



Mount Gretna's  
Spirit Lives On

125 Years of Pennsylvania  
Chautauqua and Campmeeting

Bridget McQuate

Mount Gretna in Lebanon County is an enduring gem of a historic village that offers visitors a rare opportunity to experience an unembellished, Victorian-era lifestyle that shuffles on in similar fashion today. Cloistered within a 16-mile slice of forested rocky hills surrounded by a patchwork expanse of farmland between Lancaster and Hershey, Mount Gretna came to life in 1892 as a village (now officially a borough). That's when local wealthy iron baron Robert H. Coleman (1856–1930) invited both the Pennsylvania Chautauqua and the United Brethren Campmeeting retreat to make a permanent home here. The institutions are still going strong, and both will be celebrating their 125th anniversaries this year.

Today's Mount Gretna is a mellow, old-fashioned summer vacation spot ideally located near Hersheypark, Cornwall Iron Furnace historic site, the Pennsylvania Renaissance Faire and the Wolf Sanctuary of PA, not to mention Amish Country attractions 40 minutes away. About 1,500 people live here year-round. Because I grew

**Above, Crowds of people wait to board the train at Mount Gretna Station after spending a lively day at the amusement park in its early days.**

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up nearby, I often went to the Victorian-era Mount Gretna Lake & Beach with my teenage friends to goof off on the water trapeze, jump off the high dive, eat hamburgers and fries at the snack shop, and later grab ice cream at the Jigger Shop across the road. When I came back with my family 30 years later, my original impression remained: Mount Gretna is a unique and timeless place, if not a bit mysterious. I didn't fully understand the Chautauqua element and had even less knowledge of the Campmeeting and Tabernacle ensconced even deeper in the forest, where seemingly mystical, hidden activities take place.

To demystify Mount Gretna and understand its historical evolution, I was recently given an insider's tour with Larry Bowman, a year-round resident and a director on the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society board. The tour started at the cottage that serves as the historical society's home, and it continued in a car through the forested village's steep, serpentine streets lined with colorful Victorian cottages, complete with obligatory front porches. To unravel the Mount Gretna story, let's start with what's still here: Chautauqua and Campmeeting.

## Pennsylvania Chautauqua

Mount Gretna was identified as a good place to set up a Chautauqua community in 1892 when it was already a stop along the Cornwall & Lebanon Railroad line, popular for its lovely picnic grove and playground, amusement park, and swimming lake. To



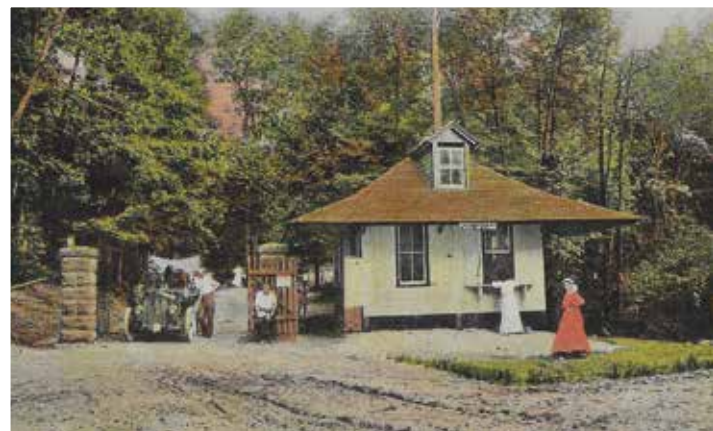
The Pennsylvania Chautauqua, founded in Mount Gretna in 1892, offered many educational programs in crafts, literature, botany and more.

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understand Chautauqua, cast your mind back to 1874, before television, radio, TED Talks, social media and smart phones. To feed people's appetite for education and enlightenment, a Methodist minister started the first Chautauqua Institution on the shores of Chautauqua Lake in New York to deliver lectures on science, philosophy, travel, literature, religion and politics, along with art exhibits and performances of comedy, music, dancing and theater. Chautauqua villages sprang up around the country, and a traveling circuit took the movement on the road, setting up in large, circuslike tents to entertain and educate the masses. At the peak of the

movement in the 1920s, these circuit Chautauquas were attended by 45 million people in more than 10,000 communities across the country.

Hugely popular on Chautauqua stages were lectures on topics of reform, morality and inspiration. The politician William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925) delivered fiery speeches on temperance and self-determination. Temple University founder Russell Conwell (1843–1925) presented to 5,000 Chautauqua audiences the impassioned "Acres of Diamonds" speech, which



Above, The original Mount Gretna Post Office, pictured here c. 1910, sat next to the Chautauqua main entrance gates.

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Left, Park visitors rent canoes and swim in Lake Conewago as the narrow-gauge train passes by on its route around the lake.

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included this famous line: “Get rich young man, for money is power, and power ought to be in the hands of good people. I say you have no right to be poor.” Maud Ballington Booth (1865-1948) engaged audiences with dramatic storytelling that conveyed mostly moral messages.

Out of more than 200 original Chautauqua communities, Mount Gretna is one of only 12 that still carries on today, with its steady stream of spring and summer plays, lectures, concerts, art festivals and performances, which mostly appear on the stage of the open-air Gretna Theater. Other visible signs of Chautauqua life in Mount Gretna are centered around the Jigger Shop, Hall of Philosophy, Gretna Emporium, U.S. Post Office and the whimsical cottages perched on the hill above the village.

## Campmeeting

Now a spiritual center for Methodists, Campmeeting is separated from the Pennsylvania Chautauqua by Pinch Road, which climbs steeply up to the peak called Governor Dick. In 1892 Coleman invited



Original cottages in Mount Gretna’s Campmeeting neighborhood look today much like they did in 1892, when most of them were built.

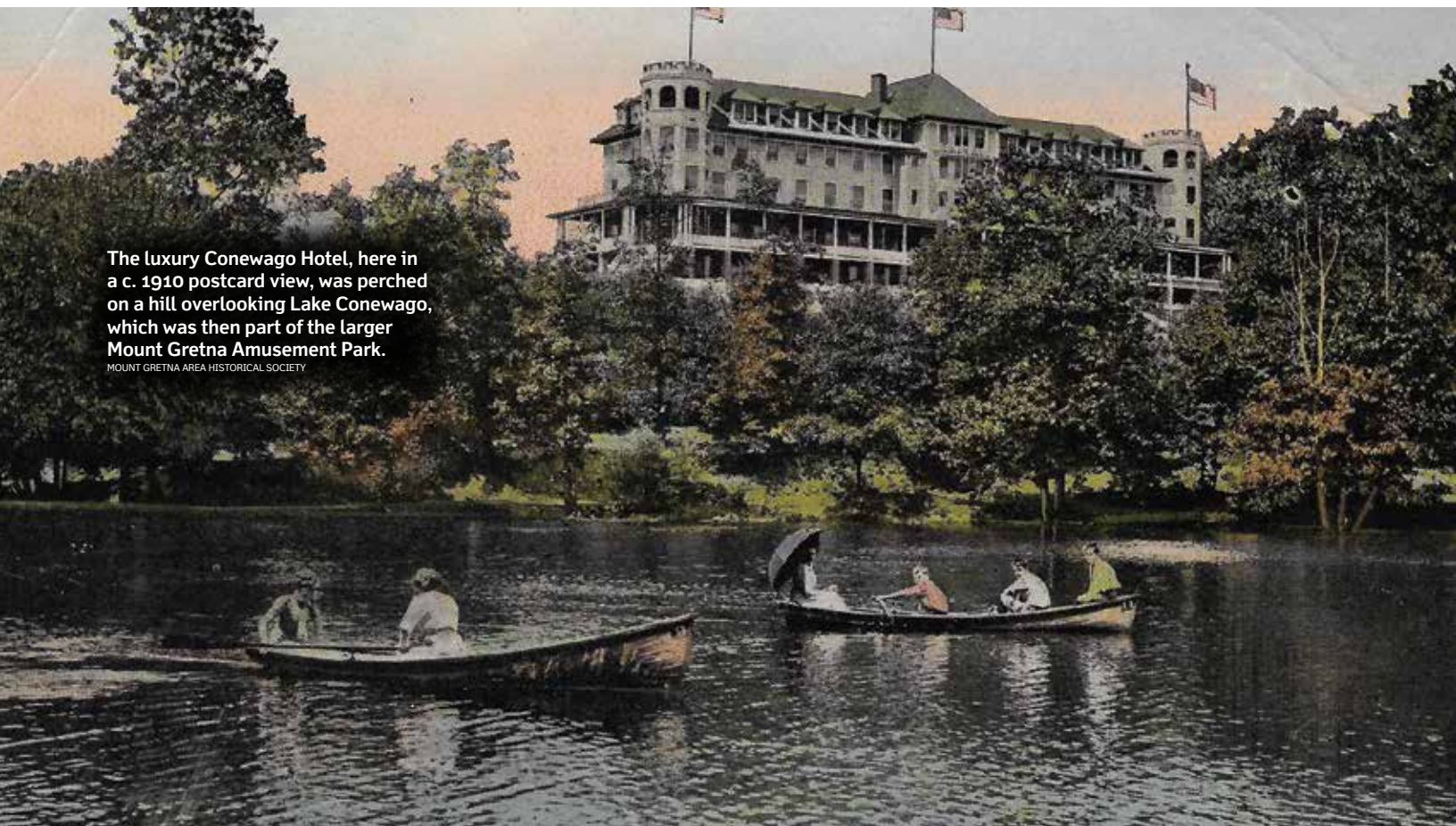
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the United Brethren Church to make a permanent home for its summer conferences in the same year that the Chautauqua was setting up house. The original Campmeeting included the covered Tabernacle amphitheater surrounded by tents deployed for 10-day summer conferences. As the retreats came to last for the whole summer, tents were replaced by permanent cottages. As reported in the *Lebanon Daily News* in 1892, “The Chautauqua and Campmeeting are occupied by persons who love to linger around the pleasant scenes of this delightful place and to drink in all that is to be seen and heard.”

The Campmeeting tradition has been going strong for 125 years and is complemented by a “newer,” 60-year-old Methodist church built next to the Tabernacle to host year-round, indoor services. Today’s Campmeeting is an old-timey, fairytale version of a public square with cozy wooden cottages and cabins tightly embracing the oval-shaped Tabernacle. The cottages are so densely packed together that front-porch conversations have been known to span four porches across. I asked my tour guide if it would be intrusive for an outsider like me to walk around among the Chautauqua and Campmeeting cottages. He assured me

The luxury Conewago Hotel, here in a c. 1910 postcard view, was perched on a hill overlooking Lake Conewago, which was then part of the larger Mount Gretna Amusement Park.

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**In 1889 the narrow-gauge railroad line was created to carry people from the amusement park, around the lake, and up to Governor Dick peak for a spectacular view of the whole region.**

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that residents welcome visitors wholeheartedly and may even try to engage them in conversation from a porch rocking chair.

## Industrious Beginnings

Long before the Pennsylvania Chautauqua and Campmeeting made Mount Gretna their home, other forces were at work to shape these wild woodlands into the quaint village that you can visit today. Starting in the 1730s, the rocky forests around Mount Gretna were found to have three key ingredients to launch a successful iron manufacturing business: iron ore, limestone to filter out the ore's impurities, and hardwood trees to make charcoal to fuel the smelting fires. Taking advantage of these natural resources in 1742, industrialist Peter Grubb (c. 1702–54) established the Cornwall Iron Furnace, just down the road from what is now Mount Gretna. In 1798 the first Robert Coleman (1748–1825) bought the furnace from Grubb, kicking off a dynasty of several generations of entrepreneurial Colemans who over

**For 50 years, starting in 1884, Mount Gretna served as the Pennsylvania National Guard's summer encampment.**

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the next 100 years transformed this patch of woods into a thriving resort and village. Cornwall Furnace is today preserved as a historic site by the Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission and is open for tours and events.

## Rail Stop Evolves into Resort

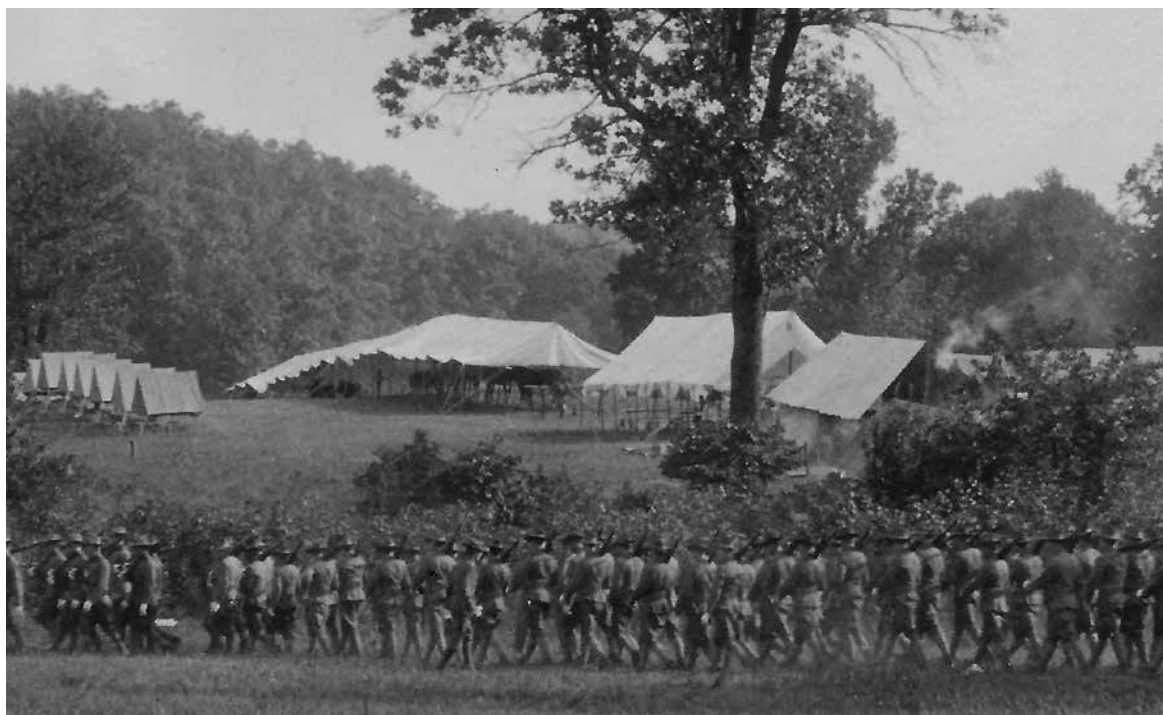
Nearly 100 years after iron baron Coleman bought Cornwall Furnace, his great-grandson Robert H. Coleman became the official owner of the family businesses at age nine. In 1884, when he was 26 and a wealthy industrialist, his childhood fascina-

tion with trains inspired him to create the Cornwall & Lebanon (C&L) Railroad. In choosing stops along the new C&L line, the Colemans selected what is now Mount Gretna for its pleasant forest with natural springs and gorgeous wildflowers to become a destination for picnics and nature gazing.

Toward the end of the 1880s, the Mount Gretna

stop on the C&L evolved from a picnic ground into a bustling Gilded Age resort, with an amusement park, a few hotels, a store, a dance hall and the Farm Expo. In 1885 Coleman dammed up the Conewago Creek to create Lake Conewago for swimming and boating (25 cents a ride) next to the amusement park. People poured off trains from surrounding towns to ride the carousel, canoe, swim or wade on the beach in full-body swimsuits, and trip the light fantastic at the Gretna Gables Dance Hall. More than 5,000 visitors enjoyed the park during the first season.

In 1884 Coleman lured the Pennsylvania National Guard to Mount Gretna for its summer encampment on several acres of



cleared forest next to the amusement park, where it would return annually for the next 50 years. Amusement park visitors would saunter over to watch the marching drills and cheer on reservists at boxing matches, band concerts and shooting range practice. You can still see the encampment's parade grounds that so far have been spared from development along Timber Road, between the trail and the village.

In 1889 Coleman created a narrow-gauge railroad to carry people from the park, around the lake and up to Governor Dick peak where they could see as far as Lancaster and Harrisburg. The luxury Victorian-style Conewago Hotel was built on a hill overlooking the lake in 1909. A competing Kauffman's Amusement Park later

developed near what is now Campmeeting, offering more modern entertainment like a silent movie theater, a wooden switchback roller coaster, and a million-gallon swimming pool for a "cooling dip" (as expressed on a postcard from the 1930s). These jaunty resort days kept Mount Gretna hopping into the 1940s.

### Spirit of a Magical Place

Even before the Great Depression, the Stock Market Panic of 1893 had taken its toll on Coleman's businesses. That same year Cornwall Furnace closed down, the C&L went bankrupt, and the family moved to New York state. In the 1930s the Depression and World War II further damaged resort activi-

ties. The National Guard was relocated to Indiantown Gap in 1935. The Conewago Hotel was demolished in 1942, and the last surviving amusement park was shuttered in the 1950s. The emergence of the automobile also had an impact as people no longer had to rely on rail destinations.

But Mount Gretna survived and continued to maintain its period essence. In recent years, the C&L line was reincarnated as a gravel trail for hiking and biking and is well maintained by the Lebanon Valley Rails to Trails system. The narrow-gauge tracks have been swallowed up by the ever-hungry forest. On a recent walk on the trail, I envisioned the big steam trains chugging through the forest years ago, unloading women in flouncy, floor-length skirts and men in bow ties and boater hats who would

descend the steps to the amusement park, eat lunch on the stone fountain, swim, boat, or ride the open-sided, narrow-gauge train around the lake.

The chugging and steaming have been replaced by the calling of birds, the gravelly crunch of bicycles and the humming of cars where the path veers near the few roads through town. The train station is gone, but you can see its foundations covered by tenacious foliage along the trail near the path to the village. The rusted water tank that serviced the station is easier to spot across from the remains of the old stone fountain. Memories of the storied resort and encampment days can be relived at the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society through photographs, posters, memorabilia and even a carousel horse with accompanying Wurlitzer pipe organ and self-playing drum.

**A popular attraction at the Mount Gretna Amusement Park was the carousel, pictured here in the park's early days around 1900.**

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The former C&L Railroad line and this surviving railroad bridge are now part of the Lebanon Valley Rails to Trails system.

COURTESY BRIDGET McQUATE/PHOTO BY RALPH JOHNSON



The Mount Gretna Lake & Beach area looks much the same as it did in 1885 when Robert H. Coleman had the Conewago Creek dammed up to create the lake.

COURTESY BRIDGET McQUATE/PHOTO BY RALPH JOHNSON

The fact that two Victorian-era institutions, Chautauqua and Campmeeting, have survived into the 21st century is due in part to their old-fashioned charm and the enduring vision and curiosity of Mount Gretna's residents through the years. As Bowman expresses it, "Mount Gretna is more than just a place to live. This community has attracted a strong mix of artists, educators, businesspeople and others who appreciate the quality of life and activities provided by the Chautauqua, Campmeeting and other organizations." Another resident famously said that Mount Gretna is not a place, but a spirit. It's also a window to the past, where you can play mini-golf on a course unchanged since the 1920s, roller

skate in the original Farm Expo building from 1890, swim in a lake, bike or hike, all while appreciating the natural world that makes this place so serene and special. Spend a little time here, and you'll be transported back to the past to experience the unique tale of a growing country yearning for education, culture and entertainment.

*Bridget McQuate is a freelance writer based in the Philadelphia area who has published more than 30 articles on travel, lifestyle and architecture. She was formerly the editor of The Philadelphia Architect and wrote the Architect's Brag Book column for The Philadelphia Inquirer's Home & Design magazine.*

In 2017 the Pennsylvania Chautauqua and the Campmeeting in Mount Gretna will be celebrating their 125th anniversaries through the assistance of the Mount Gretna Area Historical Society.

For information on activities and events, visit [mtgretnahistory.org](http://mtgretnahistory.org).



The open-air Gretna Theater still carries on the Chautauqua tradition of presenting plays, concerts, lectures and other educational programs for residents and visitors.

COURTESY BRIDGET McQUATE/PHOTO BY RALPH JOHNSON

