



## A Note from the President:

### *Greetings to all our members and friends*

As the holiday season approaches, I would like to wish everyone a Happy Holiday; whether you celebrate Christmas, Hannukah, Kwanzaa, or Winter Solstice – it is a season of giving and family. Celebrate like never before!

And let's not forget our Society ... It's the time to celebrate friendship and history ... and what not a better place to celebrate than at the historic home of **Russ and Jean Bellavance**.

Join us for our Annual Holiday Dinner Party on Monday, December 11 at 6:00 p.m. We'd love to see everyone in attendance to share in the fine food and beverage, delightful music, and festive decorations of the season. Our theme this year is "Christmas All Through the House" (even the mice are joining in!) and will feature fragrant traditional greens and cheerful decorations.

The Society will provide the main course of roasted turkey and baked ham. You provide the appetizers, side dishes and desserts. We are asking for a \$5.00 donation to cover the costs of the entrees.

You may or may not know, the Russo Family lost our beloved mother and grandmother on November 18, 2006, **Jennie Russo**. She was 104 years old and had more than a lifetime with us but we miss her dearly. I would like to thank all of our members and friends who expressed their condolences to my family.

We really appreciate your thoughts and prayers.

As the year draws to a close, we can reflect back on our successes and look with hope for the future. We are about to embark on many new projects this year – including a new website, new letterhead, grant writing, as well as a new roof and chimney and much needed basement repairs. Get on board! Things are quickly changing. We're moving forward. Join in the fun!

*Peace and Joy,*  
*Frank J. Russo, Jr.*  
*President*



**December Meeting**

***Holiday Dinner Social***

**Monday,  
December 11, 2006  
6:00 PM**

at the historic  
Bellavance Home



## Donations of Greens Needed...

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(and this time it's not money!)

On Sunday, December 10<sup>th</sup>, we will be assembling at the Bellavance Home to decorate for our Holiday Dinner Party. *We need your help!* If you can volunteer an hour or two to help out, come and meet at the Bellavances at 1:00 p.m.

We are in need of fresh cut greens, pine, fir, boxwood, holly or any other greenery. Please leave your donation on the Bellavances' back porch before 1:00 p.m.

## 2006-2007 Membership Booklets Have Been Sent...

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— If you haven't received yours, please contact **Mary Lou McFarland**, *Membership Chairman*, at 215-542-9381.

**CHANGE to your Membership Booklet**  
**Emmy Simon's** new e-mail address is:  
<mailto:emmys1@verizon.net>

## WVHS Receives State Grant...

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Thanks to our new Director and Chairman of the 1895 Schoolhouse Committee, **John Simon**, we have been awarded a PA State grant for \$10,000. This award will be used to complete some major work at the 1895 Schoolhouse. We applied for \$70,000 to complete many projects including a new roof, relining the chimney and restoring the basement walls. We are please to receive this grant; but John has hopes of finding additional monies to complete these projects.

John works very hard for our society and has great hopes for our future. John will be chairing an 1895 Schoolhouse Committee in 2007 to write a master plan for our headquarters building.

## Group to Meet at the Schoolhouse

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The **English Ceramics Study Group of Philadelphia** (a group which studies English china wares of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries) will hold their December 10<sup>th</sup> meeting at the 1895 Schoolhouse.

This group has asked for the use of our building for some of their upcoming meetings. We hope they find our building to be a viable venue for their upcoming meetings.

## Textile Collection Donated to the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society

Our Society received a donation of 19<sup>th</sup> Century clothing and textiles from the family of Sandra Glendinning of Sheaff Lane, Fort Washington. The textiles including girl's dresses from the 1890's, a 19<sup>th</sup> Century cashmere paisley shawl, two Chinese silk piano shawls, 19<sup>th</sup> Century shoes, fans, hat plumes and woman's spats. We are very please to accept these donations for our museum collection. Our curator, Emmy Simon will catalog these items and store them in acid free boxes.

## Christmas Collectibles Belsnickels

— Submitted by *Emmy Simon*

The Belsnickel was a figure in German folklore that accompanied Saint Nicholas or the Christ Child in distributing gifts to children. In some legends he is the benevolent St. Nicholas himself. Aside from being a gift bearer, he was also feared because he knew all who sinned.

The term "Belsnickel" originated from "Pelz Nichol" which, when translated literally means "Nicholas dress in fur." The term gradually reduced to "Belsnickel" when the northern Germans settled in Pennsylvania. Historical information on St. Nicholas is limited, but goes back to the fourth century in Myra (Turkey). He was exiled and imprisoned during the persecution of Christians by Emperor Diocletian and later released during the reign of Constantine the Great. By 1200, St. Nicholas became the patron saint of Greece, Russia, Sicily and Germany and the patron saint of merchants, bakers, and sailors and best known as the patron saint of children.

At one time he was living in the ancient city of Patras in Asia Minor, performing benevolent deeds. He befriended three sisters whose family had fallen into poverty. According to one account, Nicholas threw three coins into a window. The coins fell into one of the sister's stocking, and this,



reportedly is the origin of the custom of hanging stockings.

In Germany, during the Protestant Reformation, Nicholas was transformed to a more secular "Kris Kringle". In Holland, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, St. Nicholas turned into "Sinticklass", the "Santa Klass". In early 19<sup>th</sup> century America, "Santa Claus" emerged, influenced by the political cartoonist, Thomas Nast with his magazine illustrations of Santa, a white bearded, fur trimmed old man carrying a brown sack. Louis Prang, chromolithographer of the early 1900's introduced Christmas cards to America and added the belt, boots, cap, and bright red cloth to Santa Claus.

In 1835, the Belsnickel appeared in Sonneberg, Germany, the doll capital of the world, as a molded figure, made of clay and kaolin. Goose feather branches dyed green with a

red berry on top were put into the arms of these figures. A piece of thin cardboard was often glued to the bottom of these hollow pieces. Some were made into candy containers that separated at the waist, providing a receptacle to hold candy for the children. They came in various colors such as red and white, and less often in green, yellow, lavender, pale pink and blue.

In 1870, in the U.S., The Butler Brothers Co., imported Belsnickels ranging from 6-17 inches. In the 1920's, Sears Roebuck imported the later, thinner walled Belsnickels.

Because of the popularity of Belsnickels among Christmas collectors, the craftsmen in Germany have revived the industry by producing them from the old molds and, again, exporting them to this country.



## Wissahickon Valley Historical Society Calendar of Events ~ *December 2006 and upcoming events!*

- Mon., Dec. 11 ..... **Members' Holiday Social** ..... **6:00 PM**  
*At the Bellavance home, Ambler*
- Mon., Jan. 8 ..... **General Business Meeting** ..... **7:30 PM**  
*"History of the Moravians in Europe & America"*
- Mon., Jan. 22 ..... *Board Meeting* ..... *7:00 PM*
- Mon., Feb. 12 ..... **General Business Meeting** ..... **7:30 PM**  
*"History of Zion Baptist Church, Ambler"*

*The Wissahickon Valley Historical Society Newsletter is published once a month during the membership season.  
General Membership Meetings are held the 2<sup>nd</sup> Monday of each month, and are open to the public.*

**Wissahickon Valley Historical Society • 799 Skippack Pike, Blue Bell, PA 19422 • 215.646.6541**

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**Wissahickon Valley Historical Society**  
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***December 2006 Newsletter***