

Andrew A. Leiser, Sr. and Pieces of His Mail

by

Roger Curran

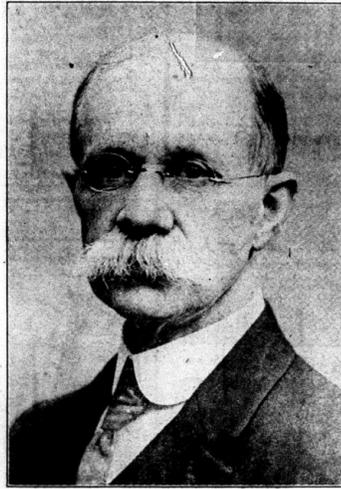
Before the telephone became a staple of everyday existence, the written word, transported through the mails, was the essential vehicle of communication among parties that were not in face-to-face contact. Old personal and business letters were frequently kept for years by the recipients and they have provided to successive generations valuable historical information about the lives and times of the myriad authors.

About 15 years ago I acquired a box of old envelopes addressed to Lewisburg resident Andrew Leiser. I'm a stamp collector and came to realize that these envelopes were part, probably the remnants, of a larger correspondence file that had been picked through for saleable stamps and postal markings. From the contents of the box and what I have noticed elsewhere, the correspondence appears to run from the 1880s to the early 1930s. It is addressed to Mr. Leiser, or partnerships to which he belonged, and mailed primarily from central Pennsylvania towns but also from elsewhere such as Philadelphia and other states. The headline for his obituary appearing in the April 9, 1931 edition of the *The Lewisburg Journal* stated that Mr. Leiser was “. . . One of the Most Eminent Counselors at Law in Central Penna. . . .”

Who was Andrew Leiser?

Andrew Albright Leiser, Sr. was born in Lewisburg on July 17, 1850. He graduated first in the University at Lewisburg class of 1869 and gave the valedictory address at commencement. He was a teacher for a brief time and then began study to enter the legal profession. After “reading” law in Lewisburg with G.F. Miller for the prescribed period and attending lectures at the law department of the University of Pennsylvania, he was admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar in 1874. In 1876 he was appointed to fill an unexpired term as

Union County District Attorney and then elected to a full term. In 1881 he formed a partnership with the Hon. Charles S. Wolfe and James Dale Wilson.



Andrew Albert Leiser, Sr.ⁱ

Wilson moved to Philadelphia in 1881 and the firm, then known as Wolfe and Leiser, continued until the death of Mr. Wolfe in 1891. Mr. Leiser thereupon entered into a successful solo practice, to be joined later by his son, which included numerous appearances before state and federal courts. He was a charter member of the Pennsylvania Bar Association and served for many years on the examining committee. Both the Pennsylvania and Reading railroads appointed Mr. Leiser their legal representative for Union County.

In 1877 Mr. Leiser married Susan Breckenstein and the marriage produced two children: Andrew Leiser, Jr., a member of Bucknell's class of 1898 and Marie Leiser, a member of Bucknell Institute's class of 1899. Marie subsequently married attorney Roy G. Bostwick of Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, who later became chairman of Bucknell's Board of Trustees.

While in college, Mr. Leiser joined Phi Kappa Psi and continued a close association with the social fraternity long after graduation. In a November 2002 article in *Bucknell World* entitled "The Names Behind the Buildings," Doug McMinn stated the following:

"Mr. Leiser was a dedicated member of Phi Kappa Psi, serving it as national president. On his death in 1931, *The Bucknellian* described his importance to the fraternity movement at Bucknell: 'He was

chiefly instrumental in securing the removal of the ironclad pledge which was imposed on the Greek letter societies by President Loomis and made any student ineligible for graduation who was a member of such an organization.”

The northern edge of Bucknell’s campus merges with a residential section of town along St. George St. from South 4th to South 7th Sts. Over the years the University has acquired some of the houses in this section of St. George and they are used as centers for students with specific common interests. One such house was the home of Mr. Leiser, purchased by Bucknell in 1958 and now known as Leiser House. It is located across the street from Larison Hall and currently serves as a gathering place for International students. Mr. Leiser died in this house and practiced law until shortly before his death.



“Leiser House,” 522 St. George St., Lewisburg

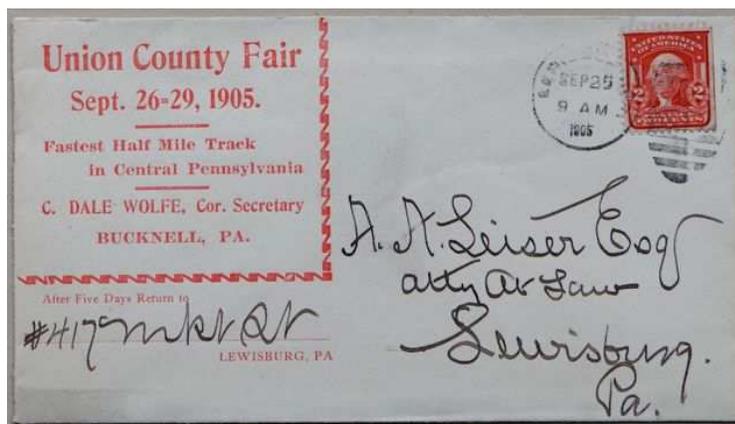
Envelopes from the Box

Several of the envelopes that were in the above-mentioned box are illustrated below. Bucknell had its own post office from 1898 to 1912. The first envelope was postmarked at Bucknell on December 13, 1900 and is shown with a portion of post card (not addressed to Mr. Leiser) where the Bucknell postmark was struck more clearly.



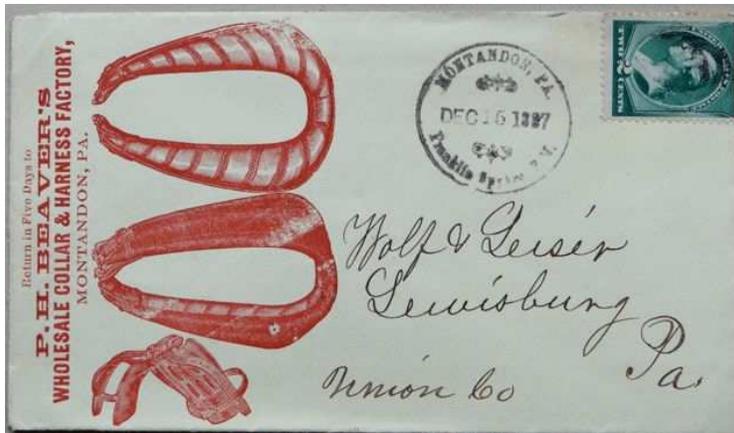
Two postmarks from the “Bucknell” post office

The second envelope is postmarked Lewisburg, September 25, 1905 and presents advertising for the 1905 Union County Fair with return address on Market St., Lewisburg. It is curious that the sender, a Mr. Wolfe, is listed at Bucknell, Pennsylvania. Perhaps Wolfe worked for Bucknell and wrote County Fair correspondence on campus.



Advertising for Union County Fair, 1905

The third envelope boldly advertises the wares of a Montandon factory. It was posted at Montandon on December 15, 1887 and at the bottom of the fancy postmark appears the name “Franklin Spyker, P.M.” Spyker served as Montandon’s postmaster from September 1885 to August 1889.



Fancy postmark that includes postmaster's name

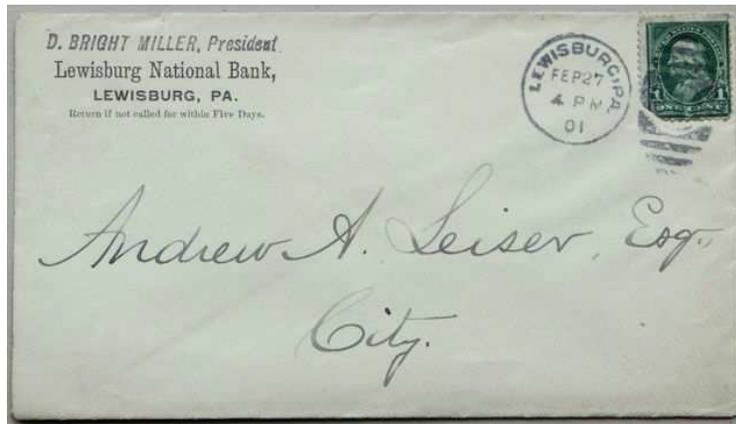
The Kelly Cross Roads post office operated from 1864 to 1905. Note the use of an actual cross in the postmark on the fourth envelope. This envelope was mailed June 4, 1890 and the enclosed letter provides an explanation as to why the sender, A.A. Diffendorfer, would not accept, and thus not pay for, a shipment of 50 crates of oranges. He had asked that they be shipped by way of the Pennsylvania RR “via fast freight” and be so marked. Apparently the crates wound up in West Milton and were “dragged around the road” before delivery resulting in oranges that were “all wet and half of them rotten.”



Kelly Cross Roads postmark abbreviating “Crossroads” to “+” at top of postmark

There was a practice seen with some frequency in the 19th century of abbreviating the address to “City” on mail when the addressee was a local resident served by the same post office as the sender. It would, of course, have

started in communities much larger than Lewisburg but the practice was used in a wide range of towns as well as cities. The word certainly didn't technically fit in the case of the fifth envelope, but its intended meaning would have been crystal clear.



Lewisburg address abbreviated to "City"

The postmark on the sixth envelope has the initials "R.P.O." at the bottom that stand for Railway Post Office. The 67-mile route for this RPO ran on the Pennsylvania RR from Montandon to Bellefonte. Clerks in RPO mail cars sorted mail on moving trains to speed delivery. They received mail from, and delivered



Envelope postmarked by Montandon and Bellefonte Railway Post Office mail to, post offices along the route. Mail received directly from the public rather than from a post office was postmarked with special handstamps that identified the RPO. Both Laurelton and Lewisburg were served by the Montandon to Bellefonte RPO which operated from 1886 to 1912.

The Lewisburg post office was once spelled “Lewisburgh.” This was true of many other towns with “burgh” in the name. In the early 1890s, the Federal government undertook a reform of the nomenclature for “geographic names.” General guidelines were established for naming post offices. The following are examples:

- avoid the possessive forms of names
- drop the final “h” in the termination “burgh”
- abbreviate “borough” to “boro”
- spell “center” as here given (“centre had been popular)
- simplify names consisting of more than one word by their combination into one word
- drop the words “city” and “town” as parts of names



Two “Lewisburgh” postmarks

The new guidelines caused many changes in post office names during the 1893-95 period. A few of the changes in our region during this time were :Mifflinburgh and Vicksburgh as well as Lewisburg losing the “h”, Selin’s Grove becoming Selinsgrove, Kelly Cross Roads becoming Kelly Crossroads, Hummel’s Wharf becoming Hummels Wharf and Cedar Run (Lycoming Co.) becoming Cedarrun. Some post offices pursued efforts to regain the former spelling. Pittsburgh and Centre Hall are notable examples, achieving success in 1911 and 1925 respectively. The last two envelopes bear “Lewisburgh” postmarks. The one on the left is not from the Leiser correspondence but shows use of an attractive blue postmarking ink. The envelope on the right was sent to Allenwood where it was unclaimed and subsequently returned to the sender.

Perspectives from these Old Letters

What insights do old letters offer? Correspondence from the 19th century, for example, reveals the challenges of living before the era of modern medicine, often devoting much attention to health and illness. They paint vivid pictures of life before today's modern conveniences. Some involve firsthand accounts of significant events of local or even broader historical interest and some provide reflections on social issues of the day. In short, of course, they document the human experience in the words of those who were living it.

Sources of Further Information

Several references used for this article are identified herewith. The book, *Commemorative Biographical Record of Central Pennsylvania* published in 1898 by J.H. Beers & Co., Chicago. The U.S. Postal Service website provides information on past postmasters. (A Google search of "USPS postmaster finder" will lead one to the appropriate section of the website.) *Pennsylvania Postal History* by Kay and Smith, published in 1976 by Quarterman Publications, Inc., Lawrence, MA, provides a comprehensive list of Pennsylvania post offices with opening dates, closing dates (if applicable), first postmasters, etc. with some discussion in the introduction about the spelling of post office names. *The U.S. Railway Post Office Postmark Catalog*, published in 1995 by the Mobile Post Office Society, is the leading reference on "R.P.O." markings.

ⁱ Photo from The Lewisburg Journal, April 9, 1931.