

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

## The Tunnel: A Neighborhood Mystery

By David Frew  
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*Astonishing as it may seem, these otherwise innocuous homes were connected by a tunnel.*

One of the most perplexing mysteries of our Northwest Bayfront neighborhood was a concrete-lined tunnel, connecting two otherwise ordinary houses on West Third Street. We learned of the tunnel from friends who lived in or near the two homes and had several opportunities to visit. A contemporary lived in one of the homes. At the time we were kids, the mysterious, underground connection could

only be accessed from the basement of one of the houses. The other end had been sealed. The tunnel was high enough for a kid to pass through without bending over. Midway between the two homes there were two distinct rooms, one on the south side of the tunnel and the other on the north side.

Since we were clever, we figured it all out within a few hours of our preliminary investigation. We had obviously discovered a secret passageway from the historic neighborhood "Underground Railroad." It had to be a hidden place where runaway slaves could hide and then make their way to freedom, when the coast was clear. "On West Third Street in Erie?" someone asked. Upon checking our theory with several "adults and teachers," we were scorned, but that was not the first time that our logic had been challenged. And we had been correct several times before when we stubbornly stuck to a logical explanation. Eventually, one of the neighbors pointed out the fact that the two houses had been built in 1906 and 1926, respectively. More than a few decades after the Civil War. Hmm. "Perhaps the homes had been built around an existing Civil War era tunnel," we argued.

Answers to great mysteries often present themselves in the strangest of ways. The connector tunnel remained an unsolved mystery in the dark recesses of my mind for several years ... until a chance conversation with Dr. Joseph Semple, physician and son of the infamous "Joe Semple" of rum-running fame. My connections with Dr. Semple were always at a lovely home on upper State Street and I learned from his children that he had lived in the Frontier District as a boy. I never associated him with West Third Street until he shared the following story:

During the 1990s he was treating a patient in his office and noticed a familiar address on the check that had been used as payment for medical services. Looking up from the check, Dr. Semple asked the man how long he (the patient's husband) had been living at the West Third Street address that was printed on the check.

"Almost five years," the man replied.

"I grew up as a young boy in that home before my family moved to the Frontier area," Dr. Semple told him.

The man who had written the check was interested and asked Dr. Joe what the neighborhood had been like in the 1930s.

After a brief description of the old days, Dr. Semple asked a follow-up question. "Have you ever noticed a tunnel that leads from your basement to the house next door?"

The man was perplexed as he responded, "Never."

“Take a close look and let me know what you find the next time you come to the office,” Dr. Joe suggested. And then he described the approximate basement location of the tunnel.

A few weeks later the man returned to Dr. Semple’s office, asking to speak with him.

Upon careful inspection the resident of the former Semple home discovered a plywood-backed wall fronted with shelves that were being used to store tools and miscellaneous items, as well as mason jars filled with fruit and jelly. Curious about the possibility that there could actually be a tunnel behind the plywood wall, he carefully disassembled the shelves barriers.

Eureka! There in the basement and behind the plywood that had been inelegantly nailed to the wall, was a sealed-up doorway. He pried the crude wooden covering apart and found a tunnel that ran under the driveway and seemed to connect to the exterior basement wall of the home next door.

The first thing that he did upon the amazing discovery was to ask his next-door neighbor to look in his basement. The neighbor was as shocked as he had been. Apparently between the 1950s, when most of the neighborhood kids had learned of the tunnel and many had visited, and the 1990s, the passageway had been sealed up and forgotten.

Dr. Semple explained the tunnel to his patient during the next office visit. During Prohibition, Joe Semple and his brother, Johnny, owned the two houses (Dr. Semple’s father and uncle). Joe Semple purchased the older of the two dwellings and had the second (next door) built for his brother. As the newer of the two homes (built in 1926) was being constructed they had the contractor build the connecting tunnel. There were two rooms in the tunnel, a small room, which contained a bank vault designed to secure the large amounts of cash that were common in the rum-running business, and a larger one for storing bottles of alcohol. By the time that Joe Semple (Dr. Semple’s father) had completed the secret storage room, his rum-running activities were generally well-known, and he was attempting to provide some security in case authorities searched his house. False plywood walls in the basements of both homes were part of the original design and placed there so that the tunnel entrances would not be obvious.

During the years that we were prowling the neighborhood, Prohibition had been long-forgotten, and both Semples had moved away from West Third Street. The 1950s’ owners had discovered the tunnel and allowed their children to play there. As the years wore on, however, subsequent owners sealed up the entrances and tried to forget about them.

In retrospect, I reluctantly realized that the teachers and other adults, who laughed at us when we pronounced the mysterious tunnel an escape route for the Underground Railroad, were right.

The lesson? Adults who preached “at” us during the 1950s were sometimes correct!

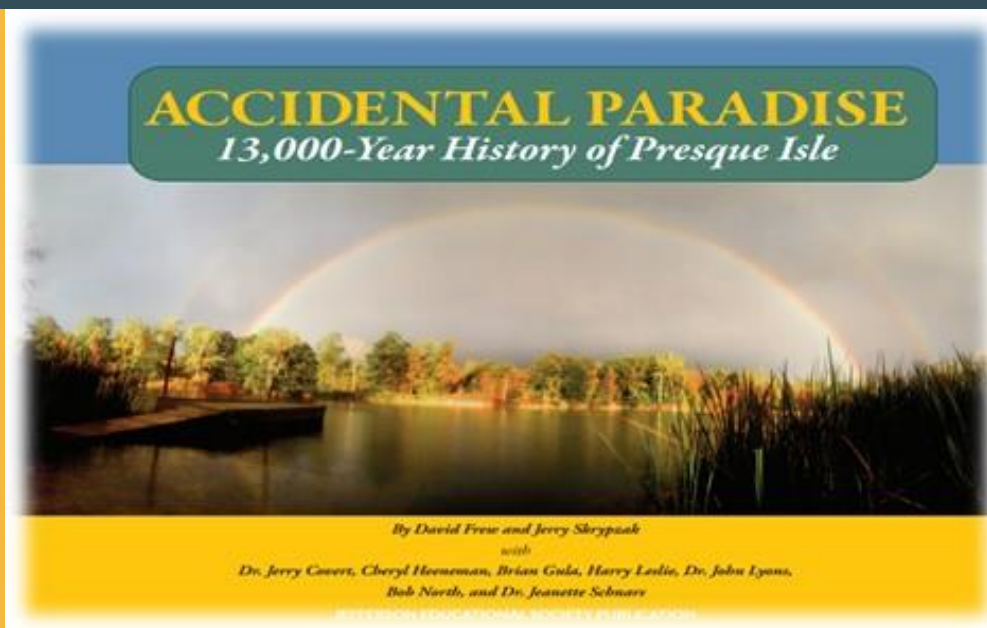
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*by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*



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For more information, send an email to [aperino@TREC.org](mailto:aperino@TREC.org).

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.*



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