

Quick, Timely Reads  
*Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*

Brenda Pundt Made Mark as City Controller

By: Dr. Judith Lynch  
Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
December 2020

ELECTED WOMEN

*Following is the eighth in a series of articles about women elected leaders from Erie County written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Judith Lynch. Jefferson Vice President Ben Speggen will host an online interview with Dr. Lynch at noon each Wednesday featuring the leaders.*

---

Another Erie County woman elected to an important city of Erie office, Controller, in the election of 1989 was Brenda Pundt. An autonomous office, independent of the Mayor and City Council, the Controller is responsible for maintaining an ongoing audit and essentially conducting financial oversight of the City of Erie's financial operations.

Brenda Pundt was a life-long resident of Erie and took the road to political office that so many others, such as Mayors Joyce Savocchio and Lou Tullio, took before her. While her qualifications lay largely in the private sector – she worked first at Sears Department Store and then as a chief accountant for McCarty Printing and also as a revenue enforcement agent for the State Department of Revenue – her political fortunes rested in her connection with the School District of Erie. She served as an Erie City School Director for more than a decade before she ran for City Controller in 1989. As such, her name had been on the Erie ballot for years.

Pundt announced that she would run for City Controller when Phil English, who had served one term, indicated that he did not intend to run again. Pundt won the 1989 primary election as City Controller and ran unopposed in the general election in November. Upon being elected, Pundt said her mission was to “see the city operate as a successful business. That’s the expertise I’m going to bring” (Miller, *Erie Times News*, 11/8/1989). Because of the term limits for elected offices adopted by the city in July 1989, effective beginning in the election of 1989, Pundt, Savocchio, and members of City Council who were elected in 1989

and since were limited to three terms.

**Pundt demands to do own audit of guns**

EMV 10/20/94 Erie Controller's Office

By BILL MCKINNEY  
Morning News staff reporter

An angry Erie City Controller Brenda Pundt will demand that double-sealed crates of confiscated guns be opened and that she be allowed to conduct a random check to make sure all are accounted for.

Erie Police Chief Paul DeDionisio sent the mayor and city council a letter stating that police had inventoried the more than 640 weapons taken in a gun buy-back program early this year plus another 350 firearms taken during regular police op-

evidence tape.

Pundt said she had wanted to be present during the inventory but was not notified. She said she had received two telephone calls from the same individual hinting that all of the guns might not have been kept.

She said the caller gave no specific information but she decided that, as controller, she should at least make a count.

"I went downstairs to the police department on Tuesday morning to do the audit and the officer I spoke to was concerned because the chief

wasn't there. I understood and said I could wait.

"I called down at 11:30 and was told the guns had been counted last week and that they were all accounted for. I told the chief I wanted to know who had taken part in the count, when it happened and I asked him to sign off on it, to get it in writing that it was done.

"I was not at any time, and I want to stress this, I was not questioning police integrity. I was trying to do my job."

Pundt said she later learned that the chief called a lieutenant in inter-

nal affairs and asked him to inspect the job, to oversee a random check of the weapons.

"To do my job as controller, they have forced me to insist on another check in my presence. I'm going to ask that this check be conducted on Friday to remove any cloud.

"The chief has made it clear to me that the weapons are going to be destroyed in the crates, that the crates aren't going to be opened again.

"I want to make it clear to him that I want to be notified before they're destroyed and I want to be present for one final check."

As Controller, Pundt was diligent in her review of accounts of the city and its property. For instance, one of the areas where she insisted that she have direct access was the area of confiscated firearms. There was a question of whether any of the confiscated property had gone missing. After her insistence, Pundt was given personal access to the guns and proceeded to count and identify each of them and then made a final report of her findings.

At times, Pundt's aggressive pursuance of anything that looked askew would bring opposition from the Savocchio administration. This was particularly true of her first term as City Controller in which Pundt admits that at times she was overzealous. In 1990, shortly after she had taken office, Pundt had a high-ranking Erie worker secretly investigated. She hired a private investigator to review this ranking city official's actions for possible improprieties. When this information was disclosed to City Council and the Savocchio administration, there was an outcry. Neither Mayor Savocchio nor City Council members were consulted about the decision to investigate. Interestingly, a discussion prior to the investigation would have disclosed that the official was slotted to be dismissed by the Savocchio administration.

Mayor Savocchio was livid Wednesday night upon learning of Pundt's attempt to keep her probe from the administration and with the spending of city money to hire the private detective. .... Savocchio said that if Pundt had come to her with the information, police would have been called in to investigate and that city taxpayer money would not have to have been spent" (Pinski, *Erie Morning News*, 11/14/91).

Concerning the City's budget, Pundt used the powers of her office to check to see that modified accrual accounting was utilized and that all liabilities and expenditures were recorded. Pundt was instrumental in "the investigation of a former city employee who was arrested in 1990 and subsequently sentenced to jail for the thefts of scrap metal from the waste water treatment plant" (*Erie Daily Times*, 2/22/1992). Pundt was scrupulous about seeing that the city adhered to the Third Class City Code. When Skip Cannavino stepped down as Treasurer and appointed an acting treasurer, Ortenzia Keller, Pundt immediately commented that the Third Class City Code allowed the treasurer, in such an instance, to appoint employees in his

**Brenda Pundt named 'Controller of the Year'**

Erie City Controller Brenda Pundt has been honored with the "Controller of the Year" award by the Pennsylvania City Controllers Association.

Her selection came at the end of last week at the final session of the annual meeting of Pennsylvania City Controllers Association in Harrisburg.

"I am very honored, actually, to be chosen," Pundt said. "It's very rewarding that your peers recognize you with an award like this."

Edward Wojnarowski Sr., association president, said Pundt "exemplified the controller of the '90s."

"Her hard work for the taxpayers of Erie and her excellent work as vice president of the Pennsylvania City Controllers Association were reasons cited by many for their choice."

Pundt, who has served as city controller since 1990, is the first woman to win the award.

The controller said she hopes to see a better working relationship among city officials.

"Recently there has been more a readiness to share information and I am happy to see that," Pundt said. "We need to do more of that."



Brenda Pundt E DT 6/27/94

office, but she doubted whether it allowed him to appoint an acting Treasurer who could sign checks and have all the powers of the City Treasurer.

**Pundt elected president of Pa. controllers association**  
*TN 6/24/95*  
*Erie-Controllers Office*

Erie City Controller Brenda Pundt was elected president of the Pennsylvania City Controllers Association Friday.

She is the first woman and the first person from Erie to hold the post.

Pundt, the only candidate, was unanimously voted in at the annual three-day conference of the state's city controllers association. This year, the conference was hosted by Lancaster.

Philadelphia Controller Jonathan Saidel nominated Pundt when, after 10 years as president, Ed Wojnarski of Johnstown announced his retirement.

Pundt, 55, said she is "overjoyed" to serve the two-year term, which ends the same year she is up for re-election as city controller. The position is not paid.

She said she will seek one more term as Erie city controller, "which will put me at retirement age. I promised the voters I could do what needs to be done in the office in three (four-year) terms," she said.

She said the association will concentrate on two main items: getting out the message that the controller is the watchdog of government and lobbying the state legislature to provide the association with its own solicitor.

There is a move, she said, to eliminate the controller position in municipal government. Some cities, such as Johnstown, have replaced the elected controller with an internal auditor.

**Pundt seeking third term as controller**  
*EOT 3/25/97 p 1c*  
*Erie-Controllers Office*

Erie City Controller Brenda Pundt has announced she will seek a third term, filing for the Democratic Party nomination in the May 20 municipal primaries.

Pundt, 56, a lifelong Erie resident, was elected to the post in 1989, campaigning on her 25 years of accounting background in private industry.

In 1993, she was named "Pennsylvania City Controller of the Year." In 1994, she was elected president of the Pennsylvania City Controller's Association. Pundt is a member of Government Financial Officers Association, Leadership Erie Alumni, the Democratic Women's Council of Erie, Elected Women's Council and is a former member of the Erie School Board.

Pundt said that as controller she has worked "to establish a system that greatly increased accountability for tax dollars spent." She said that under her leadership, the pension boards worked to restructure and aggregate the city's three pension funds, "which resulted in increased returns on investments to the city and a tax savings." She said she also established a safeguard system of reviews of the city's financial operations.

"I believe the citizens of Erie should control their own pocket-books and have a right to know where their tax dollars are going," Pundt said. "I want to continue to serve as your city controller to help bring about cost-effective and efficient government."

Pundt is the widow of Richard L. Pundt and the mother of LeeAnn Twidle and Mathew E. Pundt.



**Brenda Pundt:** Believes citizens have a right to know where their tax dollars are going.

**CITY OF ERIE  
 ORDINANCE 41-1989  
 Mayor, Council, City  
 Treasurer and City  
 Controller terms  
 limited.  
 [Ord. 41-1989 passed 6-  
 7-1989]**

Pundt's background and her fearless leadership won her the respect of her fellow controllers. In 1993, she was named Pennsylvania City Controller of the year. In 1995, she was elected president of the Pennsylvania Controllers' Association. She was the first person from Erie and the first woman to be awarded these honors. Pundt commented that being elected president of the Pennsylvania

Controllers' Association came at an auspicious time. Her two-year term as president of the Controllers' Association ended the year she was up for re-election as city controller. She reiterated the importance of controllers and the honor of serving as President. Controllers, she indicated, served as the watchdogs for government and it was her intention to continue being that watchdog for the city of Erie. In 1997, Brenda Pundt officially announced her candidacy for her third term as City Controller. Because of term limits, if Pundt won this election, it would be her last term as City Controller.

In her third term election in 1997, Pundt had no primary opposition but was challenged by Republican Jerry Kirk, a political unknown in the general election. Pundt won that election by more than 10,000 votes. In that election, Pundt continued to emphasize the importance of the controller's position and indicated her intention to examine the fire and police departments and to compare

their operations to similar departments in other cities.

Pundt served three terms as Controller, from 1990 until 2002, as allowed by Ordinance. 41-1989, which had established term limits of three terms. In 2002, Pundt was succeeded by Casimir Kwitowski, who also served three terms. Casimir Kwitowski was succeeded by Erie's second woman to be elected Controller, Teresa Stankiewicz.

# Pundt wins her third term as Erie's fiscal watchdog

ENR 11/5/97 p. 7-A Erie-Controller Office-Erie

## Police and fire department operations may come under closer scrutiny

By ED PALATTELLA  
Staff writer

The city's fire and police departments are among the areas Erie City Controller Brenda Pundt said she wants to examine in her final term as the city's fiscal watchdog. "I'd like a real assessment of the different operations of the city," Pundt said. She said she would like to explore "another way to run the police department and the fire department."

Pundt said she could not yet be specific in what she might look at in terms of public safety. But she said she wants "to make sure we are doing things in the most cost-effective manner. "I'd like to take a look at (the police and fire departments in) other cities," Pundt said. "Not to put any fault. But I'm just not convinced that the way they are running these offices is the most cost-effective way."

Pundt, 57, a Democrat, on Tuesday defeated Republican challenger Jerry Kirk, a political newcomer, by nearly 10,000 votes. Pundt, according to the unofficial count, collected 15,795 votes; Kirk, 5,926. Kirk, a design engineer, said he wanted to run the controller's office as a business.

The city's large Democratic voter edge helped Pundt defeat Kirk, 52. Pundt, who has 25 years of private-industry experience, also is well-known in city politics. She was an Erie school director for nine years and has been controller for the last eight years.

City ordinance prevents the controller from seeking more than three consecutive terms. The controller earns \$32,000 a year.

As the city's fiscal monitor, Pundt said she has tried to take an active role in the city's budget process. She formed a volunteer advisory group this year to field recommendations to help ease the city's budget woes, including a projected \$3.8 million deficit for 1998.

The controller's office has subpoena power for investigations, but Pundt could recall issuing a subpoena only once in her eight years in office. Pundt typically makes recommendations on the budget and other matters to the mayor or city council, who are not bound to follow her directives.

Pundt as controller has had confrontations with the mayor and council. She said she was at times "overzealous" in her first term, but she also said she is committed to having others take notice of her findings. She said she has tried to be more cooperative with other offices in city government.

"I'm not afraid of the challenge," Pundt said of her job. Of the mayor, council members and others, she said: "I would like them to take my recommendations much more seriously."

The election of 1989 brought a wave of change to City Council. One of course, was the leaving of Joyce Savocchio who had served two terms on City Council and then been promoted, winning the election for Erie Mayor. Filling her vacated seat on City Council was another woman, Gayle Wright. Elected in 1989, Wright served on City Council until 2001. In the election of 1989, she had the third highest vote total of those who won seats on City Council. The top vote-getter was Joseph Borgia with 18,417 votes; Michael Flatley had 18,403 votes; Gayle Wright garnered 17,076, followed by another woman, Denise Robison, with 14,408 votes. This was the first time in the city's history that two women were seated on City Council.

Interestingly, of the members on City Council, only Michael Flatley had any experience working in government. The newly elected members replaced long-serving members of Council, Robert Brabender, Joyce Savocchio, and C. Ted Dombrowski.

Gayle Wright ran for reelection in 1993. In that election she was the top vote-getter, outpolling veteran politicians Bob Brabender and Jim Thompson.

Erie Daily Times, Friday, November 3, 1989

## 4 Good Reasons why GAYLE WRIGHT is running for City Council ...

THE WRIGHT CHOICE - PULL LEVER 19A



1. Our children must have clean, supervised and well equipped parks in which to play.
2. We must create a metropolitan government in order to facilitate the rebuilding of our industrial base.
3. Our city needs to establish a long-range planning task force to better market the Erie area for future growth & job opportunities.
4. The citizens, council and the administration must work together in an effort to promote the common good of the community.

**WON'T YOU JOIN ME IN OUR CAMPAIGN?**

*Gayle*

On the lighter side:  
Aren't you happy the election will be over soon!

Paid for by the committee to elect Gayle Wright

Erie Times-News, Sunday, October 8, 1989

**"Erie Politics" column by Ed Wellejus**

\* \* \*

City council candidate Gayle Wright, whose political awareness dates back "to campaigning for John F. Kennedy as a kid in Michigan," thinks it is time the Erie area started to debate metropolitan government.

If elected, Wright said she would push for metro. "It has worked superbly in many areas," she said. "Look at Indianapolis."

As Wright sees it, the Erie area "is top heavy" with local officials. "We don't need all these officials, city, township, borough, county," she said. "We have the convenience of cars and telephones. Narrow little political units aren't necessary any more."

Wright is another of the "new" candidates in this year's city council race, making her first bid for office although she has served as a Democratic committeewoman in the Fifth Ward and also served as a delegate for Michael Dukakis last year.

A reception for Wright will be held from 4 to 7 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 15, at the Market Place Grill, 319 State Street.

\* \* \*

Wright, similar to many other office holders in the city's history, was a teacher. She had a Bachelor of Science degree from University of Akron and took graduate courses at Gannon University. She taught high school and middle school science in Erie. As a candidate for City Council, Wright pushed an agenda that featured Metro government. The consolidation of Erie with its suburban areas, such as Millcreek, Harborcreek, and Summit Townships, was seen as an answer to the city's dwindling population and evaporating tax base.

As a member of City Council, Wright gained recognition of her fellow council persons and of the public. In 1997, she was elected President of City Council. She was the second woman to hold the position; the first was Joyce Savocchio.

In May 2001, Italo Cappabianca, who was the long-serving state House representative of the Second Legislative District for 22 years, died. In a special election held August 14, 2001, there were three contenders: Wright, who had served on City Council from 1990 and was ending her last term allowed by the term limits; write-in candidate Linda Cappabianca, the widow of Italo Cappabianca; and Republican David Mumau. Wright was endorsed by the local Democratic Committee. Wright won with 48.2 percent of the vote. Linda Cappabianca placed a strong second with 39.1 percent, and Republican Mumau garnered 11.8 percent. Wright took the seat, becoming the second woman in Erie County after Linda Bebko Jones to be elected to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Zappala administered the oath of office in the Pennsylvania House chamber.

# 2001 Special Election for the 2nd Legislative District

Tuesday, August 14, 2001

## Official Returns Representative in the General Assembly

### 2nd Legislative District

Candidate	Votes	Percent
WRIGHT, GAYLE M. (DEM)	3,081	48.2%
CAPPABIANCA, LINDA	2,499	39.1%
MUMAU, DAVID B. JR. (REP)	758	11.8%
MORSCHHAUSER, ROBERT	60	0.9%

[County Breakdown for 2nd Legislative District](#)

### [2001 Special Election for the 2nd Legislative District](#)

Pennsylvania Department of State  
302 North Office Building, Harrisburg, PA 17120  
Phone - (717) 787-6458



Copyright © 2004 Pennsylvania Department of State. All Rights Reserved.  
[Commonwealth of PA Privacy Statement.](#)

Unfortunately, the duration of her position in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives was short-lived. Running in the primary election for the Second Representative District seat in May 2002, Wright faced Florindo Fabrizio, the popular Erie County Clerk, who won both the Democratic primary and general elections. Before leaving the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, in 2002, Wright was named to the PoliticsPA list of Best Dressed Legislators. Below is a picture of Wright when she was sworn in as Representative of Erie's Second Legislative District.



In 1989, as Joyce Savocchio moved from City Council to the Mayor's office, and Gayle Wright joined City Council, another woman, Denise Robison, also took her seat as a member of City Council. Denise Robison was the first Republican elected to City Council since the mid-1960s when Dr. Quentin Orlando served on that body. The 1989 election was also the first time in Erie's history that two women served on City Council.

sewer revenues.

### Republican

**DENISE ILLIG ROBISON, 2100 South Shore Drive, Erie, 16505. Age: 50. Lived in area 45 years. Education: Mercyhurst Preparatory School; B.A., English, Manhattanville College. Occupation: Communications consultant. Previous public offices held: None. Qualifications for this office:** I have worked in government in the federal, state and local levels and understand how to get things done. Federal government experience: former press secretary for Senator Ted Kennedy in Washington, D.C.; former Erie district manager for Congressman Marc Lincoln Marks. I actively work with the state as a member of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (rebuilding the U.S. Brig Niagara) and as a member of the Erie-Western PA Port Authority. My community experience includes the Mayor's Task Force on Bayfront Development; television producer of the first historical documentary on the Erie bayfront and producer of two series on Erie history; a trustee of Gannon University; presently working with Erie businesses as a communications specialist.



**ROBISON**

**ANSWER TO QUESTION:** Water is "liquid gold," and I believe it is an important solution to the city's financial problems and the key to our economic growth. Presently the lack of pumping and delivery of water for city needs and industrial/commercial/residential development is the major obstacle to Erie's economic growth and job opportunities. I have and will continue to urge the immediate creation of an independent water authority to purchase the present water system. The city would then invest the principal, and yearly split the interest into two equal parts to be used for the general fund (for city services) and infrastructure improvements. I would also see great economic gain to the city by having city council work with the port authority in developing our urban waterfront.

**LEONARD J. WRORTEL, 468 E.**

An editorial description of the candidacy of Robison in the Erie Times-News on October 29, 1989, provides a list of her outstanding credentials. Robison was a member of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, a member of the Western Pennsylvania Port Authority, and member of the Mayor's Task Force on Bayfront Development, in addition to serving publicly in many other capacities. Robison's connection to waterfront development was highly significant. In Robison's comments to the newspaper, she emphasized her stand in pursuing an independent Water Authority and stated that "water is liquid gold." Along with Mayor Savocchio, she maintained that revenue generated from creation of a Water Authority could provide the fuel for waterfront development, an essential for future growth. Further, in pursuing this growth, Robison stressed the necessity that the city of Erie work with the Port Authority, where she was a member in pursuance of the development of Erie's urban waterfront.

We urge all members, family and friends of  
**United Paperworkers Union Local 1281** to  
**VOTE** for the following endorsed candidates:

**JUDGE**

**Stephanie Domitrovich** (lever **8A**)  
**John Bozza** (lever **7A**)

**COUNTY EXECUTIVE**

**Judy Lynch** (lever **9A**)

**MAYOR**

**Joyce Savocchio** (lever **14A**)

**CITY COUNCIL**

**Gayle Wright** (lever **19A**)  
**Jerry Mifsud** (lever **17A**)  
**Denise Robison** (lever **16B**)  
**Ned Smith** (lever **19B**)



Paid for by United Paperworkers Union Local 1281 PAC Committee

**Erie council**

Joseph Borgia	18,419	Michael Flatley	18,403
Gayle Wright	17,076	Denise Robison	14,408
Jerry Knight	11,525	Gerald Mifsud	10,415
Leonard Wrobel	9,807	Ned Smith	8,099

Even though she was a Republican, Robison won the endorsement of critical labor unions. When the votes were counted, Robison had won the sixth seat on City Council with a vote of 14,408. In her remarks after being elected, Robison stressed that party was not an essential factor. "We don't have Republican or Democratic problems... we really have people problems and money problems. ...We all made promises, very specific ones during the campaigning and I intend to be held to them. A new era of city government for the city of Erie begins tonight. It's Erie's finest hour" ( Erie Times-News, 11/8/1989).

<b>1993 CITY COUNCIL</b>	
NAME	VOTES
Wright	14,706
Thompson	14,360
Brabender	12,700
Robison	11,863

Robison served one full term. She was reelected in 1993. In this election in which four members were chosen, Wright was the top vote-getter and Robison narrowly beat Stan Prazer, the former head of the Erie Water Bureau to keep her seat on City



Council.

Interestingly, given the 2020 election concerns, in this election, there was also another lost ballot issue. It was shortly after 11 p.m. and everything had been counted, but an audit discovered that the master ballot for the 2nd District of Summit Township was missing. A quick search ensued and the document was found in the first-floor area where it had been misplaced (Erie Daily Times, 11/3/1993).



While Robison worked full time for Erie Insurance, she continued to serve on City Council until 1995. In January 1995, Erie'sve Tom Ridge was elected Governor of Pennsylvania. The newly elected Governor asked Robison to join him in Harrisburg as Assistant Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Aging. The Ridge pick for Secretary of Aging, Richard Browdie, was also from Erie and already had a relationship with City Council member Robison.

By May 1, 1995, Robison had resigned her position on City Council, moved to Harrisburg and assumed her new duties as the Assistant Secretary of Aging. In commenting about this change, Robison indicated she was pleased and challenged to assume her new position. Robison indicated that her own philosophy was in tune with the mission of the Department of Aging. She affirmed the department's objective to empower seniors to live the kind of lives they want, where they want. Further, she noted that her experience in working for Erie Insurance Group brought her in frequent contact with seniors and she had gained additional insight into the needs of the elderly from serving as the Ridge campaign's liaison to the elderly during his gubernatorial campaign (Erie Times-News, 5/21/1995).

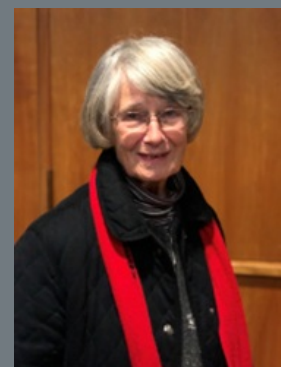
Denise resigned her position on City Council early in 1995. Appointed to take her place was James Casey, who had a long career at Fennestra and at the Erie County Courthouse. Casey served out the remaining two years of the Robison term and then was elected and served on City Council for two terms. With the resignation of Denise Robison there were no longer any women serving on City Council at that time.

---

Sources: Erie Daily Times, Erie Times News,

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Judy Lynch, Ph.D., is a Scholar in Residence at the Jefferson Educational Society. She was named the Jefferson's Decadean Scholar in 2018. She continues to serve on the Jefferson's Board of Trustees and was its first chairwoman. From 2004 to 2017, she served as Associate Professor of Political Science and History at Mercyhurst University. From 2002 to 2004, Dr. Lynch taught at Allegheny College and was part of the Civic Engagement Institute. Prior, she worked as an analyst for the CIA and served for 20 years as Erie County Executive. She received her Doctorate With Distinction in Political Science in 2001 from the University of Pittsburgh and her M.A. in Social Studies from Gannon University. Her undergraduate degree, a B.A. in History and Political Science, is from George Washington University.*



# In Case You Missed It

[Happy Thanksgiving! Be Grateful for Hale, Child, too](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence, Dr. Andrew Roth.

[West Fourth Street Music Scene](#) written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, Dr. David Frew.

[Savocchio Broke One Glass Ceiling After Another](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence, Dr. Judith Lynch.

---

Jefferson Educational Society | [jeserie.org](http://jeserie.org)

