



# Archives

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WILKINSBURG HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER  
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## March is Women's History Month - Honoring the legacy of Teresa James



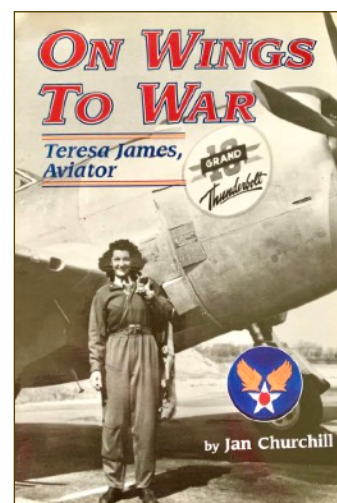
Teresa James began her flying career in Wilkinsburg and rose to the rank of Major in the U.S. Air Force Reserves



In May, 1938 aviator Teresa James was sworn in by the U.S. Postal Service to transport airmail from Wilkinsburg.

**Teresa James** grew up in Penn Township near Wilkinsburg and attended Wilkinsburg High School. She was one of six children and worked as a floral designer in the family business, **James Flower Shoppe**. Teresa watched her brother fly from the Wilkinsburg Airport but was afraid of flying after he was injured in a plane wreck. However, the lure of the sky was very tempting. After taking flying lessons Teresa soloed in September, 1933 at the age of 19, and received Private License #31249 when she was just 20.

During World War II Teresa James was a member of the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) where she was one of the first women pilots to ferry military aircraft from plane factories to various airfields. She eventually was certified by the Air Force to fly twenty different types of planes including Thunderbolt P-47s, 2,800 HP fighter-bombers. Teresa James was a role model for women and a pioneer in women's aviation. She was born January 27, 1914 and died July 26, 2008.



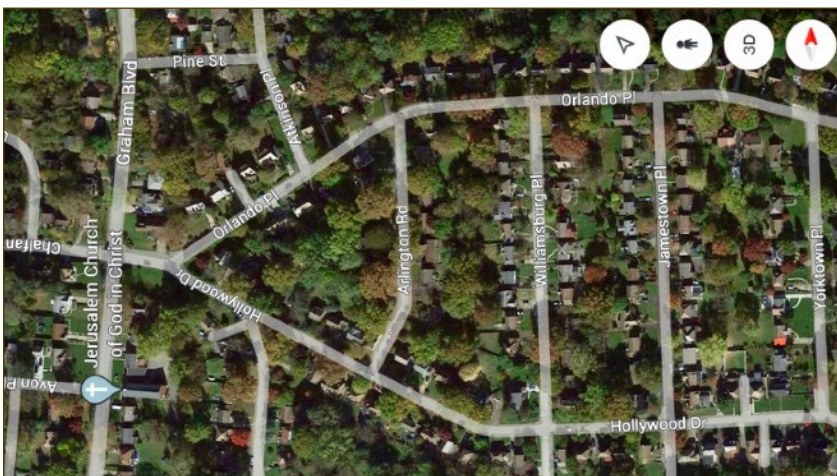
*On Wings to War* is Teresa James biography, written by Jan Churchill in 1992. It is available at the Wilkinsburg Public Library.



The Wilkinsburg Airport was located on property in the Blackridge section of Wilkinsburg. There was just one hangar as viewed from Graham Blvd. The airport existed from 1930 to 1938. It was here that nineteen year old Teresa James became impassioned with flying, learned stunts and earned money entertaining the large crowds with her daredevil spins, rolls, loops and dips.



This 1938 image shows the 51 acre airport area just after developers bought the property for home sites. The grassy paths were paved to become roads known today as Orlando Pl, Collins Rd., Arlington Rd., Hollywood Dr, (Williamsburg, Jamestown and Yorktown Pl. were part of Penn Hills.) Yorktown was the flattest path and was the landing strip for the planes. The hangar is the white rectangular structure along Graham Blvd on the far left of this image.



This Google map view shows the area in 2022. During the Wilkinsburg Airport years (1930s) the 1500 foot landing strip was a grassy strip on Yorktown Place. Thousands of spectators came to sit on the rolling hills to watch the Air Shows and stunt pilot exhibitions of Teresa James. The hangar was located just north of the Jerusalem Church of God in Christ.

## Making Compromises for the Reuse of Religious Properties - by A. Robert Jaeger

When the Gothic Revival brownstone edifice of the Church of the New Jerusalem (Swedenborgian) was put up for sale by its congregation, many of us in downtown Philadelphia held our breath, fearing the worst. The preservation community, of course, was concerned over the possible loss of one of the neighborhood's most handsome and historic Victorian churches. The First Unitarian Church next door wondered if it might have to follow the same course before long, due to its dwindling membership and growing repair problems. The residents of Center City worried that one more low-scale building, with its rare piece of garden and open space, would fall prey to the developers who were building 60 and 70 story towers only a block away.

Three years later, I'm happy to report, the dust has settled, and the formerly empty sanctuary and parish house have been converted into offices for a consortium of hospital. Thanks to a covenant put in place by the Preservation Fund of Pennsylvania, the exterior has been largely preserved, and every effort has been made to retain many of the interior features. The developer, the tenant, the preservation community and the neighborhood have all dubbed it a "true success story."

In the midst of this rising swell of good feeling, it would be wise to step back and look at the compromises that were made to save the church, as well as the larger conundrum that we will increasingly face with buildings like it all across the nation. In the case of the Church of the New Jerusalem, for example, three floors of offices were inserted into the sanctuary to make the project "work." As a result we have lost the better part of a marvelous, fully-intact Victorian church interior, its large open space once lavishly finished with carved cherry wood, unbroken expanses of decorative stained glass, and rows of brass light standards. Most of us would intuitively sense that the partial preservation of beautiful old buildings like this one, even if only the exterior remains, is better than demolition or long-term neglect. And so we are willing to make compromises for the conversion of interior spaces for new uses. But where do we draw the line?

The first consideration, of course, is the new function or purpose considered for the place. The offices being inserted into the Swedenborgian church would be considered fairly inoffensive by most communities. However, some sects or congregations are unwilling to consider the reuse of a worship place under any circumstances, and therefore a certain number of historic religious buildings are routinely demolished without discussion. More typically, both the congregation vacating the space as well as the surrounding community may feel that certain incompatible uses such as taverns or dance halls should be prevented. A congregation can place restrictive covenants on its property to prevent undesirable new uses, but often this kind of protection is overlooked. A congregation can, therefore, be reduced to watching helplessly as its former building is converted to some offensive new use. Imagine the horror of some when the Limelight disco became the owner of the former Church of the Holy Communion in New York City!

There is a second consideration, too: Assuming that the new use or function is acceptable, how much physical alteration should be allowed, either by the seller or by a landmarks commission? After all, when old buildings are converted to new uses, some amount of demolition or destruction is unavoidable. A walk by the building's exterior may lead someone to think it is still intact, but a look inside will usually reveal that many individual features have been sacrificed. The pews are usually the first to go, of course, along with other fixed furnishings such as pulpits, choir stalls, lecterns, etc. The need for stronger lighting may



require the removal of historic fixtures, the replacement of stained glass windows with transparent glass, and the installation of skylights in the roof. The most radical changes occur when the size and character of the entire space is reduced and compromised, usually due to the insertion of new floors and wall partitions.

Clergy, laypeople, preservation professionals and community leaders are facing these hard choices more and more often every year. All of us need to reexamine the tools we have to encourage wise and effective conversions of historic religious spaces to new uses. One such tool is the investment tax credit or ITC. This federal tax incentive has made it easier for some developers to justify the expense associated with the conversion of churches or synagogues into offices or apartments, and yet... it is not enough. In some cases, a proposed reuse may not meet the standards that would qualify it for the credit, and an empty building may move inexorably to its appointment with the wrecking ball.

We need other tools and ideas to keep redundant or excess religious buildings a vital part of our communities. Probably the best guide available is a book called *Churches: A Question of Conversion* by Ken Powell and Celia De La Hay. If you are concerned about the future of religious buildings, buy a copy. And let us know of your successes in reusing historic churches or synagogues in your own community.

Wilkesburg has been known as the City of Churches for most of the past century. This designation is due to the great number of religious denominations who have worship spaces in the Borough. The number of mainstream denominations has lessened but more non-denominational congregations have started. Long-time member of the Wilkesburg Historical Society **Ken Chute** conducted extensive research on the history of more than 40 churches who have been in the Borough. Some are now vacant, but the site is a fascinating glimpse of the worship places, past and present in Wilkesburg.

[wilkesburgsacredspaces.com](http://wilkesburgsacredspaces.com)

Preservation of churches can involve newer techniques including videography. One project of the **Religious Architectural Heritage Committee of Preservation Pittsburgh** is the Wilkesburg Sacred Spaces Virtual Tour. This involved choosing six diverse churches in Wilkesburg, then conducting interviews to gain knowledge and personal insight from those who were interviewed.

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwo7Yp5d2geFPLww\\_Hlf5-A/Fid](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwo7Yp5d2geFPLww_Hlf5-A/Fid)

Additional videos of historic religious spaces in Wilkesburg will be produced in 2023. The church members and their spiritual leaders will have the opportunity to share their faith and dreams, their building's history, the uniqueness of their worship space and any plans or problems that they wish to present. The Religious Architectural Heritage Committee of Preservation Pittsburgh is looking forward to scheduling these additional videos.

Another Sacred Space event is in the planning stage for late summer/early fall 2023. The former Mulberry Presbyterian Church (South Ave. at Mulberry St) is becoming Center for Civic Arts and will host a multi-church event. More details will be posted as they develop. **Center for Civic Arts** is an excellent example of reusing a historic church in a new way.

## Scrapbook of Wilkinsburg memorabilia donated to the Wilkinsburg Historical Society

Recently a long time member Lois Geschwindt Schroeder gifted her father's scrapbook to the Society. David Geschwindt created the scrapbook when he was Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce of Wilkinsburg. At that time he was also the Chairman of the 50th anniversary of the Borough of Wilkinsburg. Many of the items will be of interest to Archives readers and will be included in future issues.

David Geschwindt was a family man whose family included wife Evelyn and daughters Dorothy and Lois. He was employed for thirty years at Felger Tailoring at 923 Wood Street in Wilkinsburg. David became involved in every effort for the betterment of Wilkinsburg and it's people. He was affectionately known as "Mr. Wilkinsburg." Unfortunately, David Geschwindt died suddenly in September 1942. Newspapers stated that his death "left the community in a deep shroud of mourning and the business life of the community in a pall of gloom."

Another article declared, "Mr. Geschwindt possessed, in goodly measure, that indescribable thing men call charm, also that rarer quality of mind which kept him from knowing it. In spite of his real modesty, his attractive personality drew men to him and he became a leader in every circle which claimed his interest or challenged his attention. His vision, enthusiasm and zeal without measure, made a substantial contribution to the community, and to his own Church, he was a vital factor among many groups." He left quite a legacy and heritage.



**TAILORED CLOTHES**

WE MAKE YOU a suit to fit your figure. We do not attempt to fit your figure to a suit.

That is one BIG difference between our clothes and the ready made product.

**FELGER**

SUITS—\$30 UP

Men's Tailoring  
923 WOOD STREET  
PE 1495  
WILKINSBURG, PA.

A SONG FOR  
WILKINSBURG'S JUBILEE, 1937

☆☆☆

(Tune, "Maryland, My Maryland")  
By MADGE MORGAN FRANCE  
913 Rebecca Street, Wilkinsburg

☆☆☆

Let's sing a song for Wilkinsburg,  
Where hearts are kind and friends are true!  
We cherish all the old that's good,  
And welcome all the good that's new.  
For fifty years we've lived in peace,  
And watched our little village grow,  
Till thirty thousand happy souls  
Within its borders come and go!

☆☆☆

When war's dark cloud hung o'er the land,  
The cry "To arms!" rang far and near,—  
And all our boys ran swift to fight,  
Though leaving home and all that's dear.  
So let's be proud of Wilkinsburg,  
And keep her ever staunch and true,—  
Still cherishing the old that's good,  
And welcoming the good that's new!



This item is from the Geschwindt scrapbook, a window placard for those who donated to the 50th anniversary celebration.

The 1787 date is not accurate. Instead it is the era when the Pennsylvania land office sold a 266 acre tract to Andrew Levy in 1769, who then sold it in 1788 to William Thompson, who then sold it to Dunning McNair. McNair was a close friend of John Wilkins, Jr. and named the area Wilkinsburg in honor of his friend.

October 5, 1887 is the date that Wilkinsburg actually became incorporated as a Borough. The week of October 3-9, 1937 is the seven day celebration of fifty years of Wilkinsburg's growth as a Borough. Note that at the time Wilkinsburg was the largest Borough in PA.



President's Day was February 20, 2023 and Borough offices were closed in observance of the holiday.

It was a good day to have a brief Presidential conference at the Lincoln plaza, a meeting of the minds.

Borough employee **Kevin Santillo** donned his Lincoln clothing and obliged with a photo shoot.

Plans are still in place for lighting at the plaza. When the sun goes down, the statue and three benches are in darkness. Funds have been collected towards solar powered lighting to enhance the area and make it more beautiful and safer for visitors/pedestrians. Anyone who wishes to contribute to the purchase of industrial quality solar lighting for the plaza can make a check to the **Wilkinsburg Historical Society**, and memo it "Lights for Lincoln." A donation in any amount is gratefully accepted.

A final planned item for the Lincoln plaza is a bronze plaque, matching in size and style the one which shows the name of the statue, "**Forever Free**" along with the date of the statue installation and the sculptor, **Susan Wagner**. Many people have questioned why Wilkinsburg has a Lincoln statue since the man never actually visited our Borough. The answer is that Wilkinsburg was on the earliest alignment in 1913 of the Lincoln Highway, the country's first practical coast-to-coast highway. Much of the highway in Pennsylvania became Route 30. Lincoln's statue in Wilkinsburg overlooks the Lincoln highway, just as the original copper statue did. Wording has not been determined yet, and funds are not sufficient at this time.





Don't miss out on **The Wilkinsburg Sun**, a free monthly community newsletter published by the volunteer Wilkinsburg Community Newsletter Board, with the support of the Wilkinsburg Borough, the Wilkinsburg School District, the Wilkinsburg Chamber of Commerce and the Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation.

The Sun accepts submitted articles provided they are related to Wilkinsburg and are civic-minded.

<https://wilkinsburgsun.wordpress.com>

Sign up to receive The Sun by email at:

<http://eepurl.com/v0iBP> and friend The Sun on Facebook.

Wilkinsburg Historical Society has a website, to share more information about the history of Wilkinsburg. [wilkinsburghistory.wordpress.com](http://wilkinsburghistory.wordpress.com)

Mailing address: **Wilkinsburg Historical Society, P.O. Box 17252, Pittsburgh, PA 15235**

The "Archives" Historical Society newsletter is published monthly, March through November.

We do not usually publish the Archives during the three Winter months of December, January and February.

Wilkinsburg Historical Society yearly dues for the Wilkinsburg Historical Society are:

\$20.00 INDIVIDUAL Member, \$35.00 FAMILY Membership

\$10.00 STUDENT or ASSOCIATE Members Please keep your membership dues up to date.

Contributions are needed for "Lights for Lincoln", to get improved lighting for the Lincoln Plaza area. Abraham Lincoln stands in the dark after sun-down. Your donation can help us illuminate this outstanding area overlooking the Lincoln Highway.

### Wilkinsburg Historical Society - Membership application Help promote the valuable history of Wilkinsburg.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Cell Phone \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address \_\_\_\_\_

( ) \$20 Individual membership

( ) \$35 Family membership

( ) \$10 Student or associate membership

( ) \$\_\_\_\_\_ Additional donation

Please make check payable to: **Wilkinsburg Historical Society**

**PO Box 17252, Pittsburgh, PA 15235**

Anytime is a good time to pay your dues for the Wilkinsburg Historical Society. We have many preservation projects going on, and providing displays for Wilkinsburg events. Many thanks to those of you who have already sent in your membership dues. Please use the address on the form, our PO box.