

President's Message

Dear Friends, Happy New Year to all. May 2024 bring blessings to our friends, families and neighbors. McKinley Christmas on December 2nd was well attended. All four sites experienced great enthusiasm from visitors.

The Society is in need of members to fill officer and committee chair positions. There are many members on the books but the Society cannot survive without active participation. Please contact me at 330-719-5716.

In this Jan–Feb newsletter you will find the reminiscences of Christmas in Niles, circa 1955 of *Dr. Bob Wilson III*. I'm not sure if Dr. Bob expected to be published when he sent this letter. However, we are grateful.

As I read Dr. Bob's letter so many memories of my early childhood flashed back. I don't know about the reader but sometimes my brain must be shoved into those images of days gone by. Who can remember boarding a Greyhound bus on Robbins Avenue for Youngstown. The goal was to Christmas shop and experience the department store decorations and fineries. Mom would take 3 or 4 children under 10 years of age shopping. Remember the red sky along Route 422 as the bus passed the steel mills. Anticipating the end of our journey, passing the projects we knew we were almost there. And yes—that dingy bus station was a little frightening. We would run outside from department store to department store in wind, rain and snow depending on Mom's objective. This was an adventure!

Included in this issue is the insert concerning the preservation of the First Lady Gowns. The First Lady Gowns was a unique project undertaken by the ladies of Niles to celebrate the Bicentennial of the United States of America. They were our mothers, aunts, friends or neighbors who had a unique spirit.



When the Society took possession of the gowns almost fifty years ago the gowns were cleaned and put on display in the Ward–Thomas House. It is now time to make sure that the gowns are preserved beyond our lifetime. *Meredith Elliot* proposed the preservation project and offered to take charge. Donations for three specific gowns have already been received. One donor wished to honor her mother-in-law who wore one of the gowns. Please consider a donation. If you are not able to contribute the \$100, any amount will be greatly appreciated.

Anna Marie Beagle, President.



Aerial View Of The East Side Junior High School Known As Washington.

New Schools Planned for Niles.

Not in 2013, not in 1956, but in 1923, the Niles City School Board discusses the need for a new construction of school buildings.

“Superintendent *R.J. Kiefer* states needs of schools here. A recent school survey recommended a six-room addition to the Garfield (Third Street School) is the first step in the building program. It is estimated that this addition should serve the needs of the south side until 1931.

The next step in the survey recommends an East Side junior high school which should house the seventh, eighth and ninth grades living in that section of the city as well as grades one to six and substantially relieve the congestion and overflow now registered with all east side schools (Lincoln, Jefferson, Monroe and Harrison schools). Coincident with this recommendation is the suggestion of an addition to Jefferson School.

This step is made imperative because of the congestion of population. Some idea of the crowded conditions may be obtained from the following facts. One portable room is now used at the Lincoln School; two portable rooms at Monroe school and two poorly lighted, and ventilated overcrowded basement rooms at the Jefferson school, and another basement room at Harrison school. In addition to this the old Central school and Grant school (Leslie Avenue School) – schools long ordered closed by the state- have been put into use, Roosevelt (Madison Avenue) is filled; the Jackson building is overcrowded; the eighth grade is housed in the high school, rooms designed for shop work are used for class rooms, and the auditorium put into use for study hours- a shortage which totals 21 rooms. With an annual increase in population of from 200 to 250 four to six additional rooms will be needed next year and the same number for the ensuing year. To meet this emergency, six to eight rooms must be added to Jefferson school and a new junior high school of 24 to 28 rooms so constructed that additional rooms may be placed as needed without destroying its symmetry. Proposed \$350,000 bond issue to be submitted to the electors at the November election.”

Niles Evening Register September 28, 1923.

Personal Washington Memories: going home for lunch, opening and smelling your crayon box for the first time, the taste of paste in a jar, finding sassafras roots in the woods, riding a bike to school, special assemblies with the ‘Science Guy’, clapping dust from erasers, *Selena Coupland* checking our heads with an ultra-violet lamp, finding the secret rooms above the stage, clocks with Roman numerals, school patrol boys with badges to help the younger ones across Hartzell, Church League Basketball games at night in the gym, class recess on the big playground, riding your bike home down the ‘Ash Path’, and of course—sled riding down Washington Hill.

Link for photos of Washington: exterior, interior and basement.

<https://www.nileshistoricalsociety.org/washingtontour.htm>



Ward-Thomas Museum
Home of
The Niles Historical Society
503 Brown Street
Niles, OH 44446

Non-profit Organization
US Postage Paid
Niles, OH
Permit #337

Preserving and promoting Niles' History for future generations

Visit our Website: www.nileshistoricalsociety.org
Check out the Photographs and Stories links.

Monthly Calendar

Museum 'Open House'
The first Sunday of each month, 2-5
Last tour begins at 4 pm

Membership Meetings

Westenfield Room
10:00 am First Saturday of each month

Call for private tours to be scheduled

330.544.2143

Officers

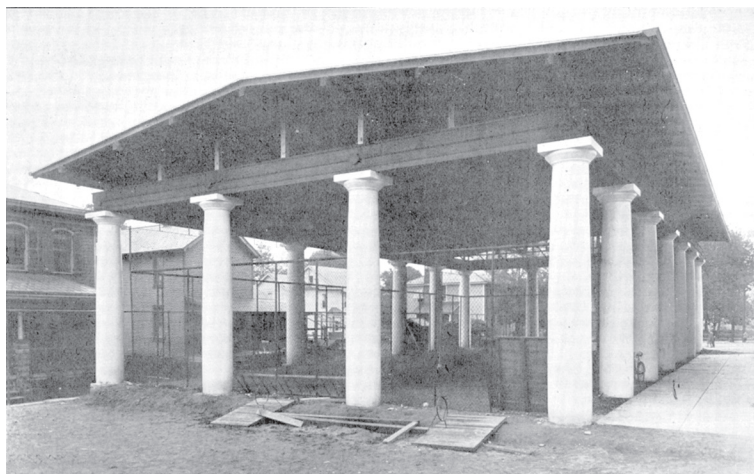
Anna Maria Beagle.....President
Dave Martin.....Vice-President
Lynda Ralston.....Treasurer
Coleen Tominney.....Secretary

Audrey John.....Curator

Ralph Tolbert.....Newsletter and Website

Trustees:

Anne Townley, Nancy Malone, and Sandy Bilovesky



New Annex classrooms for Niles High School.

The open air playground was built to provide play/exercise space for the elementary school children protected from the environment. Just four years after the Niles High School opened in 1917, this area would have brick walls and two floors to accommodate new technical classes. The columns and roof would become a part of the new Annex.

A long covered concourse would be added along the outside wall on the west side of the building to provide access to the new classrooms.

Steps provided access to the lower level areas. A cafeteria and open space for lunch tables and gym classes would later be added.

"Teams are at work excavating for the foundation which is soon to be laid beneath the open air playground, transforming the institution into a school for vocational training. The dirt being hauled from the structure is being used for filling at the new Madison Avenue School."

Niles Daily News May 17, 1921



Vocational Training building school room at the new Niles High School (Edison) located on the second floor in the new Annex Building.

Calendar Of Events

A business meeting will be held as needed in the month of February.

In January and February, tours can be scheduled by contacting Anna Marie at 330-719-5716

Niles Historical Society website links:

Home page: <https://www.nileshistoricalsociety.org/index.htm>

Historical Photos: <https://www.nileshistoricalsociety.org/photos.htm>

Historical Stories: <https://www.nileshistoricalsociety.org/stories.htm>

Reminiscences of Christmas, circa 1955, in Niles and the Steel Valley.

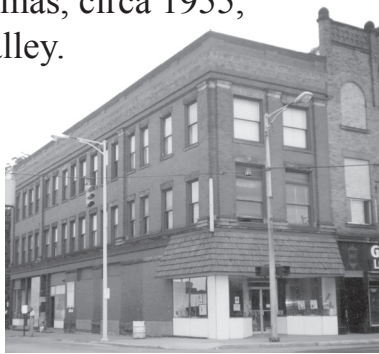
As Christmas began to rush in, the town of Niles started to deck itself with tinsel and red bells hanging across Main Street. Christmas music emanated from loud speakers and, with a little luck, a few flakes drifted from the grey, mill valley skies. Christmas decorations were up in Calvin's drug store, Isaly's Dairy, and Hoffman's dry goods store, the latter looking positively Dickensian. One could catch the Christmas spirit in the music of Bernard's Music Store. Best of all, we knew that *Mary Trimbur*, the elevator operator at the Niles Bank Building, would get dressed up in her Santa Claus suit.

Christmas shopping would usually take us to Youngstown. We often took the bus and then—off to M^cKelvey's and Strouss's. The elaborate, animated window displays were riveting, followed by a whisk out of the cold air, through the revolving doors, and into that special atmosphere of a big department store. I can still smell the perfume, hear the store signal bells quietly chiming, and ascending (with some anxiety) the escalators. In M^cKelvey's the main object, of course, was the fifth floor toy department with its magnificent train layouts and Santa Claus. I vividly recall the mixture of apprehension and excitement as we approached the throne of that august personage. Then we sat on that red velvet lap and recited a list—a bike, Viewmaster, Joe Palooka punching bag, Hopalong Cassidy suit—my sister *Georgia* wanted a Tiny Tears doll. Strouss's had its own delights, including a "fish pond" grab bag and frosted malts that had a flavor which I have never seen duplicated. We sometimes had lunch at M^cKelvey's coffee shop, and then would leave through the Arcade out to the bus station. This terminal was a huge, grey—dingy barn of a place with numbers hanging from the ceiling for each lane. The diesel fumes of that old bus terminal are as much a part of my Christmas memories as the pine scent of the tree.

On at least two occasions the Wilson family went to Cleveland—once on the train!—the great Terminal Tower, lunch at Halle's department store where they served children's portions in little mock ovens, and best of all—Sterling—Linder—Davis. What made this last store so special was the biggest Christmas tree you ever saw. At the bottom of the tree were a number of great stuffed animal toys, all of which had a pull string which would cause the bear to growl and the hyena to laugh.

Back in Niles, the Youngstown Vindicator, The Niles Times, and the television (our blonde Philco) were alive with Christmas. Special Santa Claus comic strips appeared in the paper, and "Mr. Jing-a-Ling, Keeper of the keys" would plug Halley's department store. About two weeks before Christmas, the family usually went for an evening ride to see the exterior decorations at houses around town—Santas on roofs, carolers, reindeers, and beautiful deep blue lights reflected in the snow. Bentley Avenue had the best, in my opinion. Just before Christmas, I went with my Dad (*Bob Wilson, Jr.*) to buy the tree, usually out to a place on Rt. 422. Back then, 422 still had vestiges of its country character. Once the tree was set up and decorated, we put the tinsel icicles on—always three to a branch and draped just so. Finally, we set up the rather elaborate Lionel train set around the tree.

We found time to attend the Christmas candlelight service on Christmas Eve at First Christian Church where we were members. My father came to church only occasionally and his arrival always provoked comments such as "There's Bob Wilson, nobody told me the world was coming to an end", ... The old church was quite lovely—the walls were dimly lit and candles illumined the great, rosette-style windows. I can still see the choir behind the maroon, velvet-covered railing, just stage left of the pulpit. There were my *Great Aunt Frances Froelich*,



Calvin's Drug Store

sweet, chubby old *Mrs. Hargate*, *Dorothy Evans*, *Helen Crawford*, and *Oliveann Davis*, looking like a lovely angel who had deigned to grace our church for a while. When the service concluded, we walked out the front door past the great bell pull, and out into the crisp night, crossing Church Street and into the narrow alley between the parish house and the Masonic Temple. Christmas was at hand.

One night, after all the Christmas day festivities were over, and my sisters had gone to bed, my Dad and I ran the train late into the night. All the lights were off except the lights on the tree and on the train set. Dad was lying on the floor, propped up on his left elbow with his right hand on the transformer control. I sat right next to him, working the remote switches. I can still see my father in that sort of dim, reddish—green light, grinning but concentrated, as he sent the Santa Fe careening along the track. Merry Christmas! Contributed by: *Dr. Bob Wilson III*



Postcard of the old Disciple Church, First Christian Church with old rectory on right.



The Men's Bible Class of First Christian Church on the lawn in front of the church.
The stain glass rosette window of the First Christian Church on Arlington Street.



A photo of the Parish House of First Christian Church which was purchased in 1918 and razed in 1966. It sat on the northeast corner of Arlington and Church Sts. where the Masonic Temple parking lot is located.

History Of The Butler Theatre Building. Part 1

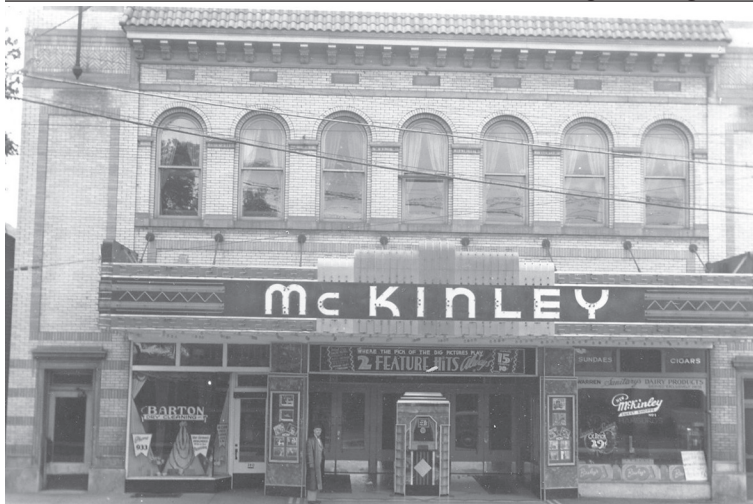


The Butler Theatre on South Main Street would later become the Robins Theatre and would close in the 1960s. Photo 1935.

From the first time the Warner Boys showed silent 'flickers' at Deibel's Grocery on Mill(State) Street in 1896 with their sister, *Rose*, playing accompaniment on the piano until the 1960s, Niles has had a variety of movie theatres located throughout the downtown. The Garden Theatre, an outdoor theatre, was a forerunner of the modern drive-in theatre. It was located on North Main Street about where Sparkle Market is now. Later on this site, the McKinley Theatre would be built, the McKinley Theatre closed in 1960. *Jack Warner*, of the Warner brothers, built the new Warner Theater on State Street which opened in 1921. The Stafford Theatre was listed in the Burch Directory of 1912 at 125-133 Furnace Street (East State), the building later housed the Park Furniture Company. By the 1960s all the movie theatres in Niles were closed. All were demolished during urban renewal except for the Robins Theatre which is to be demolished as of October 2023.



Garden Theatre showed outdoor movies, weather permitting.



McKinley Theatre, Barton candy shop and McKinley Sweet Shoppe.

The earliest mention of the Butler Theatre in the Niles Daily Times was September 25, 1924 which is the same year the newspaper was in business. The last year for advertising the Butler Theatre was 1940.

The building had many uses: Butler Theatre hosts vaudeville show and motion picture shows. September 25, 1924, *Paul Peruzzi* manager; Fiddling-Dancing Contest held at Butler Theatre February 27, 1926; Niles High School band holds concert at Butler Theatre May 4, 1927.

John Perruzzi was the manager of the Butler, April 26, 1929 and *Peter Ruffo* was the manager of the Warner Theatre. Pete Rufo would later become the manager of the Butler Theatre.

June 11, 1929. Crowds attend Butler opening for the first 'Talkie' used in Niles Theatre. The seating capacity of the Butler Theatre was taxed to the utmost by the crowd which attended the opening show of the talking pictures there Monday evening.

The management of the theatre announced that the latest and best talking and sound pictures will be shown as soon as they are released.

Crowds flocked to the newly remodeled Butler Theatre on its Grand Opening of September 1, 1933.

"The theater, which opened in the 1920s, has sat mostly empty and deteriorating for several years. Now owned by Niles, the city has begun the process of demolishing the building. Asbestos abatement has begun on the theater building, along with the old Reisman's Furniture store next to it. They will be torn down in the coming weeks. The contractor completing the demolition is *Dore & Associates Contracting Inc.* based out of Bay City, Michigan.

As some residents have questioned why the city did not attempt to salvage the building, Niles Mayor *Mientkiewicz* said that was not a realistic option. "The city is not in the theater business," Mientkiewicz said. "We would encourage private development or public-private partnerships, but there's a reason why for 60-plus years, this building sat idle and vacant. I'm assuming, private developers said 'absolutely not,' due to its condition of it and the money they'd have to spend rehabbing it." Warren Tribune Chronicle, October 29, 2023 with permission.



The Robins Theatre, October 2023

In late October 2023 the two corner buildings, Reisman's and the Robins Theater, were cordoned off prior to their demolition.

Previously, these buildings housed The Style Shoppe, Loblaw's Market, Butler Soda Grille, Dunnigan's Photography, a ceramic shop, Ward's Costume Shop, a tattoo shop, offices for the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services, and a pool hall and various other downtown businesses. In the 1980s, former city auditor Phil Rickard owned the building and used it as a haunted house. Follow the link below:

<https://www.nileshistoricalsociety.org/movietheatres.htm> Page 2