each other, while others sat on the window sills or even in the aisles. School was out, and many children came with their parents. The spectators, already conditioned to hate Curtis, constantly booed him in the courtroom.

Stout suggested to Pender prior to joining the prosecution that he should try to get the judge, Adam O. Robbins, replaced because he could be highly prejudicial.

During the course of the four-day trial, Fisher made more than 100 motions only to have every one denied.

The first witness was Lindbergh who remained on the stand for 1½ days. By the end of Fisher's questioning, Lindbergh admitted he did not think Curtis

The Other Lindbergh Trial — Continued

knew the kidnapers, the total opposite of the prosecution's indictment. As more and more witnesses were brought forward, almost all of them said they did not think Curtis knew the kidnapers. Fisher began to think he had a good chance of winning the case. Stout gave an emotional closing, using such phrases as "the weeping mother and grief stricken father." He was turning this into a sympathy case for the grieving Lindberghs. Sticking his finger in Curtis's face, Stout finished with, "Into this picture came this man Curtis, the most monumental liar that treads on God's green earth. We ask you to convict him in the name of New Jersey and for the sake of a sorrow stricken mother and father."

Fisher, his face bright red, jumped up and in his closing blamed Schwarzkopf and the State Police. "They have mangled and mangled the case for seventy-four days and are no nearer a solution now than they were in the beginning. They should be thrown out of the State of New Jersey as a menace to our civilization."

The Verdict

On Saturday, July 2, Judge Robbins gave his charge to the jury. They retired to the jury room and returned just four hours later with a verdict. Forewoman Alpaugh reached into her pocket and pulled out a blue sheet of paper. Straightening her gold-rimmed glasses she read, "We the jurors in the State of New Jersey, County of Hunterdon, find the defendant John Hughes Curtis guilty, with a recommendation of mercy." The results of the trial were totally unexpected to the defense. John Hughes Curtis had been absolved as a hoaxter and faker but was convicted of being in contact with the kidnapers and failing to disclose their whereabouts to police.

Several days later Curtis was sentenced. Prosecutor Hauck wanted three years and a \$1,000 fine, but since the jury had asked for mercy he recommended two years and a \$1,000 fine. Fisher wanted no jail time and no fine. Judge Robbins sentenced Curtis to one year in jail and a \$1,000 fine and set bail at \$10,000.

The Appeal

When the trial ended, Fisher asked various jurors how they had arrived at a guilty verdict. They said the case was so confusing that they found Curtis guilty mainly because he had hurt the Lindberghs. Now it was time to get Curtis out of jail by posting his bond. Everyplace Fisher went to get a bail bond he was turned down, only to find that Lindbergh and Schwarzkopf had contacted the main bail bond companies and told them not to give one to Curtis. Fisher finally got a bond from the Casualty Surety Company in New York. Curtis had no money. Fisher and his law partner C. Ryman Herr traveled to Norfolk to raise \$600 for the bond. Meeting Curtis's friends, they quickly raised the money and after



The crowded courtroom during the trial. Charles Lindbergh is seated, lower center of photo.

45 days in the Flemington jail, Curtis went home on July 18. Fisher filed an appeal with the State Supreme Court through a *writ of error* that said the verdict returned on July 2 was contrary to the weight of evidence and to the charge of the court. The appeal immediately stopped the implementation of the sentence. Fisher was convinced the Supreme Court would throw out the case. Soon quiet negotiations began between the prosecution and defense. The prosecution did not want to go before the Supreme Court.

On November 8, 1932, Curtis was again in Robbins' courtroom with Lanigan, Hauck and Fisher. Robbins, using his judicial prerogative, dropped the one year of jail time and only made Curtis pay the \$1,000 fine. Reaching into his wallet, Curtis pulled out a \$1,000 bill and handed it to the judge. He then shook hands with Robbins, Hauck and Lanigan as if they were old friends. His six-month ordeal was over.

Curtis had left his ailing wife and family because he wanted to help Lindbergh. He never asked for any money from Lindbergh, paying all his own expenses. He was beside himself when, on the day he was to make the exchange for the Lindbergh baby, a baby's corpse was found in Hopewell. Curtis would always wonder if it was the Lindbergh baby.

After convicting Curtis of knowing the gang that kidnapped the Lindbergh baby, the State Police never followed up on any of the clues Curtis gave them.

In 1934 when Bruno Richard Hauptmann was arrested, they tried to make him expose the gang he was supposedly part of. When Hauptmann said he was not part of any kidnapping gang, the New Jersey State Police then changed their whole theory that the kidnapping had not been committed by a gang but by a "lone wolf."

Jim Davidson is the author of 'When the Circus Came to Town.' The above article is a synopsis of his soon-to-be-published book 'The Other Lindbergh Kidnapping Trial.' Photos courtesy of the author.

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In Memoriam

We sadly note the passing of **Stefan (Steve) F. Firtko**, who died Nov 16, 2023. For a number of years, Mr. Firtko was a weekly visitor to our library. He was a serious researcher with a sense of humor, who always took time to help others.

Our condolences to the family of HCHS life member **Cowles Whitehouse Herr**, who passed away January 7, 2024. Mr. Herr was a Navy veteran, Hunterdon County attorney and respected Alexandria Township resident.

From the Desk of HCHS Curator Don Cornelius

Regular readers of this space know that for the first time in many years, this column did not appear in last fall's newsletter. But it's back now, and I can't help but find a bit of humor in the timing.

Think of it this way: Springtime is when Mother Nature breathes new life and color into old and dreary things. What was once old will seem new again.

When it comes to new acquisitions for our archival collections, what's new is what's old -- and, we are beyond excited to let you know that there are quite a few new old things, thanks to the generosity of so many donors who found time over the winter to clean out closets and drawers and entrust to us their contents.

To each of you we send a heartfelt thank you because without your old things, our collection would stagnate. There would be no new old things to get excited about, no new old things for each of you to enjoy. So thank you for your faith in us and your belief in our mission.

And now, on to the part for which you've all been waiting. HCHS has received a large and varied amount of material recently. There are always the usual and customary donations of materials about family histories for our dedicated genealogists. We have had donations large and small that add knowledge to many Hunterdon families, including Van Fleet, Wagner, Danberry, Chiu, and Higgins. Speaking of family histories, we were also given a massive collection (more than 30 boxes) of records entitled the Richard O. Piatt Papers, a collection that documents the Piatt and allied families of Hunterdon County and beyond.

The single largest acquisition we have had in years occurred in 2023. The heirs of the estate of Anne Moreau Thomas donated a collection of more than 100 boxes of historically significant material, including scrapbooks, 1947-2018; carousel slide trays and slides, ca. 1950-2010; photographs, 1953-2018; Papers of D. H. Moreau; Records of the *Hunterdon County Democrat*; and additional booklets and ephemera, such as Flemington Presbyterian Church Directories. While the scrapbooks, photos, slides and other materials are primarily about the family, this family, as the owners and publishers of the *Hunterdon County Democrat*, essentially were the pulse of Hunterdon County for three generations. The history of this family IS, in some respects, the history of the county.

Stephanie Stevens and John Kuhl, two longtime county historians, donated many materials from their personal collections this past year as well. It is really too many to discuss in detail, but some things that stand out

to me are John's collection of manuscripts, research, and photographs concerning Three Bridges, and Stephanie's collection of maps and her contribution of the original survey report on Readington's old barns.



Jennie Creveling, 1964

Since we were speaking of scrapbooks earlier, I would be remiss if I did not point out the acquisition of Joan Verity's collection of them: A series of binders made by the donor that document aspects of Hunterdon County and family history and other interesting subjects. Some researchers in today's world of the internet and large corporate accumulators of data do not make time for resources such as these hyper-local sources of knowledge that can often bridge a connection in family history.

Those of our members and researchers who love photography will find plenty to interest them as well. Margaret Browne donated to us a lovely collection of photographs of the Higgins Family, including Judiah Higgins and others, ca. 1880-1930. The collection has almost 100 images, many of them from the 19th century, and a high percentage of the images are dated and/or identified. There have been other donations with images as well: Flemington H.S. Class of 1947 reunion photos; Photos of the late Honorable Marilyn Rhyne Herr; images of the River Towns and a farm in Byram donated by Robbie Berlin; photos of the demolition of the old Court Street School; and images of the John T. Matthews family of Flemington from around 1910.

Sprinkled amongst donations of collections are always some intensely interesting individual items. Lou Rozier donated a curious little diary, the family account book of M.D.A.C. Trefren, of Lebanon, NJ. The diary recounts the birth and death dates of parents and siblings in mournful tones, along with an attached lock of hair of each. The item is dated November 5, 1846. The Nicollett County Historical Society (from Minnesota!) donated an astonishingly beautiful carte-de-visite (visiting card) image (dated 1864) of Jennie Creveling of Hunterdon County, otherwise known as Mary Jane Creveling Sliker, (1847-1918). And the firm of Watts, Tice, and Skowronek donated a Certificate of Appointment of George H. Large as tax collector for the 5th District of New Jersey, signed by President Benjamin Harrison, dated October 10, 1889. You just can't have enough presidential signatures in a historical repository.

I hope you enjoyed reading about these wonderful donations. Although we can't recount every donation here, please know that everyone at HCHS loves our donors. Without you, our labor of love that is collecting, preserving, and sharing the county's history could never happen.

Spotlight on Collections: Ringing in the Old

By Peggy Ballman

The traditional school bell is a pleasant reminder of bygone days, when teachers hovered in the doorway of their schoolhouse, calling students into class with a clang and chime. For Hunterdon County teachers in the 19th and 20th centuries, these bells were essential tools to structure the day and keep classroom order. This beautiful example of a handheld bell from the museum's collection dates back to 1878.

Cornelia Fisher Ayres of Ringoes was the owner of the bell pictured here. She was born and raised in Ringoes, the daughter of Jacob and Louisa Hunt Fisher and the granddaughter of local physician, Cicero Hunt. After graduating from Larison's Seminary around the age of 18, she began her first teaching assignment at the nearby Pleasant Ridge school.

The bell was donated by her son, Samuel Ayres, Jr., who shared that his mother rang it first at Pleasant Ridge and later at four other schools in the area: Unionville, Ringoes, Clover Hill, and Neshanic.



About eleven inches tall, the bell has a sturdy wooden handle covered in a glossy black coating. Within the brass body, a dense ball attached to an iron clapper creates the chiming sounds. Cornelia's bell has aged well. The clapper still rings clear enough to cut through any classroom chatter.

In the days Cornelia taught, schoolrooms often held 30-to-40 students at one time, and teachers of that era followed their own pace for beginning and ending the day. Most likely, bells were purchased with the teacher's own money.

It appears that Cornelia left teaching after her last semester in Neshanic, possibly as she married and started a family. She lived the remainder of her life in Somerville, where her husband ran a dry good business and they raised two children. She is buried in Amwell Ridge Cemetery.

By all accounts, Cornelia held fond memories of her teaching years. In June 1935, at the age of 75, she attended a reunion of the Pleasant Ridge school with other former teachers and pupils. We have no way of knowing, but perhaps she carried the bell along as a happy reminder of their days together.

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