

Robert and Frances Ligget: Local History Leaders of the Mid-Twentieth Century

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When I returned to the Main Line area to study law at Villanova Law School in 1973, a friend from Boston suggested that I should pay a call on an interesting couple who had restored a historic home in Valley Forge. When I called Frances Ligget that fall, I was invited for lunch and delightful conversation with the couple at their home, Echo Valley Farms. Little did I know at that time how special this would be, not only to experience their careful restoration of the home, but also to later learn of their impact on our historical community. Thus, it was a pleasure to hear Society archivist, Cheryl Leibold, give a talk on Frances Ligget's *Reminiscences*, just transferred to the TEHS Archive collection from the Paoli Library.¹ After her talk, I told Cheryl of my long-ago meeting with the Liggets and she asked me to write something about them. Thanks to Cheryl's encouragement, I began to study *Reminiscences* as a "lens" through which I would revisit the lives of this remarkable couple, Robert and Frances Ligget. At the time I met them at their home, I did not know that Mr. Ligget would die a few years later in 1976, and that their house, also known as Lord Stirling's Quarters, would be deeded to Valley Forge National Park by Mrs. Ligget in 1978. Here follows my biography of this remarkable couple.

The legacy of Robert and Frances Ligget to our community endures to the present day in several notable ways:

- their careful preservation of "Lord Stirling's Quarters" and its transfer to Valley Forge National Park in 1978;
- the preservation of over 200 acres of land in Easttown and Willistown Townships through the establishment of Waynesborough Golf Club in 1965, via a strategic lease from Robert Ligget to twelve local citizens; and
- Frances' compilation of interviews and anecdotes of the life of their rural Chester County community of Valley Forge, all of which were assembled in a two-volume work called *Reminiscences*, self-published in 1965.

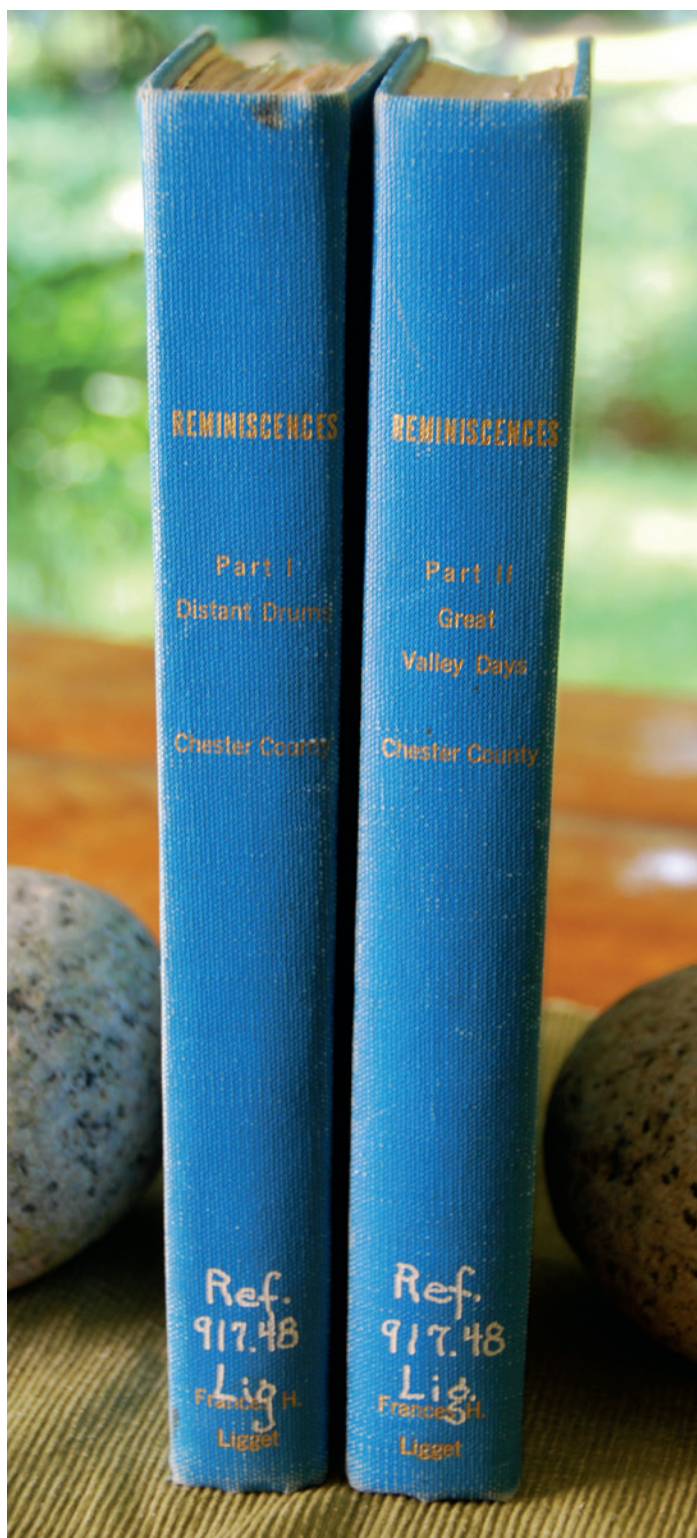
But what else should be remembered about this talented couple? They were certainly among the socially prominent local historians of a generation past, a list which might also include A. Edward Newton (1863-1940), book collector, and Henry Pleasants (1853-1928), a local church and school historian.² In the case of the Liggets, their main interests were the Valley Forge community and the preservation of historic structures.

My initial sources for information on the Liggets were Frances' three articles in the *Tredyffrin Easttown History Club Quarterly* (hereafter *History Quarterly*).³ In them, she provided a history of their home, known as Lord Stirling's Quarters, and their occupancy of it. A brief timeline of Parson William Currie's early



Mr. and Mrs. Ligget hosting a tea at their home in 1965. The photo was included in her *Reminiscences*, Part 1, with this caption: "Host Robert C. Ligget and his wife Frances of Stirling's Quarters, Valley Forge ... before 1965 Costume-Candlelight Tea in honor of the wives of Award Jurors for Freedoms Foundation ... Most who serve on this committee are State Supreme Court Justices and a number of heads of National Organizations" *Photo from Reminiscences Courtesy of TEHS Archive.*

ownership and occupancy of the property is annexed to the first article. She described how, newly married in 1925, they had visited the then very rural village of Valley Forge, and purchased a farm on Yellow Springs Road, a property that they would later name "Echo Valley Farms." At the time, the property consisted of several buildings and 246 acres. The largest structure became their home for over three decades and the Liggets gave it the name it carries today: "Lord Stirling's Quarters." Major Gen. William Alexander Stirling, also known as Lord Stirling, was billeted there during the Valley Forge encampment. Gen. Stirling preferred to be called Lord Stirling because he was the eldest son



Formerly found in the reference section at Paoli Library, Frances Liggett's self-published two-volume set *Reminiscences* (Part I *Distant Drums* and Part II *Great Valley Days*) is now part of the TEHS Archive collections.¹

Photo © 2019 John O. Senior

of a distant relation of the Scottish fifth Earl of Stirling, and had somewhat successfully laid legal claim to the title. His father, James Stirling, had left Scotland in 1715 following the failed Jacobite uprising, and his son, William Alexander, was born in 1726 in New York City.

William became an ardent supporter of the American Revolution and its ideals. He was one of George Washington's

most trusted and accomplished generals. The Liggets were enormously proud of their home, and carefully restored it, thereby preserving it for future generations.

Shortly after the initial land purchase, the couple purchased a working Guernsey farm nearby, known as Waynesborough, since the land had been part of the property once owned by General Anthony Wayne and his family. Although they never lived there, Robert hired a resident farmer to maintain the barn and tend to the cattle. In 1965, he leased the barn and 300 acres to the founding members of the Waynesborough Golf Club. These twelve conservation-minded citizens wanted to build a golf course, which would at the same time preserve the open space. The option to purchase this land from Mrs. Liggett was exercised in by the club in 1990.⁴

From the several obituaries on file in the TEHS archives⁵, I learned that Robert C. Liggett (1892–1976) was educated at Friends Select School, Philadelphia; Penn's Wharton School, Class of 1913; and Penn Law School, class of 1917. He served in World War I as an Army Artillery Officer. He then practiced law in Philadelphia and taught at the Wharton School of Business. He married Frances Hammond and they moved to Tredyffrin Township in 1926. He was active in many civic activities including the T-E Joint School Board; the Valley Forge Historical Society (as treasurer); The Radnor Hunt (as a board member); The Pickering Hunt; The Merion Cricket Club and the Chester County Prison Board. He died in 1976 at age 84.

Robert's wife of over 50 years, Frances Hammond Liggett (1901–1992) was educated at the Agnes Irwin School, Class of 1920. At that time, the school was in downtown Philadelphia, a few blocks from Friends Select. She received her school's "distinguished alumna award," for her work in community service in 1985. Frances displayed her civic-mindedness early on when her Farm and Garden Association organized a community "clean-up" of the Howellville neighborhood during the Depression years of 1932–36. (See the following sidebar for more on this subject)

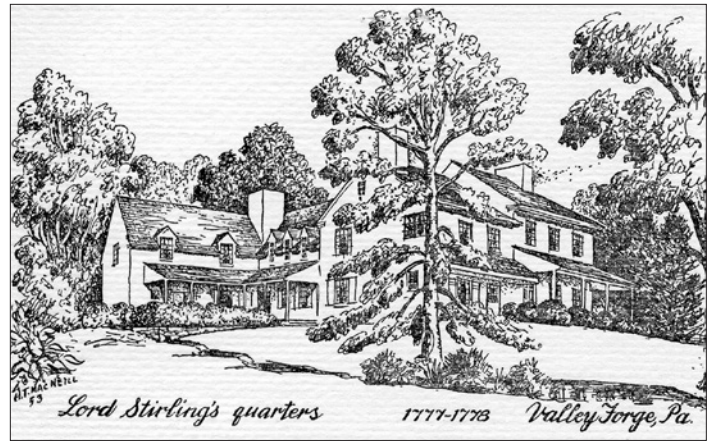
She was a part of many other civic, historic, and patriotic groups, notably the Daughters of the American Revolution; the Valley Forge Chapter of the Colonial Dames (Quaker heritage group); and the Swedish Colonial Society. She joined the Red Cross during the World War II years, providing hospitality to traveling soldiers at the Paoli train station. One report states she used her horse-drawn wagon as a mobile canteen. She was also known for hosting "costumed" social events at their farm, not only for the nearby Freedoms Foundation Award weekend, but according to her granddaughter, Kathryn, for the Girl Scouts and others as well. She received the Girl Scouts Lifetime Achievement Award, and was recognized by the Pennsylvania House of Representatives in a citation for her community work in 1974. She was a life member of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Club.⁶ In 1989, the Club undertook a tour of some of the historic homes that had housed General Washington's generals during the 1777–78 Winter Encampment at Valley Forge, and while at Lord Stirling's Quarters, enjoyed a colonial tea hosted by the Liggets.



The Tredyffrin Easttown History Club visited Lord Stirling's Quarters in July 1989, after it had been transferred to Valley Forge National Historical Park. A stone monument in front of the house recognizes the history of the house. (TEHS Image Collection identifier STI14).

1989 photo by Herb Fry, courtesy of the TEHS Archive.

In addition to her community service, in the mid-1960s Frances spent three years recording over two dozen oral histories (i.e. recollections of events, or times the speaker lived through) or short subject-driven essays on topics about which the speakers were presumed to be knowledgeable, e.g. family history. She interviewed people in her home, recorded the interviews, and then had them typed up. She compiled them into two volumes so that in her words: "the march of progress would not obliterate the history of the area." The first volume, Part I, is titled "Distant



Henry T. MacNeill's 1953 illustration of Lord Stirling's Quarters from *Reminiscences* (TEHS Image Collection ID STI7). Courtesy of TEHS Archive.

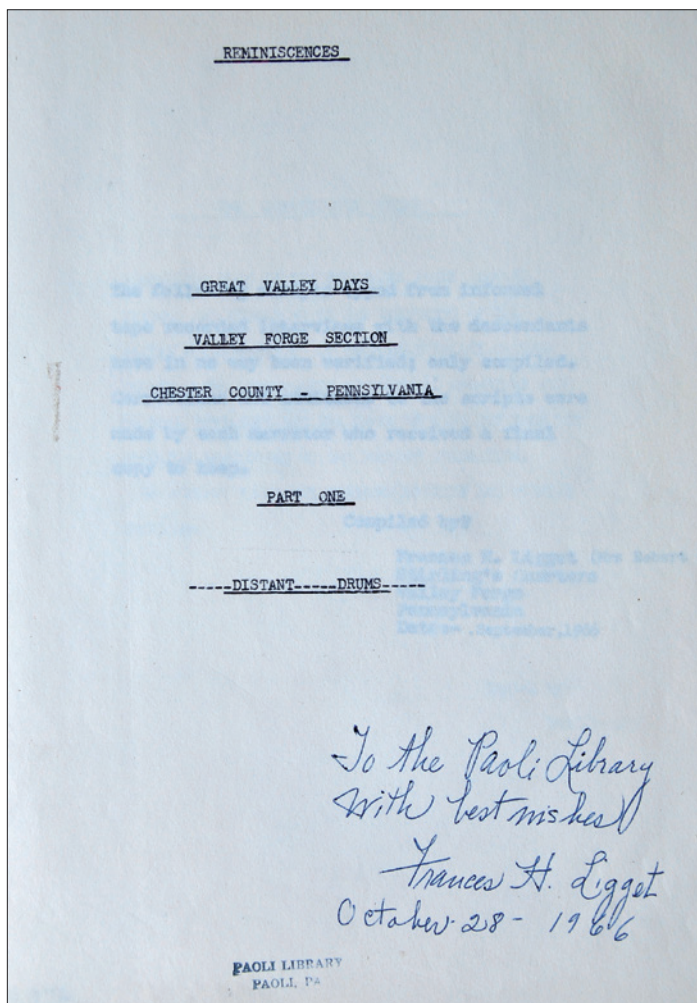
Drums," and its theme is the period of the American Revolution in the Tredyffrin area. The second volume, Part II, is titled "Great Valley Days" and deals with subjects related to first half of the nineteenth century in the Tredyffrin area.

Her friend, Ruth Bovell, typed up the interviews and Frances put the pages into binders. These two volumes, her *Reminiscences*, each comprise about one hundred typescript pages and at least as many additional pages of miscellaneous ephemera (photographs, postcards, newspaper clippings, photocopies, etc.). She was fond of the line-drawings of Henry T. MacNeill and included more than a dozen. An unbound copy of her *Reminiscences* was given to the Chester County Historical Society and another to the Paoli Library, where it was bound in library buckram, and this copy was transferred to the TEHS in 2017.¹ Numerous clippings about Frances Ligget, and her *Reminiscences*, may also be found in the TEHS Biographical files.

Frances, who died in 1992 at age 90, is buried in the family plot at Washington Memorial Cemetery next to her husband.⁷ Their eldest daughter, also named Frances died at age 15 in 1938 in a car accident, and is buried next to her parents. The Liggets were life-long members of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, where Robert was an elder for many years.^{3C} Their other daughter was the late Audrey Ligget Snyder, of Tampa, Florida (1932–2010). The legacy of Robert and Frances Ligget lies in the fact that each one made unselfish contributions to their community for sixty-five years in our region. In addition to their maintenance of Lord Stirling's Headquarters for over fifty years, they preserved its memory by sharing it with numerous interested parties in the community. While Mrs. Ligget's *Reminiscences* may not be scholarly — something she freely admits in her preface — the texts reflect the optimistic outlook of the author about preserving our local history, as well as their memories of happy occasions in the Great Valley.

Notes

1. The two-volume set of Frances Ligget's *Reminiscences* was deaccessioned from the Paoli Library and donated to the TEHS Archive in 2017. Thanks to Paoli Library and branch manager Beverly Michaels for the wonderful addition to the Society's collection.



2. Henry Pleasants of Wayne, PA (1853–1928) was a self-trained church historian at St. David's, Radnor, and a local lawyer, known for his books *The History of Old St. David's Church* (first edition 1907) and *The History of the Old Eagle School* (1909). A. Edward Newton of Daylesford (1863–1940) was an internationally known book collector, described by TEHS Archivist Cheryl Leibold in her article "Archive Gifts Received in 2016" *History Quarterly*, Vol. 54 No. 3 (Autumn 2018), pp. 20–30.
3. (A) "History of General Lord Stirling's Quarters and the Property Now Known as Echo Valley Farms, Valley Forge" by Mrs. Robert C. Ligget, *Tredyffrin Easttown History Club Quarterly* (TEHCQ), Vol. 10 No. 2 (October 1958), pp. 39–41; (B) "Reminiscences of the Great Valley" by Frances Ligget, TEHCQ, Vol. 25 No. 4 (October 1987), pp. 135–140; (C) "Discovered – The Deep Country" by Frances H. Ligget, TEHCQ, Vol. 31 No. 1 (January 1993), pp. 27–36 (reprinted from her 1965 *Reminiscences*).
4. "A Brief Look at the History of Waynesborough and the Recent Reconstruction of Its Barn," by Stephen Dittmann, *History Quarterly*, Vol. 39 No. 2, (April 2001), pp. 63–68. A plaque at the golf club lists the twelve founders.
5. Archival material in the TEHS archives includes obituaries of both Liggets, newspaper clippings on Frances Ligget's *Reminiscences*, and a number of photographs in the TEHS Image Collection, some of which are included in this article.
6. "In Memoriam, Frances Hammond Ligget," *History Quarterly*, Vol 31. No. 1, (Jan 1993), p. 37.
7. Assisted by Washington Memorial Chapel cemetery manager Rodney Platt, the author reviewed records and correspondence concerning the Ligget plot, purchased in 1938 when their daughter Frances died. The three gravestones are located in the Anthony Wayne section, Family Plot 160. Mr. Ligget has an Army medallion in front of his grave; Mrs. Ligget has a DAR insignia on her gravestone.

Cleaning Up Howellville

The "Howellville Clean-up" was a community-based clean-up of a low-income neighborhood in Howellville, near what is today the intersection of Bear Hill Road (Route 252) and Howellville Road. The following excerpt from "Howellville" by Sue Andrews (*Tredyffrin Easttown History Club Quarterly* Vol. 39 No. 3 July 2002 pp. 75–103) describes the community's origins:

Howellville, one of Tredyffrin's earliest villages, grew in an area convenient to the farms of the Great Valley. A tavern was often the start of a town, and the first one here was built about 1712. By the early 1700s, sawmills and gristmills had appeared. Nearest to the center of town was the sawmill on Crabby Creek. Several of the early farms had their own limestone kilns. The first school opened about 1720.

The Italian-American community there in the early 1930s was particularly affected by the decline in the nearby limestone quarry business, and the area had been neglected for years. Under the supervision of Mrs. Ligget and other Farm and Garden Assn. volunteers, and with the active participation of many local children, the clean-up went forward in several pushes in the mid-1930s. Trucks loaned from a nearby quarry were put into use. Today, the Howellville barber shop is a visual reminder of a once thriving small community, and up the hill is the Pentecostal Mission which is still active.



Images of the 1934 Howellville clean up project from Frances Ligget's *Reminiscences* (TEHS Image Collection identifiers HOW4–7). Courtesy of the TEHS Archive.

