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Photos by Dan Tregembo

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Copies of calendar available at: Sparkles by Shell — 246 W. Main St., Monongahela Area Chamber of Commerce Office — 212 W. Main St.,  
Rabe's Trading Post — 210 Fourth St., or by emailing a request to [mainstreet15063@gmail.com](mailto:mainstreet15063@gmail.com)  
*The Monongahela Main Street Program*



by Terry A. Necciai, RA, Preservation Architect / Architectural Historian (703) 731- 6266

**Check out the “Monongahela Main Street Program” Facebook Page,**  
and “Like Us” (if you do).

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The Monongahela Main Street Program is a charitable corporation incorporated under the laws of Pennsylvania and has been designated by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, as of August 2017, as a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation.

*The hardcopy edition of the Monongahela Main Street Program’s Monthly Wall Calendar and Vol.4, No.12, of the Calliopica newsletter will be going to print a little later than usual this month. That gives us an opportunity to comment on things that are unfolding rapidly in early December.*

**Main Street Program Sponsoring Second Annual Holiday Pop-Up Shop**

Some excellent last-minute Christmas items will be on sale on Monday, December 18<sup>th</sup>, 4-8PM, at two West Main Street locations. Watch for LuLaRoe clothing, baked goods by Shortbread City, “shabby chic” items by Dicey Cat, cigars by Rollin Stogies, jewelry, Christmas decorations, and more. Shoe designer Mark Barbera, of Mark Albert Boots, Somerset, Pa., is planning to come and display his American-made Chelsea boots, derby shoes, and loafers as part of the event. Barbera’s next stop is a show in Florence, Italy, in January.

The two locations are Main Street Barber and Supply, at 105 West Main, and the Monongahela Area Chamber of Commerce office at 212 West Main. The Monongahela Main Street Program is sponsoring the multi-site pop-up shop / vendors’ show for the second time. This year, the Mon River Towns Program has provided financial support for window displays and other costs to enhance the impact of the event.

**Main Street Program Awarded Light-Up Grant**

The Monongahela Main Street Program has been awarded a “Lighter-Quicker-Cheaper” grant from the Mon River Towns Program to do additional things to light-up our downtown retail area in the holiday season. The grant provides help in advertising our annual pop-up shop / vendors show and to purchase materials to place displays and backdrops in some of the buildings now vacant that have recently been purchased by new owners. We thank the River Towns Program for their support at this time. A previous “Lighter-Quicker-Cheaper” from the same organization funded the expenses associated with the first year of our “Avenue of the Hanging Jack-O-Lanterns” project. The Monongahela Area Chamber of Commerce also received a “Lighter-Quicker-Cheaper” grant from the Mon River Towns Program to support additional “light-up” activities they added this year to their annual Light-Up Night event (officially “Santa Claus is Shopping in Town”).

**...And You Light-Up My Library!!**

Have you seen how bright the Monongahela Area Library is, inside and out, now that the new lighting has been installed? The majority of the lights were changed over Thanksgiving weekend, but some details are still being worked out. The Library reopens for business on December 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Sprucing Up the Planters, and Lighting Them, Too!**

Have you seen the little Christmas trees in the 11 planters along West Main Street? They were donated by Lowe’s and placed there by the Monongahela Main Street Program’s Adopt-A-Planter Committee. The committee added strings of battery-powered miniature lights, Christmas tree cuttings as mulch, and some other holiday decorations since our last newsletter went to print. They were lit in time for the November 17<sup>th</sup> Light-Up Night festivities.

**MARC Wants Everyone to Light-Up Just about Everything!!**

The Monongahela Area Revitalization Corporation (MARC) has had their first annual “Christmas Decorating Contest” underway since before the Chamber’s Light-Up Night celebration. For homeowners and shopkeepers alike, - anyone with great holiday decorations - , the contest involves filling out an application and submitting it to MARC by 5PM on December 8<sup>th</sup>. The following businesses are accepting the application forms: Hills Restaurant, Little City Coffee, Community Bank, Cox’s Market, DeVore Hardware, and Sparkles by Shell. A panel of appointed judges will ride around town checking out each address. The winners will be announced at MARC’s Christmas party, on December 18<sup>th</sup> and on the organization’s Facebook page Tuesday morning the 19<sup>th</sup>.

**Milestones**

Our Sympathy to Josh Tonecha, one of the new owners of the two buildings at Third and West Main (our cover story) in the passing of his father, James Tonecha of Apollo, Pa. (a native of Venetia), on November 26<sup>th</sup>.

**Connectivity Project Meeting at Monongahela Fire Hall**

At 7PM on December 6th, Klavon Associates, Landscape Architects of Pittsburgh, will lead a [public meeting](#) to present ideas for better connecting our downtown area with the Aquatorium. The meeting is intended to solicit input from the general public. The project is a study of highly creative ideas that could help to make our downtown area work better, such as painted crosswalks with river themes, or an arch at the Second Street entrance to the wharf and Aquatorium area that would be visible from West Main Street. Although the study comes with some cost estimates, it is intended to get people thinking about possibilities, and does not yet reflect an actual project.

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The buildings at 254-260 West Main have been purchased by a new investment group: JJI Ventures LLC (owners: Josh Tonecha, Justin Myers, and Ian Hoover). The facade projects that are well underway for the two historically separate buildings are projects #5 and #6 of the Monongahela Facade Grant Program.

*Here’s some background on the building in the photo with the Christmas tree in front on the Wall Calendar side:*

The building at 254 West Main Street was built about 1900 and is referred to in some sources as the “McIlvain Block,” apparently a reference to attorney Charles G. McIlvain who had his offices in one of the building’s upper levels. McIlvain was the son of a Somerset Township farm family (for whom McIlvaine Road was named, between Ginger Hill and Kammerer; the name can be spelled with or without the final “e,” which is silent; two other relatives, John A., and John W. McIlvaine, who spelled the name with the “e” were judges).

An 1885 graduate of the University of Michigan, C.G. McIlvain was admitted to the local bar shortly after returning to this area and initially lived on East Main Street when his law practice was located here. He was the attorney for John Barclay Finley, of the Monongahela City Trust Company, who led the effort to merge over 100 small riverfront coal mines in 1899 to form the Monongahela River Coal and Coke Company, also known as “R.C.” or the “River Combine.” Like Finley, around the time of this successful move into the world of big corporations, McIlvain moved to Pittsburgh where he had an office on Grant Street and where he was a district attorney for a term. He apparently maintained an office in this building, as he took in various law partners from time to time. He was a partner with W.K. Vance and Carl Gibson, both of whom built important homes in the Third Ward, on Lincoln and Lawrence Streets, respectively. Attorney McIlvain died in Pittsburgh in 1927, but had a presence here until that time as trust officer of the Monongahela City Trust Co.

By May 1902, a couple of advertisements appeared in the *Daily Republican* announcing the opening of a new business named “Henderson’s Five and Ten,” located in the McIlvain Building. However, in July 1902, the business was sold by the G.C. Murphy Company, owing to the fact the Mr. Henderson had contracted Typhoid (a dreaded deadly disease of that era) and could not continue operating it. The G.C. Murphy Company was then growing rapidly into a large chain of “five-and-ten” stores headquartered in McKeesport. (For the younger people among us, a “five and ten,” as they were called around here, or “five and dime” as often called in other areas of the United States, was a variety store that tried to stock only items that could be sold for ten cents or less; they were that era’s equivalent of what we now call a “dollar store.” – How the value of money has changed!) In 1904, the Murphy Co. sold twelve of its stores to F.W. Woolworth, another large variety store chain, and this building thus came to house a Woolworth’s store. Five and Tens were common in small towns until ca.1990.

Woolworth’s started in Utica, New York and Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in the late 1870s, and grew into a large chain. After spreading across Pennsylvania, Woolworth’s became an international outfit by 1904 when stores opened in Canada. In 1910, the company built one of the first major skyscrapers in New York City. By 1912, there were 695 Woolworth’s stores. The chain went into steep decline in the 1980s, and the last 400 American stores were closed by 1997. The Woolworth’s name, however, survived in England where it was re-branded as a higher-end department store. A Canadian branch sold most of its stores in that country to Wal-Mart in 1994, and, in 1997, the Dow Jones Industrial Average added Wal-Mart when they removed the defunct Woolworth Company from their listings.

In April 1919, our Woolworth’s store moved diagonally across the Street to the Markell Building, which was located where the plaza is now next to Community Bank. The building at 254 West Main subsequently found other uses. (That building, which had a beautiful stone front in the Richardsonian Romanesque style, housed Woolworth’s for many years, but went into disarray after the store closed, was torn down about 1970 to make way for the current bank plaza; around the same time, the bank building was expanded onto the right-of-way that had previously been occupied by Linn Alley.)

The design of the McIlvain Building incorporates many details that were popular in the 1890s. The second story windows have semi-circular arches with brick trim emphasizing the half circle. This was a characteristic of the Richardsonian Romanesque style, an architectural trend that came about as other architects and builders sought to emulate the work of the most important American architect of the 1880s. H.H. Richardson designed the Allegheny County Courthouse, which is sometimes said to be the most copied building in America. Richardson died in 1889 while the courthouse was under construction. The Richardsonian Romanesque details here are combined with some Colonial Revival details in an eclectic and lavish design. Even though the facade details are drawn from several different styles of that decade, they were “whirled together” here in a way that is characteristic of the Queen Anne style buildings of the 1890s. The architecture of the 1890s, especially as it appeared in buildings built by and for the middle class, frequently mixed style features from many different eras of architecture from the past.

The McIlvain Building resembles many storefront buildings constructed in Charleroi in the 1890s. In fact, a large percentage of Charleroi dates to the 1890s, the main decade in development

there, after the immensely successful March 1890 Charleroi Land Sale. The first wave of buildings in Charleroi were designed by (or at least their construction was overseen by) Robert L. Barnhart, a New York architect that the Charleroi Land Company had brought to the valley to help in carrying out the ambitious plans they had laid for that new town. Barnhart remained in the valley for the remainder of his life, and he designed key buildings in other towns around 1900. This building looks enough like the Charleroi store buildings of that era, and the buildings that Barnhart designed for Donora, West Newton, and other towns that it is possibly an example of his work. It could also be the work of one of several other similar architects working in Charleroi or at the time, as the town grew to a population of 6,000 in only 10 years. Or it could have been by another architect working in the valley.

At some point after Woolworth’s moved, this building became home to Grodecour’s Drug Store, with Emil Grodecour as pharmacist. An advertisement for the Grodecour Drug Store at this location appears in the *Daily Republican* at least as early as 1936. The building had other uses in between. For instance, the American Legion post was housed here (apparently on the second floor) for a period before they moved two doors up the street to the Glasser Cafe Building.

Emil Grodecour’s brother, Louis Grodecour, had been in the pharmaceutical business beginning about 1903, although he had been a glass worker at Wightman Glass in New Eagle before that. He passed his state examination to be a pharmacist in 1905. The original drug store business that he owned was called Rouse and Grodecour, but that partnership was dissolved in 1906. By 1907, the two Grodecour brothers were in business together under the name “Monongahela Pharmacy,” but the business was also alternately called Grodecour Brothers or Grodecour’s Drug Store. It was located in the Monongahela Times Building, now offices of Dr. Randall Rodriguez.

Monongahela Pharmacy installed a soda fountain in 1908, the same year that Emil Grodecour passed his boards as a registered assistant pharmacist. The following year, he attended school at the University of Pittsburgh’s Department of Pharmacy and subsequently passed the state exams again, in 1909, this time as a fully licensed pharmacist. The partnership dissolved not long afterward, and the two brothers began operating competing pharmacies. But this competition only lasted a few years, as Louis Grodecour died in 1921 at age 40 when he had surgery for an appendicitis attack. After Louis Grodecour’s untimely death, the pharmacy in the 100 block of West Main was sold to a different family. Emil Grodecour’s pharmacy was located at 254 West Main (from some point at least as early as the 1930s) until he sold it in 1950.

Emil Grodecour was also involved in another prominent local business. Several investors, including Dr. C.B. Lamp (later mayor of Monongahela) built an indoor swimming pool in New Eagle in 1925. The facility, which was designed by local architect George Yohe, was called the Natatorium, because it had bleachers like an auditorium to watch competitive water-based sports and performances by well known swimmers (“nata-“ is a Latin root word meaning swim). The facility was sold to Emil Grodecour in 1933. However, in the Depression era, it may not have been the business opportunity everyone was hoping it would be. In 1940, Grodecour sold it to the New Eagle Fire Department for use as a community center, and they erected a floor over the swimming pool area. It remains in use as the New Eagle Social Hall (the building was expanded to double the original size in the 1980s).

**The New Ownership under JJI Ventures LLC**

When the partners at JJI Ventures purchased the two buildings at 254-260 West Main Street, their main focus was on the apartments, about a dozen of them, on the second and third stories. One of the partners (Tonecha) has experience as an apartment landlord in the Monongahela area, and this was an opportunity to expand to a larger complex with a contractor (Myers) and a realtor (Hoover) as the other two partners. The combined building contained at least three first story businesses for many years, and it is large enough that it could conceivably contain as many as five first story businesses. The partnership has been busy on this project. They hired Fine Line Painting, owned by Tyler Mucci and Ricky Bartman, to paint the exterior in October, although they reserved some of the first story details, where detailed restoration and redesign is needed, to be done by members of their own in-house team. They also went to work at the same time on what was needed on the interior. Local plumber Josh Iams has been busy at work in the apartments, and Justin Myers’s crew has been preparing the first story for new finishes. New roofing is in the plans for a portion of the complex as soon as weather permits. Notably, all the owners and contractors listed above are between ages 22 and 35, a clear sign that a new generation has arrived here.

The group has been exploring possibilities for retail businesses to occupy the first story. We expect that some great businesses will take root here before long. The plans also include locating a construction office in some of the back space.

On the front of our calendar, the border of tiles with reindeer patterns is a repeated collage made from a photograph of one of the tiles in the border of the upper story West Main Street windows of the corner building, the Legler-Smaldone Building. These are believed to be from the historic Moravian tile works in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, as discussed in the May 2017 edition of our Wall Calendar and Calliopica Newsletter.

**“For a Thriving Downtown and a Fully Engaged Community”**  
*The Monongahela Main Street Program*