

# JEFFERSON

## EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

### Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

#### *Holy City: Charleston, S.C. or Erie, Pa.?*

By David Frew  
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*Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.*



*St. Michael's Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina is the most visible of the city's many beautiful steeples.*

I understand why Charleston, South Carolina is called the “Holy City.” After making month-long winter pilgrimages there for more than 25 years, I have seen the cityscape and its church spires from almost every angle. And as its reputation suggests, one of the city’s most stunning features is the array of church spires and steeples that rise above the downtown. The fact that the entire city is just a few feet above sea level and that there are so many observation vantage points surrounding Charleston enhances the profile that calls attention to the city’s churches. The relatively low elevation also causes residents to be concerned about seawater increases that are currently being forecast. From almost any vantage point surrounding the city, dozens of beautiful churches are clearly visible.

I never thought about Erie in that way, even though I grew up in a neighborhood dotted with churches. Not until the Bicentennial Tower was built in 1996. As planning for the tower was taking place, I was asked to design a system of plaques to be attached to the upper observation deck. My mission was to devise a series of signs, which would contain illustrations and text that would tell the story of the 200-year history and development of Erie. I had already created the signage along the bluffs describing Erie history and volunteered at the History Center and Presque Isle to write exhibit descriptions (legends). Apparently, my love for local history combined with engineering training in “efficient” writing had been useful for creating such descriptions. It “seemed” like an easy task and one that I was flattered to have been asked to accomplish.

The first step was to climb the steps of the not-yet-opened tower, where I stood on the observation deck and began to think about how to write the narrative content and choose pictures. The challenge seemed simple, at first. Four primary directions, each of which would visually suggest a component of Erie’s history. I took a camera and binoculars on my first trip up the steps and was rewarded by visual details that could be seen from the four different panoramas: (1) Presque Isle and the open lake, (2) East Erie and Presque Isle Bay channel, (3) West Erie’s bayfront with docks, marinas, and yacht clubs, and (4) Center city with State Street, major buildings, and the downtown. “I took pictures and made notes. How hard could this possibly be?” I asked myself.

That first day was crystal clear and when I pointed my binoculars north, I could easily see in the distance the 650-foot towers of the Nanticoke Electric Generating Plant on the Ontario shore of Lake Erie. Scanning left from the twin stacks, I could see Stelco Steel with its enormous buildings and the lighthouse at the tip of Long Point. Inspired by a rare sight that I often enjoyed from the hills south of Erie, I descended the steps, went home and began writing. As I wrote I now realize that I had a bias toward describing the open lake, shipwrecks, and objects on “the other side of the pond.” A bias probably created by my personal love for Port Dover and the other side of the lake as well as books that I had written about shipping and shipwrecks.

The writing was not as easy as I had originally imagined. As I roughed out content relating to the four sight lines, it was a struggle to develop unique themes for each of the planned panels and to balance the number of words that would be placed on each sign. While I wrote, I took drafts to the Port Authority and others and asked them to review the work and the logic of the “division of topics.” With each suggestion there were adjustments and content [was](#) shifted between individual stations. Finally, and just in time for the official opening, it seemed that the narrative was done. The plan was to transfer the final text as well as illustrations onto expensive metal tablets, which were to be permanently mounted on the observation deck.

Thankfully the expense and finality of the anticipated transfer from paper to steel created personal doubts and when I expressed concerns to Port Authority project directors, we devised an alternative. Instead of ordering the expensive permanent metal plaques right away, we made paper copies with room for comments on each. Printed visitor guides were given to everyone who came to see the tower when it opened and there was an incentive for providing feedback. Early comments were complimentary, but I was unconvinced of their sincerity.

Eventually, I decided to ride the elevator up to the observation deck to ask visitors

directly. And that was when I received the “gift” of Karen James. I spotted her on the Erie side of the deck, carefully reading the paper guide. From her focus, I knew that she was digesting the text but as I watched, her face gave away her displeasure. I approached Karen and asked what she thought of the historical descriptions and her response was the best thing that could have happened to the Bicentennial Tower.

“Whoever wrote this stuff (she used a better word) doesn’t know anything about Erie history,” she answered.

“Why?” I asked.

Karen James then took the better part of an hour to explain what I should have already known. (1) The text was horribly biased toward northerly views of the lake, shipping, and far-away Canadian objects that would only rarely be visible on clear days. “Who really cares about a dirty coal plant over there?” she asked. She was absolutely correct. “Look the opposite way toward Erie,” she continued. “What do you see?” Karen quickly answered her own question: “Churches. Dozens of them! And they call Charleston the Holy City?”



*Erie's Bicentennial Tower lights up the bayfront at the foot of State Street.*

After I confessed that I was the writer and thanked her for the feedback, Karen agreed to meet. A week later, she took time to patiently explain the importance of Erie’s churches and the powerful relationship between places of worship and the ethnic neighborhoods that created the backbone of the city’s early development. Returning to the tower, I took a new look at the city. A thoughtful scan of Erie’s skyline revealed dozens of church spires, at least as many as Charleston. Some were a mystery to me, and I had to drive to their locations to identify them. Others were obvious. The Russian Orthodox Church of the Holy Nativity with its gold spires, the towering St. Peter Cathedral, St. Stanislaus with its twin domes, and St. Mary’s, to name a few. And their architectural lines were every bit as unique and distinctive as the churches of Charleston.

Thanks to the input from Karen James, I was able to rewrite much of what I had already done and improve the narrative significantly. After I developed a better draft, I asked Dr. Bill Garvey to accompany me to the top of the tower to look and then to add his thoughts. Dr. Garvey, who had written extensively about Erie's ethnic enclaves, added additional ideas and, thanks to the patience of the Port Authority, the final permanent markers were delayed until there was a final draft.



*Looking south from the Bicentennial Tower toward Erie, Holy City of the north*

Images of just a few of the churches that are visible from the tower are shown below. If you stretch left and right, you should be able to see lots more.



*The Russian Orthodox Church of the Nativity with its gold domes is the closest and most obvious.*



*This one stumped me at first. It is the old Villa Maria School and Convent at West Eighth and Liberty streets.*



*St. John the Baptist R.C. Church at East 26th and Wallace streets*





*St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church on Peach Street*



*St. Peter Cathedral at West 10th and Sassafras streets*



*St. Stanislaus, with its distinctive blue, Eastern European style domes, on East 12th Street*

Field Trip: Plan a trip to the Bicentennial Tower. Ride up to the observation deck and count churches. Take binoculars. Erie is a “Holy City.”

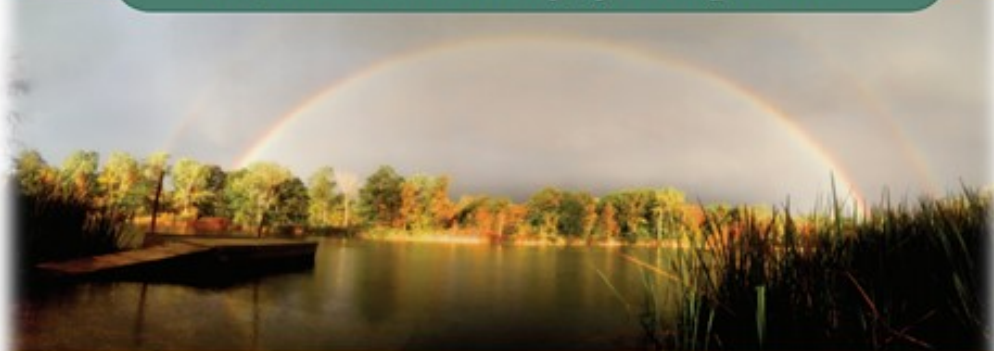
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*Accidental Paradise Available at TREC!*

*Accidental Paradise*  
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak

**ACCIDENTAL PARADISE**  
*13,000-Year History of Presque Isle*



*By David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*  
with  
*Dr. Jerry Covert, Cheryl Heeseaman, Brian Gula, Harry Leslie, Dr. John Lyons,  
Bob North, and Dr. Jeanette Schnars*

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY PUBLICATION

The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, [AccidentalParadise.com](http://AccidentalParadise.com).

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, [AccidentalParadise.com](http://AccidentalParadise.com).

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at 301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505 will also handle sales *daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

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



## In Case You Missed It

[Book Notes #83: The Great Gatsby: ‘Almost 100 and Counting’](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[Who Moved Our Creek?: A Bay Rat History Mystery](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. David Frew

[A Sanida Safari](#) written by Al Lubiejewski (with research by Edward Robasky)

