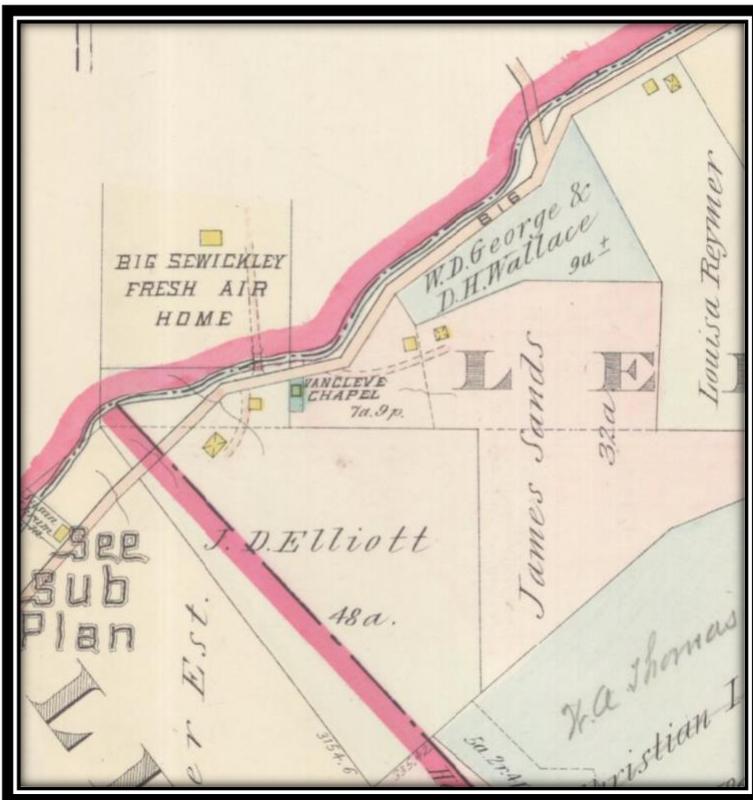


Bell Acres History...

Van Cleve Presbyterian Chapel

Presbyterianism arrived in the Sewickley Valley during the early 1800s, with itinerant ministers preaching in homes, barns and out of doors, wherever the faithful gathered. Since the minister's time in each location was limited, it was left to lay persons to organize Sunday School classes that met for Bible study and prayer.

Philip Creese (1816-1889) was both a farmer and carpenter who lived on Camp Meeting Road and was for many the superintendent of a Sunday School class that met in one of the local schools. He was also a longtime Sewickley Township road supervisor and school board member. It is written that his Sunday School became the nucleus of the Van Cleve congregation when the chapel opened in 1876.



By 1838, Sewickley Presbyterians were financially able to support a full-time minister. Until then, they had been sharing one with the neighboring Fairmount congregation in Franklin Township. Membership in the Sewickley church grew quickly, due in part to the influx of new residents arriving from Pittsburgh's East End.

Beginning in 1851, rail service provided passengers with a quick and easy commute between Sewickley and Allegheny City, making Sewickley a desirable community for wealthy Pittsburgh families. Tension developed between the early families and newcomers, resulting in a group of first families leaving the Sewickley church. Led by Mrs. Eliza Leet Shields, the group built a church on Shields' property at the corner of Church Lane and Beaver Road in then Sewickley Township and named it Leetsdale Presbyterian (1864).

To better serve families living "back in the country", the Pittsburgh Presbytery requested that Leetsdale Presbyterian build a mission chapel on Big Sewickley Creek. Under the direction of Rev. Robert S. Van Cleve, the chapel was built in 1875 at a cost of \$1,000 in what is now Bell Acres Borough. Shown on a 1906 Allegheny County map, the chapel was located near the Leet Township line on Big Sewickley Creek Road, opposite the Fresh Air Home.

In 1907, the name of Leetsdale Presbyterian was changed to Shields Presbyterian in honor of its benefactor. In 1984, 120 years after they split, the Sewickley and Shields congregations merged. Unfortunately, no information is currently available on the fate of the Van Cleve Chapel, whose former site is now residential property.