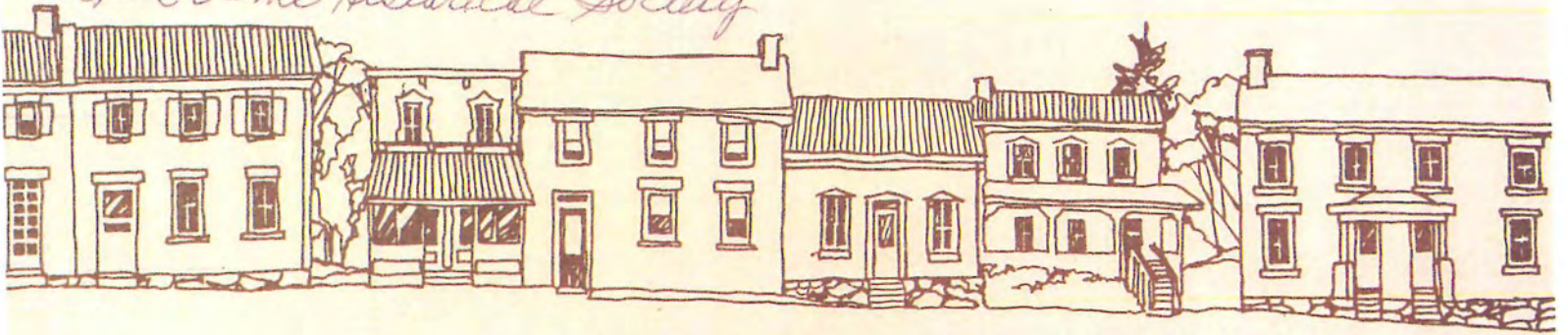


*you Vance Historical Society*



# West Middletown

## HISTORICAL SKETCH

“History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illumines reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life, and brings us tidings of antiquity.”

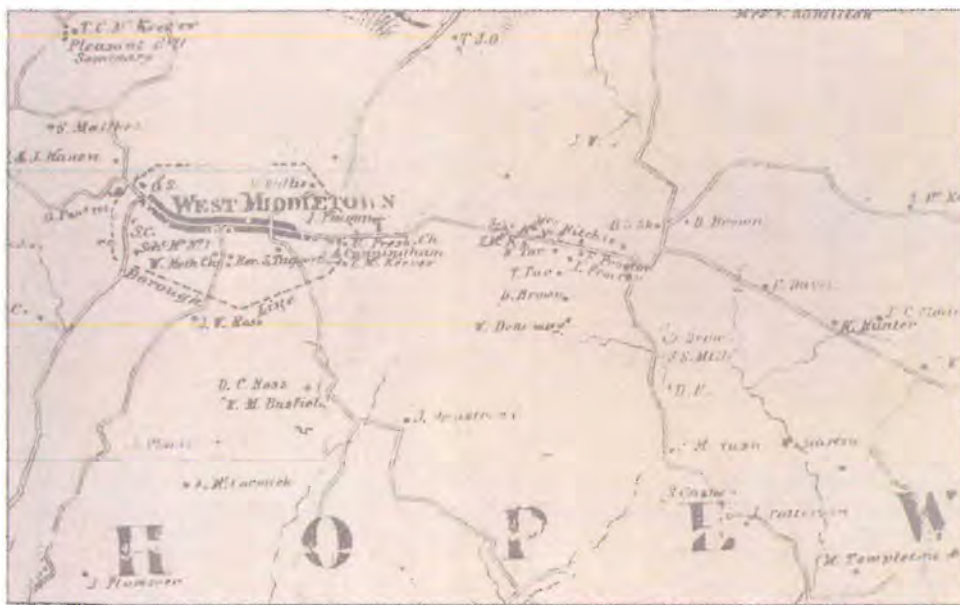
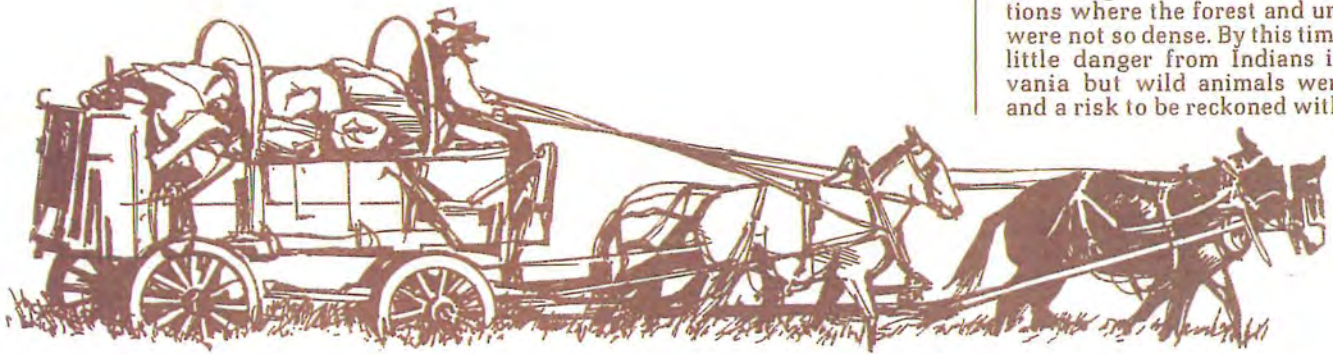
Cicero

Prepared for  
The McKeever Study Library  
West Middletown, Pennsylvania  
March 1978

**T**o those residents,  
both past and present,  
through whose inter-  
est and love of West Middletown  
much local history has been pre-  
served, this sketch is dedicated.

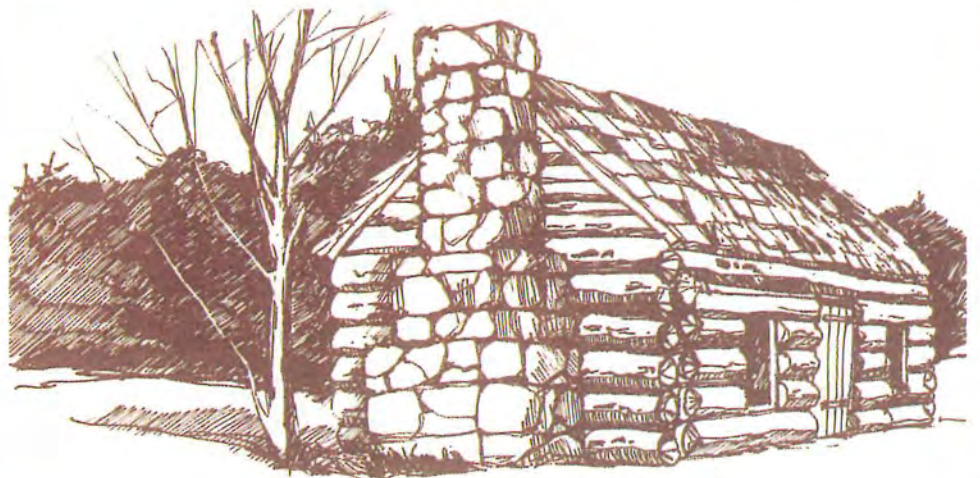
# From a trail, to a tract, to a town...

Pioneers who migrated from the east to western Pennsylvania in the late 1700's usually traveled either Braddock's road, which later became the National Pike, or Burd's Road, which followed roughly what is now Routes 31 and 136. Both roads came to Washington, Pennsylvania, which by 1790 was a busy frontier town midway between Pittsburgh and Wheeling. As a rule, the roads of that time followed old Indian trails along the ridges, partly to avoid the soft or swampy footing in the valleys, and partly because there was less danger of ambush on higher elevations where the forest and undergrowth were not so dense. By this time there was little danger from Indians in Pennsylvania but wild animals were plentiful and a risk to be reckoned with.



In 1781, Washington County was divided into thirteen townships in commemoration of the thirteen original colonies. Hopewell was one of the townships and comprised what is now Hopewell, Cross Creek, Independence, Jefferson and a part of Mount Pleasant. Cross Creek Township was created from a part of the original Hopewell in 1789. In 1806 a portion of it was taken to form Mount Pleasant, and in 1853 Jefferson was also taken from the western part of Cross Creek. Not until 1856 was Independence Township formed from the western section of Hopewell.

Along a ridge between Buffalo Creek and Cross Creek in Hopewell Township, midway between Washington and the Ohio River at Wellsburg, James Martin and Samuel Gill took out patents on two tracts of land, "St. Martins" to the south of the ridge was patented in 1781, and "Rosegill" to the north in 1790.

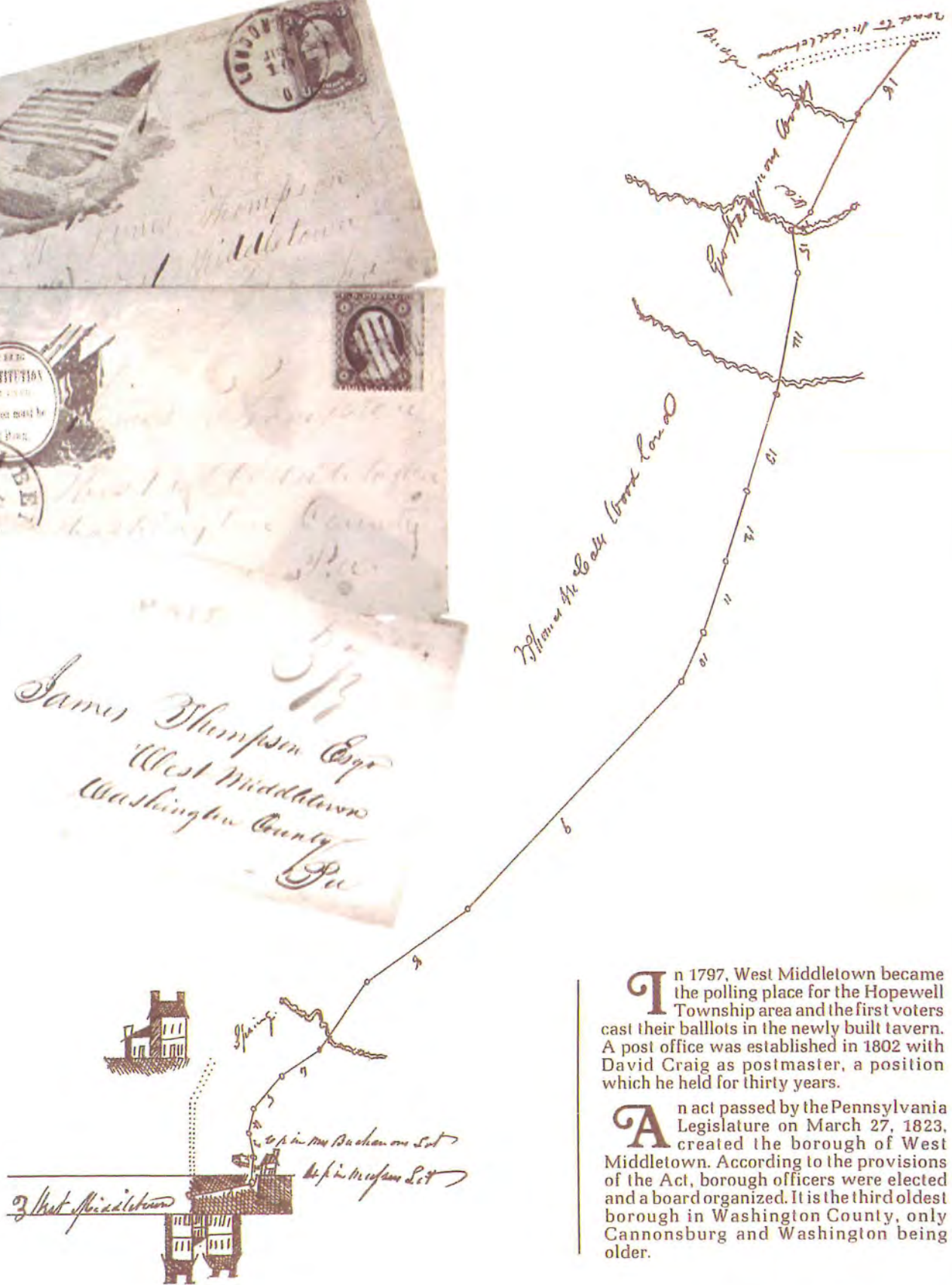


Galbraith Stewart and his family had been living in the Mt. Hope area until 1795 when he bought part of the "Rosegill" tract. Here he built a little cabin and a blacksmith shop and soon was doing a brisk business repairing the wagons and other equipment of the pioneers who were moving westward over the ridge trail to the river crossing at Wellsburg and to the Ohio country.

**M**ore settlers soon came and first among them was a merchant, David Craig. Then came William McKeever, a hatter, and his family. Mr. McKeever was an ardent abolitionist and his views on the subject of slavery soon became well known.

**T**he influx of settlers and the volume of pioneer traffic warranted the construction of an inn, then a corn and flour mill, a large tannery, a cider press and a distillery, and other frontier industries.

Thus was the birth of West Middletown.



**I**n 1797, West Middletown became the polling place for the Hopewell Township area and the first voters cast their ballots in the newly built tavern. A post office was established in 1802 with David Craig as postmaster, a position which he held for thirty years.

**A**n act passed by the Pennsylvania Legislature on March 27, 1823, created the borough of West Middletown. According to the provisions of the Act, borough officers were elected and a board organized. It is the third oldest borough in Washington County, only Cannonsburg and Washington being older.

**L**ater in 1823 the citizens were called to a public meeting at which it was agreed to levy a road tax to finance the construction of 100 rods of stone paved road through the center of the village. The following year this work was accomplished, including sandstone curbs and flagstone sidewalks. The concrete road was built by the State 103 years later.



**C**hurches and schools were quickly established by the settlers. As early as 1802 the Presbyterians held "tent" services at Chestnut Grove and in 1818 the first Grove United Presbyterian Church was built there. The present church was built in 1860.



**I**n 1811, Thomas and Alexander Campbell's newly founded denomination, the Disciples of Christ, built a small frame meeting house on Brush Run two miles south of West Middletown. In 1848, they built a small brick church in the western end of town. Several years later it was sold to the African Methodist Episcopal congregation, and in 1861 the Disciples of Christ moved to the building where they are still located.



**S**ome of West Middletown's early settlers belonged to the Methodist Society and attended Doddridge Chapel about two miles west of town. In 1841, they built a church in the village where they held services for 20 years. The Methodists sold this building to the Disciples of Christ and built another Church in 1861. Later this building was acquired by the African Methodist Episcopal congregation.



The earliest schools in West Middletown were "subscription" schools conducted in private homes. Union Grove, a two-room school, was built in 1828 where the Grove Church parking lot now is. According to reminiscences, many of the early teachers taught and disciplined with equal fervor.

West Middletown school district became independent from Hopewell in 1856. In 1848, a school was built on a lot adjacent to the ball field, and this site continued to be the location of the public school until the last building burned in 1941. Since then there has been no school building in West Middletown.

One mile north of town Jane Campbell McKeever, a sister of Alexander Campbell, founded the Pleasant Hill Female Seminary. She had conducted a "select" school in her home in a log building erected for that purpose. In 1846, other buildings having been added, she opened a boarding school for young ladies. The first class of four graduated in June 1847. Management of the school was turned over to her son, the Reverend Thomas Campbell McKeever, and under his guidance Pleasant Hill Seminary grew and flourished with an average attendance of more than 125 students. After his sudden death in 1866, the school deteriorated rapidly and the last class of three graduated in 1869.





**A**mong the buildings at Pleasant Hill was a small, octagonal, frame building which Campbell McKeever had built for his office and study. It had large windows and the walls were lined with books. Here the minister and school principal prepared sermons and met with students. Many years after the demise of the school, this little building was moved into West Middletown where it was used first as a barber shop and later as a shoe repair shop. About 1930 it was razed. A replica of Campbell McKeever's study was built in 1973 under the sponsorship of the Borough Council. The new McKeever Study houses items of local history and genealogy and also a small circulating library.

**I**n 1832 the Borough Council called a public meeting to decide whether fire fighting apparatus should be purchased. The vote was 24 to 17 in favor of buying a fire engine for \$275.00. Complete with brass trimmings it was kept at David Craig's store in the center of town. It was used for 20 years, then stored until 1868 when the council ordered it sold. The ladder, hooks, weigh-scales and all brought \$12.25. No further attempt was made to establish a fire department in West Middletown until 1952 when the present volunteer company was organized. A used fire truck was bought in 1953 for \$1100.00, and the next year the firehall was built.

**T**elephone service was available in West Middletown as early as 1898 with both the National Telephone Company and the Bell Telephone Company providing service here. The first gas line was laid through town by the Manufacturers Light and Heat Company in 1887. The gas street lights were replaced by electric lights on March 10, 1928.



**W**illiam McKeever was one of the first abolitionists in Washington County and he with his sons, Thomas and Matthew, formed the nucleus of the anti-slavery movement in West Middletown. They were active participants in the "Underground Railroad" which helped run-away slaves make their way to freedom. William McKeever died in 1838; but Matthew, who lived nearby at Pleasant Hill, and Thomas, whose house still stands in West Middletown, continued to hide slaves and arrange transportation for them to the next "station." This abolition activity of the McKeevers and their anti-slavery neighbors created considerable resentment across the state line in West Virginia, and according to the Brooke County Record, "certain parties about West Middletown were considered very obnoxious." During this period John Brown, frequently visited the McKeevers. Ostensibly his business was buying sheep, but his opposition to slavery was well known, as was his friendship with the McKeevers, and certainly he gave all encouragement to the abolition cause.



John Brown

On September 17, 1880 Matthew McKeever wrote as follows about the "Underground Railroad":

"You wish to know something of my experience with the underground railroad. I was a conductor of that road for 40 years. The kind of cars we used was a good spring wagon, with a chicken coop in each end and the Darkies in the middle with a good cover over them.

"The most slaves I ever shipped at once was eight. They came to our house about daybreak one morning before any of us was up, except a colored man, John Jordon. He took and hid them on the sheep shed loft and kept them there four weeks, and although we had a family of 18 or 20, there was not one of them knew they were there, not even my wife. They were fed all of that time out of our spring house and kitchen by John Jordon. There was never anything discovered, only a hired girl told Mrs. McKeever somebody was stealing our bread. That was the first time we ever kept any of them, and our reason this time was because we supposed their masters were watching the Canadian shore, which happened to be true. But they got tired waiting.

"The next lot we shipped was one which was brought from Wheeling, W. Va., to Bethany, Brook Co., W. Va., to my brother-in-law's, Joseph Bryant, who lived there and was a great Abolitionist. At that time my son Campbell was going to school there (Bethany College) and Bryant sent them up to my house with William Arvey and Campbell, and I shipped them to Pittsburgh. This fellow that brought them to Bryant's turned "states" evidence, and told their masters of Bryant's feeding them and sending them away. Their masters set the sheriff on Bryant and took him to Wheeling, and he was there 15 days before the court came off, and while he was there they offered \$500 to anyone who would bring me into Wheeling dead or alive. But I did not venture down there about that time.

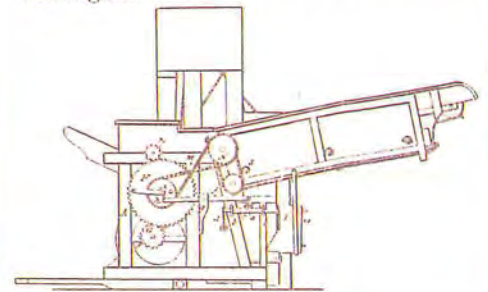
"They kept the fellow who brought them to Bryant for a witness, and when Court came off the Judge decided 'that they could not punish an accomplice while the principal was at large', and Bryant was sent home.

"Had other cases similar. My brother Tommy shipped a good many. I think as near as I can recollect the number I shipped was about 35 or 40.

"I was acquainted with a great many slaves and their masters, and I never advised a slave to run away from his master, but when they came to me I helped them all I could."

**T**he first modern threshing machine ever made in the United States was manufactured at historic West Middletown," writes Earle Forrest in his History of Washington County. Andrew Ralston, who lived not far from West Middletown invented a combination grain threshing and winnowing machine which he patented in 1842, and after several improvements was reissued a patent in 1856. Robert McClure arranged with Ralston for the exclusive right to manufacture this threshing machine, and a large building was erected for that purpose in the western end of town. It is not known how many hundreds of these machines were manufactured at the McClure shop, but it is known that large shipments were sent by river to the middle west where they are credited with having contributed significantly to agricultural development.

**T**he big frost in 1858 ruined the grain crops and nearly ruined Mr. McClure. Over the next ten years he gradually ceased their manufacture. The last one was made about 1869. In 1923, Henry Ford bought the last machine for his museum at Dearborne, Michigan.



**B**esides his threshing machine, Andrew Ralston also patented several other inventions. To him goes the credit for inventing the first oil burning lantern in the United States, only three of which are known to be in existence. It was a very small lantern which used a wick in oil, and it was considered a great improvement over the previous candle-lantern. They were manufactured during the 1850's by James Bell at his home in West Middletown which stood at the corner of Main Street and the Lane Barn Road.



**A**mong Mr. Ralston's other inventions were a dog churn" and a "rocking chair" churn, both of which sought an easier way to accomplish a tedious chore. He also patented a sheep feeder which was an ingenious trough arrangement with a hinged top which greatly reduced the waste of hay and grain.





As West Middletown had been for years a center of anti-slavery activity, it was not surprising that during the Civil War the community was charged with patriotism and represented by a large number of volunteers. Most enlisted in the "Roundheads" (100th Penna. Volunteer Infantry) and the Ringgold Battalion. Among the more gala events in West Middletown in later years were the reunions of the "Roundheads" in 1906 and 1915 and the Ringgold Battalion in 1908. Decked out in flags and bunting, the veterans were hosted with enthusiasm and entertained by the West Middletown Band.

On May 30, 1927, a crowd estimated at 2,500 converged on West Middletown to celebrate the dedication of the Soldiers Memorial. A small plot of land had been donated for the monument and approximately \$2,400.00 for its construction was raised through private donations. It commemorates Hopewell Township and West Middletown service men from the Revolutionary War through World War I.

During the middle 1800's West Middletown was a busy place. As many as eight stores were in operation at one time. Many houses had two front doors, one to the living quarters and the other to the business enterprise. In addition to stores, coffin makers, cobblers and coopers, tanners and wagon makers, blacksmiths and tombstone cutters all plied their trades. Busiest of all, perhaps, were the innkeepers. The Lindsay Hotel, the Hamilton Hotel, the Clutter Hotel, and the Odenbaugh, the McGuigin, and the McNulty Hotels, all of these were usually filled with travelers and peddlers. The France Hotel which was on the corner of Main and College Streets was still in operation well into this century.



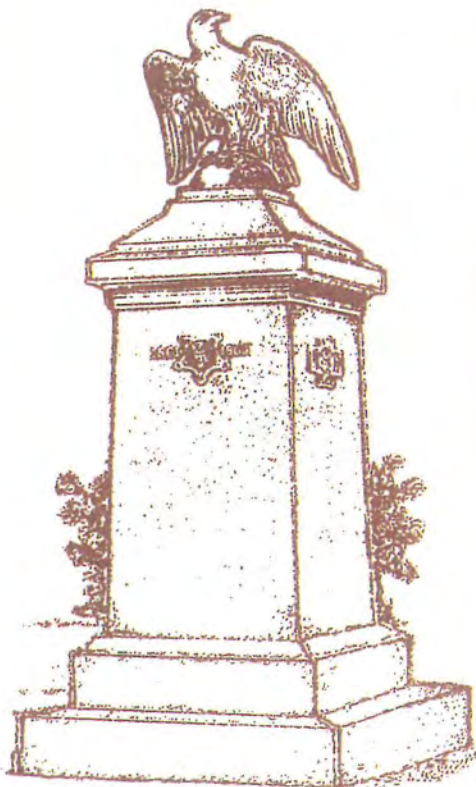
Located equi-distant from Washington, Wellsburg, Claysville and Burgettstown, and with five side roads intersecting the main road within the borough limits, West Middletown was a natural hub of activity. According to Creigh's *History of Washington County*, in 1870 West Middletown had "92 dwellings, 6 stores, 1 confectionary, the usual number of mechanical professions, 1 extensive machine shop, 1 tannery, a United Presbyterian Church, a Wesleyan Methodist Protestant Church, a Disciple Church, and a colored Methodist Church."

The cemetery behind the Grove Church, although owned by the church, was the burial place for most early West Middletown residents regardless of denomination. The first recorded interment was in 1815, but there had been many unrecorded burials before that.

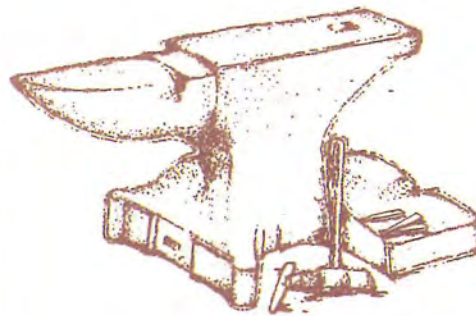
In 1901, the West Middletown Cemetary Company was formed and land was acquired across the road from the Grove Cemetery. The first burial in this new cemetery was in April 1902. Among the first burials was Samuel Furguson. Mr. Furguson lived at the France hotel and was the paymaster when the Wabash Railroad was being built through Avella. On September 23, 1903, while driving his buggy along the flat at the foot of Seminary Hill enroute to the railroad with the payroll, a blast from dynamite which had been placed in a culvert under the road killed Mr. Furguson. The two murderers escaped with the payroll but were later apprehended in Europe.



Shortly after World War II, a monument in honor of World War II servicemen from West Middletown and Hopewell Township was dedicated at the township roadside park a mile east of town. This memorial bears the names of 97 district men, three of whom were killed in action.



The twentieth century has seen a drastic change in West Middletown. With the advent of cars, no longer was it necessary for the town to be a self-sufficient, do-it-yourself community. Of all the many enterprises that prospered here over more than a century, only the blacksmith shop survives. From the arrival of the first settler until today, West Middletown has never been without a blacksmith shop. A few newer businesses have been started -- antique shops, a custard stand, a farm equipment store, and a ceramic shop -- but the town is now almost entirely residential. The population of West Middletown was 323 in 1870 and 195 in 1970. According to the last government census, the percentage of residents past age 65 is more than twice that of surrounding areas or of Washington County as a whole.



Yet, far from fading into oblivion, the village has taken a new lease on life and looks forward to future additions and improvements. Perhaps the renaissance was initiated by the 4-day celebration in 1973 of West Middletown's 150th Anniversary sponsored by Town Council. Since then, the annual Apple Pie Festivals have brought many thousands of visitors to town. This has encouraged West Middletown to "see itself as others see it," to recognize it's uniqueness, to appreciate it's treasures preserved from the past to take pride in being a small but historic dot on a page of history.

