

**GREATER JEFFERSONTOWN**  
**HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER**

October 2017

Vol. 15 Number 4

**October 2017 Meeting**

The **October** meeting will be held on **Monday, October 2, 2017**. We will meet at 7:00 P.M at the Jeffersontown Library, 10635 Watterson Trail. Anne Bader, owner of Corn Island Archaeology and GJHS member, is going to talk about what they unearthed and learned during preparations for what would be part of the bike path in the Parklands.

The Greater Jeffersontown Historical Society meetings are held on the first Monday of the even numbered months of the year. Everyone is encouraged to attend to help guide and grow the Society.

**Jeffersontown Historical Museum Exhibit**

The new exhibit at the Jeffersontown Historical Museum is part of the Louisville Photo Biennial 2017, Louisville's premier photographic festival, September 22 to November 11. Exhibitions showcasing the art of photography are at fifty three locations in Louisville, Lexington, LaGrange, Bernheim Forest Visitor Center, Frankfort, in Indiana in New Albany, Jeffersonville, Clarksville, Sellersburg, and Madison. You can find all the venues and times at [www.louisvillephotobeinnal.com](http://www.louisvillephotobeinnal.com). At our museum Beth is featuring photographic equipment.

**In Memoriam**

Fred L. Roemele, retired Chief of the Jeffersontown Police Department and GJHS member, passed away on September 12, 2017, at the age of 86. After graduating from Jeffersontown High School in 1948 he worked with his brother, Lloyd, at Myers Funeral Home, which had been founded by their grandfather, Fred Myers.

He enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1951. He received the Purple Heart Metal for injuries sustained in battle on Christmas Eve 1952 during the Korean Conflict.

Following his discharge, he joined the Jefferson County Police Department in 1954, working his way to Assistant Chief before retiring in December 1981. Fred was asked to serve as Jeffersontown Police Chief by Mayor Daniel Ruckriegel, Sr. in 1982. Under his leadership the Jeffersontown Police Department became the first nationally and state accredited law enforcement agency in the state of Kentucky and received many awards and accolades during his tenure.

Fred received many awards during his law enforcement career, including a letter of bravery on November 13, 1972, from President Richard Nixon for his resolution of an armed hostage situation.

Chief Roemele retired after 52 years in law enforcement in 2007.

**August Meeting**

On June 1, 1792, Kentucky was admitted to the Union as the fifteenth state. To celebrate the 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kentucky's statehood, the Kentucky Historical Society is going around the Commonwealth giving a short presentation and collecting peoples' stories and thoughts about Kentucky in what is called

“Kentucky’s 225<sup>th</sup> Listening Tour.” Tony Curtis of KHS met with the Greater Jeffersontown Historical Society at our August meeting.

At the KHS building in Frankfort there is a “People of Kentucky” exhibit until the end of 2017 that focuses on people in Kentucky and their contributions to the state, anywhere from nano-satellites built by students at Morehead State University to the inventor of the stoplight, to almost any contribution you can think of by people of Kentucky from different eras.

As part of the exhibit KHS is going around Kentucky meeting with groups, such as historical societies like the GJHS, museum groups, social groups, groups of all kinds to learn their concerns, what they look on as being favorable or unfavorable in Kentucky, what needs to be improved upon, their visions of what Kentucky should be in the future, what are important topics the Society needs to talk about, and what kinds of exhibitions should they have. All this will drive how the KHS will grow their collection of artifacts and documents in the future.

Tony talked about a Civil War Governors project he is currently working on and he had a slide of a letter from a Jeffersontown resident written in the 1860s. The web address for the project is <http://discovery.civilwargovernors.org>. The information covers all areas of interest, with some 10,000+ document so far. He said if you would look at the letters, court case documents and such, you will find that nothing has really changed much over 150 years.

He then showed a short video titled “Made in Kentucky” that told about the collections housed in the KHS museum in Frankfort, what these collections tell us about the people and the families they came from and how KHS takes some of the collections around the state. If you have ever attended the Kentucky State Fair, you may have seen some of these. The video told about some of the programs KHS has, such as the one this meeting covered. It talked about how history helps us understand who and what we and the state are, how knowledge of the past can help mold a better future, and how it is the goal of the Kentucky Historical Society to put this knowledge in the hands of the people of Kentucky. Tony put a plug in for the Kentucky Local History Fund, a fund you can contribute to through a check-off on your taxes. The money is used to fund projects by local historical groups, museums and genealogical groups. There is a website where you can find more information – <https://history.ky.gov/2017/07/11/grant-funding>.

Tony Curtis then moved to the main topic of his presentation the celebration of Kentucky’s 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a state. There is a huge effort by the Tourism Department to get out to all the 120 counties in Kentucky. Our meeting was the twenty-sixth and they have scheduled meetings in fifty-five counties. To learn what all is going on across the state you can go to [www.ky225.com](http://www.ky225.com) and see how the 225 theme is being incorporated into local celebrations.

He played the Tourism Department’s 225<sup>th</sup> Anniversary video showing pictures of people, places, objects, etc. celebrating all things Kentucky. He then asked what jumped out at us and what did we think should have been in the video. One was Lincoln’s pocket watch, which is in the KHS museum. There were no pictures of the natural arches in the gorge area and it was brought up that the Jefferson Davis Memorial in Fairview wasn’t in the video.

Tony then moved to the “listening” part of the program. There were a series of questions, then we gave our thoughts and Tony wrote them down to take back to KHS. I’ve listed a few of the ideas mentioned

What Makes Kentucky, Kentucky? - geography, how Kentucky was made from the state of Virginia, Kentucky’s shape, the Jackson Purchase area, the state’s various diverse areas, all of its navigable rivers, the most in all the states, except for Alaska; the bourbon and wine industries, coal, horses, food-KFC, steel/iron oil, tobacco, Happy Birthday song, Stephen Foster, our great state parks, KET, Ft. Knox, Ali, D. W. Griffith, L&N. For these questions these were just a few responses that were given.

Kentucky’s Challenges - Historic challenges that still affect us today, challenges that we think Kentucky will see in the future. - Poverty and education, McConnell, health system, Appalachia/Eastern KY/Prejudice, strip mining/mountain top removal/protecting our environment/air-waterways pollution, stereotypes, drug problems, social services, safety, public funding/retirement systems, transportation systems, statewide leadership, phone scams/robo calls, geography.

How do we meet these challenges? - Identify good leadership with vision, lower college tuition, more industry/robotics/manufacturing, effective engagement/advocacy, more conservation education earlier, more trade schools, multiple political party shakeup, and Louisville VA hospital

How will you connect with Kentucky this year? How will we change the landscape and meet the challenges we’ve presented? - Voting to change leadership, change campaign financing, advocacy/meet with legislators, support KET and KHS, volunteer in your community.

The answers do vary per region, but many of them are constant – education, drugs, poverty, industry, environmental issues. At the end of the 225 Listening Tour the collected information will be taken back, collated into spread sheets, and a final report will be written. Tony wasn’t sure of whom all will receive a copy, but they have been working closely with the Tourism Department and have been in close contact with the governor’s office. It was suggested that the regions with answers particular to that region should be identified. That is not in the system at this time but Tony will carry the suggestion forward.

Tony was very happy with the level of the responses and the numbers of them we gave for the number of people attending the meeting.

### **Jeffersontown Magazine**

The city has contracted with the Towne Post Network to produce a new *Jeffersontown Magazine*, a monthly publication featuring people, places, businesses, happenings, and history of Jeffersontown. Beth Wilder is providing one or two great articles on Jeffersontown history each month. The free magazine is sent to J’Town residents and can be found at many businesses around town and at the library.

I will include as many of the articles as I can in the newsletter for our non-resident members. The following piece is what Beth submitted for the September 2017 issue.

## History of the Gaslight Festival

The name “Jeffersontown” is practically synonymous with the words “Gaslight Festival.” This delightful event has been an annual fixture in Jeffersontown for 47 years. Many people tend to believe the festival simply sprang from the early town fairs, but actually, it has a much more interesting history than that, and it centers around – you guessed it – gaslights.

In the 1800s, Jeffersontown used coal oil lamps during the nighttime hours to provide a bit of light on the town square and a few surrounding blocks. In 1911, the Commercial Club proposed that the old oil lamps be abandoned for “a more modern electric light system.” Of course, at that time, there was no electricity in Jeffersontown, so in 1912, they held a week-long street carnival in the hopes of raising some of the \$15,000 it would cost to get an electric plant and “secure a ‘great white way’ for the town.” Louisville merchants and Jeffersontown businessmen worked hand in hand to set up what they hoped would be a successful event for the entire county.

The August 10, 1912 edition of the *Courier-Journal* noted that the fair sported plenty of entertainment, including a dog circus, waltzing mice, an educated horse, Celina the Snake Girl, theatre acts, a mystic, popcorn and lemonade stands, merry-go-rounds and a Ferris wheel, in addition to various other acts, bands, hawkers, merchants and contests. The carnival drew in multitudes of people from all over the county; in addition to those who drove to Jeffersontown throughout the week for the fair, on Friday night alone, two special Interurban cars brought in over 200 visitors – not bad for a town that only numbered 345 in the 1910 census.

The fair was a great success and paved the way for replacing the old gas lamps, which were not thought to be “in keeping with the progressive spirit of the citizens” of the town. Jeffersontown got the electric lights it wanted, and the old gaslights were scrapped, save for one lone lamp and post that would reappear about fifty years later.

In the mid-1960s, Jeffersontown was undergoing a renaissance on its town square, including the construction of a new City Hall building in 1966. The Jeffersontown Restoration Society, a branch of the Chamber of Commerce, was working hard to influence business owners on the town square to build or remodel in this same Federal Style, reminiscent of Jeffersontown’s founding years. Two very persuasive people in the Restoration Society were Chairperson Peggy Weber, a realtor, and her friend Petra Williams, who was an antique collector, author and businesswoman. They and several other highly influential Society members managed to convince all the other merchants in town to renovate their storefronts in keeping with the new restoration plan and to help clean up the town square in general.

About this time, a local church was remodeling and happened to find one of the original gaslights under the steps of their building. The unit was salvaged by Tom Caxton, an antiques dealer, who owned a fine antique store on Chenoweth Run Road. Peggy and Petra made one of their regular trips to his shop and became enchanted with the old gaslight. They decided that the newly remodeled town square should be lined with the lovely old gaslights, and they promptly took their proposal to the Jeffersontown Mayor and City Council, even offering some of their own money toward the project. The City agreed, and Ozzy Oestringer was hired to make reproduction lamps to line the town square.

The City funded the \$2,000 to purchase a dozen gaslights (later increased to 20), and LG&E was persuaded to provide free labor to install them. The total cost of such a dramatic image change for Jeffersontown was \$2,500.

The project generated a great deal of publicity for the town, and the Chamber of Commerce decided to embark upon a campaign to have Jeffersontown designated an “All Kentucky City.” To qualify for such an honor, Jeffersontown had to compete against other Kentucky cities in terms of progress, growth, living conditions, opportunity, etc. Because of the newly established Bluegrass

## Gaslight Festival scenes



THE SLANSFIELD PLAYERS entertained guests with scenes from "The Moon Man".



DEBBIE BISHOP (left) explains "The Moon Man" to a group of excited kids.



Mrs. KATHRYN WHITE displayed items from her Chamber of Commerce.



A 1970 Gaslight Festival poster promoting the celebration of 175th.

Research and Industrial Park and the beautiful new appearance of the town square, as well as meeting all the required criteria, Jeffersontown was able to win the All Kentucky City award, not once, but twice – in 1968 and 1969.

In early 1970, the Jeffersontown Chamber of Commerce wanted to build upon the recognition the town had received. At a January meeting, they got their solution. As the story goes, during the meeting, Peggy Weber whispered the notion of a Gaslight Festival to Petra Williams, who immediately jumped up and shouted, “Peggy has the most wonderful idea!” The Chamber members loved the idea and immediately named the new event “The Gaslight Festival.”

Although the intent behind the festival was to showcase the newly renovated Gaslight Square and promote the businesses there, Mayor Franklin Chambers decided that the town square was a little too new, clean and fresh to risk throwing a party there. According to *Jeffersontown News-Leader* editor, Rob Patterson, the organizers said that was “the only bad decision the popular mayor ever made for the city.” Chamber President Jack Durrett came through for the city, however, offering the J-Town Center on Taylorsville Road (which he owned) as the venue for the new event. The organizers quickly accepted.

The first annual Gaslight Festival was held on Sunday, June 7, 1970 at the J-Town Center; the same week the Jeffersontown Community Fair was scheduled for June 10-13 at the Community Center. The Chamber wanted to be generous, and so included both events in its poster promoting the Gaslight Festival, which was the only publicity the Festival received that year. They also tried to come up with varied events that would add to the Community Fair’s, rather than compete with it. One of the events that organizers created to attract a crowd was a parade, which ironically began at City Hall and ended at the J-town Center; now the reverse occurs.

The first Gaslight Festival was a mild success in comparison with the Community Fair that year, but by the second year, things improved, since Mayor Chambers agreed to allow the 1971 event to be held on Gaslight Square, as originally planned. The second annual Gaslight Festival reflected Petra Williams’ love of antiques and crafts, with many more display booths and a large antique show.

The third annual Gaslight Festival in 1972 really got the ball rolling. Jack Durrett used the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Jeffersontown as a way to promote both the city and the Gaslight Festival. The festival was moved to September 30 – October 2, many more events were scheduled, and the weather was fine. Several thousand people attended the event, and the Gaslight Festival became a firmly established event. By 1977, crowd estimates were at 150,000.

Ironically, the original purpose of the Gaslight Festival had dramatically changed in that short space of time. The businesses that were once being promoted during the festival had to close their doors during the event because of the huge number of booths placed at their storefronts. Still, that indicated the growing prosperity of Jeffersontown and its willingness to change with the times. The Gaslight Festival became inextricably linked with the City of Jeffersontown, and even today continues to grow and adapt with the city. Nothing says “Jeffersontown” more than the Gaslight Festival.



Mayor Chambers and Guests in 1972



Ozzy Oestringer's Gaslights



Peggy Weber, a local real estate agent, and Petra Williams, a Jeffersontown antique dealer, are given credit of coming up with the idea of the Gaslight Festival. Both were active in the Jeffersontown Chamber of Commerce



### Contact Us

The telephone contact is your newsletter editor, John Ulmer, 491-6463. Our e-mail address is [jtownhistsociety@aol.com](mailto:jtownhistsociety@aol.com).

