

**SURVEY AND HISTORIC CONTEXT REPORT:
THE LIFE, WORK, AND LEGACY
OF MASTER BUILDER THONEY PIETRO,
MORGANTOWN, WEST VIRGINIA**



Thoney Pietro

Prepared for:
City of Morgantown Historic Landmarks Commission
and
Monongalia County Historic Landmarks Commission
July, 2002

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document presents the findings of a cultural resource survey project completed between the fall of 2001 and the summer of 2002 in the Morgantown, West Virginia area. The project was carried out under the joint auspices of the City of Morgantown Historic Landmarks Commission and the Monongalia County Landmarks Commission. Funding was provided by the West Virginia State Historic Preservation Office. Following the issuance of a Request for Proposals, the Commission selected the historic preservation and community development consulting firm of Taylor & Taylor Associates to complete the project. All aspects of the survey were carried out by the project manager, David L. Taylor, one of the firm's principals, who has been certified by the State Historic Preservation Offices of West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Ohio, Maryland, and New York as meeting the professional qualifications for architectural history set forth in 36 CFR 61. The Pietro project was completed in conformity to the *Survey Manual* prepared by the West Virginia State Historic Preservation Office and with the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for Identification and Evaluation*. The project documented the work and legacy of Thoney Pietro, an Italian working-class immigrant who came to Morgantown in the 1890s and became a major road builder and eventually something of a philanthropist in his own right. The project produced eleven Historic Property Inventory Forms along with the Historic Context Report which consists of the bulk of this document. Black and white photographs were taken of each property, as were color slides and digital images. Three sets of 4" x 6" black-and-white prints were provided, one each to the County and City Landmarks Commissions and to the State Historic Preservation Office, along with original copies of the documentation materials. The survey forms and *Report* were provided to the Commission in CD-ROM format as well. In addition, a photography log was provided, along with recommendations as to those properties which appear to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or for designation as state or local landmarks.

Summary of Building Types and Construction Methods

The Thoney Pietro Survey project identified a series of distinct property types within the context of the long career of Thoney Pietro. Pietro was a public works contractor and not generally involved with the construction of buildings, although individual buildings were associated with him and his career. The following property types were identified in the course of the survey:

brick-paved streets
single-family domestic architecture
multi-family domestic architecture
masonry walls

Predictably, the material favored by mason Pietro was masonry. Two identified examples of wood frame single-family domestic architecture were surveyed; the balance of the architecture surveyed was of brick or stone construction. The walls associated with Thoney Pietro—including the example located in the area of Pietro Court—are of sandstone. The paved streets reflecting Pietro's work, typified by Pietro Court and Wagner Road, the latter of which was surveyed, are of brick.

Recommendations

The legacy left by Thoney Pietro is impressive, to say the least. The complex of buildings bounded by Pietro Court, Pietro Street, Pennsylvania Avenue, and Kingwood Street contains a densely-assembled collection of five buildings, stone walls, and the brick-paved Pietro Court, all of which are directly associated with Thoney Pietro. This aggregate of properties is clearly eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district, and such designation is recommended for the consideration of the City of Morgantown Historic Landmarks Commission. Since the complex is owned by essentially one individual, the owner consent issue would have to be resolved. However, since National Register listing carries with it no restriction on private property

rights and since all are income-producing properties, the availability of the rehabilitation investment tax credit may provide an attractive incentive for listing. Local and state designation should also be considered; local designation would provide a measure of protection not afforded by National Register listing. The nomination could be entitled the *Pietro Court-Pietro Street Historic District* and should incorporate the buildings, the walls, and the brick-paved Pietro Court as contributing features.

The two stone houses which were surveyed are more associated with the *legacy* of Pietro than with him personally. Both appear eligible for local, state, and National Register designation, and, at a minimum, it is recommended that National Register designation be pursued if the property owners are agreeable.

The monumental property known as "Pietro's Castle," is clearly one of the state's most distinctive properties. It is obviously eligible for listing in the National Register, and such designation, as well as that of a state landmark, should be pursued, if the owner consents. The property's designation as a local landmark is recommended as well; such action is within the purview of the Monongalia County Landmarks Commission, since the property lies well outside the Morgantown city limits.

The eligibility of the retaining wall on White Avenue is less assured than the other properties. It is likely more of a candidate for local designation than state or national designation.

The historic brick pavement on Wagner Road lies within the Chancery Hill Historic District. The bricked street is clearly a contributing feature in the district. Discussions should be held with the State Historic Preservation Office as to the feasibility of amending the Resource Inventory for the district to designate the paved street as a "contributing" element within the context of the district, thereby providing all available protection from adverse impact by publicly-funded undertakings. If local designation were bestowed upon the neighborhood, the Landmarks Commission should assure that the historic pavement is included specifically in the documents associated with such designation.

In addition to the above registration activities, it is also recommended that the Thoney Pietro Survey be expanded to an investigation of the legacy of the entire Pietro family, including, especially, Thoney Pietro's older brother, James. Following the c. 1925 break-up of the Pietro Construction Company, James Pietro went on to have a distinguished career in his own right and his contribution to Morgantown should be explored as well. Building upon the material developed in this *Report*, the subsequent project would result in a comprehensive study of the legacy of this unusual and influential family.

Such a project would be eligible for State Historic Preservation Office funding and could be combined with registration of the properties identified in the course of the present study.

THONEY PIETRO: FROM ATELETA TO MORGANTOWN TO LIVE THE AMERICAN DREAM

The life of Thoney Pietro is that of a Horatio Alger-esque figure who lived the American dream during the more than three-quarters of a century he made his home in America. The family Pitassi was long-established in the Italian area of Genoa, where in the thirteenth century Giulio Pitassi was a "great captain of adventure."¹ The family eventually divided into several branches, establishing themselves in Aquila Suloma, Pescozitano, and Ateleta. By the eighteenth century, one Pio Pitassi had become a large landholder in the town of Ateleta in the Province of Aquila. On March 1, 1877, Morgantown's Thoney Pietro was born of this line of Pitassis. His father, Fiore Pitassi, was a physician.²

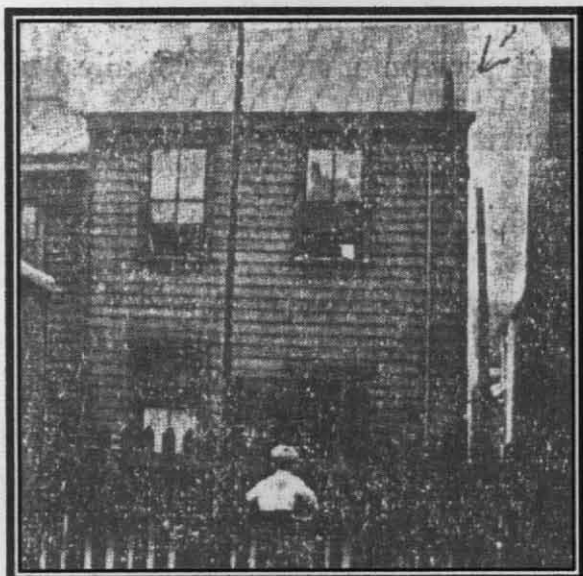


Fig. 1 Thoney Pietro lived in this modest working-class house when he first arrived in Pittsburgh. [photo from *Unionc*, cited in Bibliography]

Little is known of the specific details of his earliest upbringing. He served an apprenticeship as a stone mason under his Genoan grandfather and as a teenager (variously reported as April, 1894 and May, 1896) he emigrated to the New World and eventually settled in Pittsburgh. Like countless immigrants, his name was anglicized and forever after he would be known as Thoney Pietro (locally pronounced "Tony Peetro"). He began work as a skilled laborer and his first job involved the brick paving of Liberty Avenue, in downtown Pittsburgh.³ Despite his skills, he apparently did not merit inclusion

¹Much of the material for this report was drawn from the Thoney Pietro Collection, part of the West Virginia and Regional History Collection at West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia. Pietro's genealogical data came from a typewritten manuscript appearing in both Italian and English.

²"Thoney Pietro and his Castle: Stone Mason par Excellent [*sic*]," unpublished MS in the West Virginia and Regional History Collection at West Virginia & University, Morgantown, West Virginia.

³This area of downtown Pittsburgh is part of the National Register-listed Penn-Liberty Historic District. It has since been paved in asphalt.



Fig. 2 This unidentified photo in the Thoney Pietro Collection may be the likeness of young Thoney shortly after he arrived in America.

in local *City Directories* until 1900, when he first appeared as Ferdinando Pietro, listed as a bricklayer with lodgings on Stockholm Street, near 28th Street, in the vicinity of the present-day "Strip District," northwest of the downtown. In 1902, the *Pittsburgh City Directory* listed one "N. Pietro," a mason living at 1302 Penn Avenue. It is not known whether or not this Pietro was Thoney Pietro, but the Penn Avenue address was in close proximity to the address noted for Ferdinando Pietro the previous year. No other mention of Pitassi or Pietro ever appeared in the *Pittsburgh City Directories*.

Pietro was married three times. His eldest child was Mary Virginia, by his wife Josephine, while his son, George, was by his wife Maria, to whom he was married more than fifty years. Josephine Pietro, apparently the victim of post-partum depression, took her own life when Mary Virginia was but a few days old. The wife of Thoney Pietro's brother James had just given birth to a daughter, Anna, and she nursed both infants.⁴

A typewritten manuscript headed simply "THONEY PIETRO" lists his first job as an 1896 sewer and paving project in Wilmerding, Pennsylvania, followed by similar early projects in Freeport and Ridgway, Pennsylvania (1897)⁵, Aspinwall, Pennsylvania and Morgantown (1898), Scottdale, Pennsylvania and another project in Morgantown (1899), and Homestead and Aspinwall, Pennsylvania (1900). In the 1920s, this list was incorporated onto letterhead for Pietro's paving company.

⁴Oral interview with Gloria Cunningham, granddaughter of James Pietro and grand-niece of Thoney Pietro, conducted at Morgantown, West Virginia, April 2002. The interview tape is deposited with the West Virginia and Regional History Collection at West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia..

⁵At the time of preparation of this document a large historic district was being reviewed at the National Register for listing. Approved by the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Board in June, 2002, this district retains a number of brick streets which may be the work of Thoney Pietro.

Thoney Pietro evidently excelled immediately in his chosen profession as a bricklayer. He entered the employ of the James McAfee Company of Allegheny, Pennsylvania, formerly a separate community but now part of Pittsburgh's North Side.

In September, 1900, the company was engaged on a paving project in Homestead, Pennsylvania, the home of U. S. Steel, on the Monongahela River. Twenty-three year-old Thoney Pietro's skills so impressed his superintendent, a Mr. Ross, that he offered a \$300 wager--a significant sum at that time--that his young mason could exceed the existing record for bricklaying within a specific time, then held by an Irish immigrant who had laid eight hundred

six square yards of bricks in a ten-

hour span. The bet was laid down, and on Twelfth Avenue in Homestead Pietro single-handedly laid a section of brick street thirty feet in width and three hundred fifty feet in length, a total of 1,166 square yards, translating to fifty-eight bricks per square yard, for a staggering total of 67,628 individual units or one hundred thirty-six bricks per minute all day. Seven years later, he bested his own record by laying one hundred eighty-two bricks per minute on a paving project in Indiana, Pennsylvania. A broadside printed by Pietro many years later noted that a reporter from the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* came to Indiana to cover the story which "created quite a sensa-



Fig. 4 Maria Pietro

tion in the days when a workman's pride was how well he could do his job and not how little he could do and keep it."⁶



Fig. 3 The first house which Thoney Pietro built was this modest frame home which he erected in 1908 on the city block which would eventually contain five Pietro buildings.

⁶MS from the West Virginia and Regional History Collection at West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia.

In 1898 Thoney Pietro boarded a Monogahela River steamboat at the Pittsburgh wharf and headed upriver to Morgantown, West Virginia.⁷ He initially occupied rented quarters and secured work as a laborer. By 1903 he was able to acquire his first home in Morgantown, a small frame cottage. In 1908, he erected the first of several properties which would become part of the legacy which he left to

his adopted country. The 1908 home, located at 72 Kingwood Street (Fig. 3), is a modest laterally-oriented gable-roofed frame building of two stories. It occupies a portion of the city block which Pietro acquired and upon which he erected four more properties over the next seventeen years. In 1910, Pietro built a substantial wood Bungalow (Fig. 5) immediately in front of this first house, at 70 Kingwood Street. He remained in the Bungalow for about fourteen years, until in 1923 or early 1924 he engaged Morgantown architect Carl Reger to design a



Fig. 5 In 1910 Pietro built this Bungalow immediately in front of his earlier home, which appears at the upper left corner of this photo. It was the last wood frame house he would occupy and he remained here until 1925.

new home next door, at 74 Kingwood Street. The masonry work was done by the A. L. Shrum Company of Morgantown and the woodwork was supplied by the Herdman Sash, Door, and

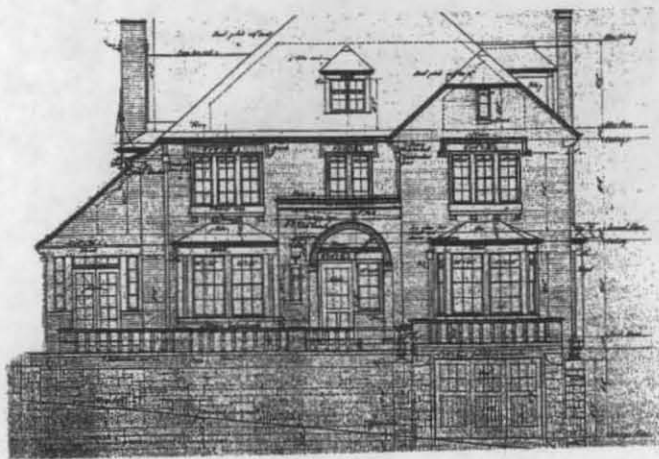


Fig. 6 In 1924, Morgantown architect Carl Reger designed this vaguely Mediterranean Revival-style buff brick home for Thoney Pietro at 74 Kingwood Street.

⁷Undated clipping from *Unione* [Italian language newspaper], in the Thoney Pietro Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Collection at West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia. The periodical was published in Pittsburgh and while it is not dated, information on the masthead suggests a 1938 publication date.

Lumber Company, prominent purveyors of custom millwork from Zanesville, Ohio.⁸ The highly decorative ornamental tile hearth and other similar tile features were the work of the Mosaic Tile Company, also of Zanesville. At about the same time, he erected a brick duplex and a small brick Bungalow behind his home. He remained in the 1925 house at 74 Kingwood until the 1930s, when he moved to the palatial home which he erected at Rockley Heights, east of Morgantown. This became known as "Pietro's Castle" and will be discussed in more detail later in this document.

Fig. 7 The unsigned elevation drawing of the Pietro Duplex (right) was part of the collection of the Morgantown-based General Woodworking Company. The elevation drawing of the Pietro House (below) is also from the collection of General Woodworking, but is signed by architect Carl Reger. The General Woodworking drawings are held by the Institute for the History of Technology and Industrial Archaeology at West Virginia University.



⁸Information from correspondence in the Thoney Pietro Collection, *op. cit.*



Fig. 7 These contemporary photos illustrate the three homes which Pietro erected for himself in the Pietro Court area.



Not long after settling in Morgantown, Thoney Pietro established the Thoney Pietro Construction Company, whose early letterhead identified the firm as masons and general contractors, with street paving a specialty. The letterhead also notes that the company undertook "sewerage and excavating of all kinds." The Pietro operation also included Thoney's brothers Henry, James, and Lawrence (originally Lorenzo). For many years James served as County Foreman, corresponding to a public works superintendent. In the 1920s, Henry Pietro relocated to Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, where he operated the Pietro Company's Philadelphia-area work from 28 East Glenside Avenue in the suburb of Glenside. During this same period the firm had two agents in Baltimore, Idella Porter and W. S. McCandless, who maintained offices in Room 416 of Baltimore's Equitable Building. It was likely through their efforts that the Pietro company secured paving and sewerage projects in the "Homeland" Subdivision which was being developed in Baltimore by the Roland Park Company in the mid-1920s.

Thoney Pietro became one of the 5,000 Italian-Americans who settled in Morgantown. In 1942, the *Morgantown Post* chronicled the contribution of the community's Italian-American population, describing this segment of the local population as "go-getters."

Most of the Italians being unskilled laborers, upon being admitted sought employment on road construction and coal mining camps and gradually some of those who had aptitude for business went in busi-

ness.⁹

Thoney Pietro was clearly one of those “who had aptitude for business.” Always fiercely proud



Fig. 8 This 1909 photo shows Thoney Pietro's crew standing proudly on Stewart Street in Morgantown. Pietro himself is at the far right in the bowler hat. Note the “TP” which was likely set up in brick for this photo.

of his heritage, Pietro recognized that the influence of Italian-speaking citizens in West Virginia was significant and in the 1930s, after attaining considerable influence himself, Pietro campaigned successfully for Italian language instruction to be offered in the public schools.

There is no indication that except for his “Castle” which will be discussed later, Pietro ever expanded from excavating and masonry contracting to the construction of buildings. On the other hand, his paving and sewer construction business kept him more than a little busy. By the ‘teens, the corporate letterhead referred to the Pietro Paving & Construction Company, with Thoney Pietro as president and Henry Pietro as secretary. The letterhead noted their specialties in “grading, paving, curbing, sewerage, cement work, street car lines, masonry, brick work, cement walks, etc., etc.”

An account by one Jasper Bean describes a typical paving job. Bean was ten years of age in 1912 when Thoney Pietro paved streets in the rural village of Wadestown, in western Monongalia

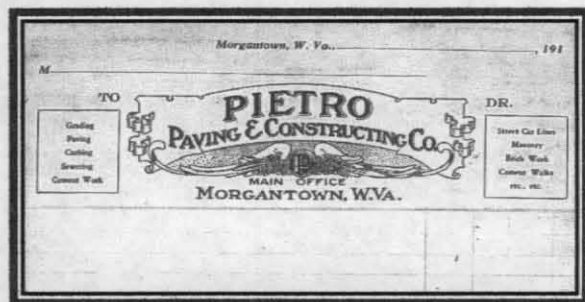


Fig. 9 This early letterhead lists the various specialties of the firm; based on the date line, it was used before 1920.

⁹Morgantown Post, “Italian American Are Among Finest Citizens in Nation,” September 17, 1942.



Fig 10 The work of the Pietro Company extended to the laying of culverts and sewers as well as paving. Here Thoney Pietro is shown beside a recently-installed drainage culvert.

County, West Virginia. Eighty years later, he recalled that the project began with four horses pulling a grading machine along the dirt street. When the thoroughfare was properly smoothed, a foundation course of sand was poured evenly as the base for the brick pavement. Pietro had several others working with him, whose responsibilities were hod carrying and setting up the materials which Pietro, the master bricklayer, needed to complete his job. Bean recalled that nearly the whole village came out to see the paving progress. Wadestown's leading citizen was shopkeeper Morris Garrison, and he had the honor of placing the first brick in the new street. "He took a brick and laid it 'caddywompus' (i. e., diagonally) in the middle of the street in front of the store. Pietro never moved the brick. He laid bricks around it to form a square. Then he laid rows to the sides of the street."¹⁰

A 1915 letter in the Pietro collection at West Virginia University referenced the publication of a book which the company intended as an advertisement of the breadth of their work. Unfortunately,

such a publication was not found in the course of researching this document. The best record of the work of the firm appears on another letterhead from the late 1920s, which in the margins lists all of the work--exclusively public works-related--which Thoney Pietro and the firm completed between 1896 and 1928. It is apparent from this list that the majority of the company's work was in West Virginia, although they were the successful bidder on jobs in

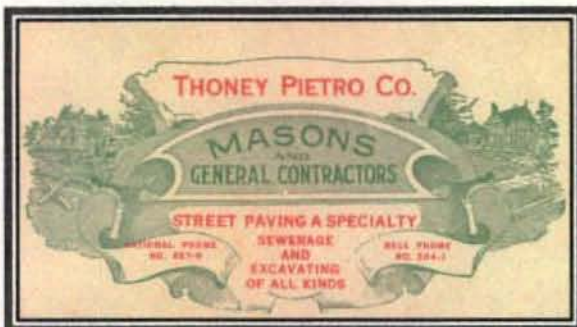


Fig. 12 This business card likely dated from the World War One era.

¹⁰Ginger Brookover, "Castle on the Crest," *Wonderful West Virginia* (50:12), February, 1993, 2-6.

Maryland and Pennsylvania as well. The following jobs appear on this letterhead:

1896	Wilmerding, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving
1897	Freeport and Ridgway, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving
1898	Morgantown, West Virginia Aspinwall, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving
1899	Morgantown, West Virginia Scottdale, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving
1900	Homestead, Pennsylvania Aspinwall, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving
1901	Morgantown, West Virginia Ingram, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving
1902	Morgantown, West Virginia	sewer and paving
1903-1904	Morgantown, West Virginia Uniontown, Pennsylvania Scottdale, Pennsylvania Ambridge, Pennsylvania Fayette City, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving sewer and paving sewer and paving sewer and paving
1905	Morgantown, West Virginia	sewer and paving
1906	Morgantown, West Virginia Indiana, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving
1907	Morgantown, West Virginia Indiana, Pennsylvania Pt. Marion, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving sewer and paving
1908	Morgantown, West Virginia Pt. Marion, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving
1909	Morgantown, West Virginia Pt. Marion, Pennsylvania Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving sewer and paving

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1910	Morgantown, West Virginia Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania Uniontown, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving sewer and paving
1911	Sabraton, West Virginia Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania Springdale, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving sewer and paving
1912	Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania Scottsdale, Pennsylvania Roscoe, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving sewer and paving
1913	Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania Scottsdale, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving
1914	Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania Scottsdale, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving
1915	Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania Scottsdale, Pennsylvania	sewer and paving sewer and paving
1916	Williamson, West Virginia	sewer and paving
1917	Monogah Service Company	water line
1918	Monongalia County Court Wellsburg, West Virginia	road work sewer
1919	Fayette County Monongalia County	road work road work
1920	Ritchie County Fayette County	road work road work
1921	Ritchie County	road work
1922	Ritchie County Clarksburg, West Virginia	sewer and paving sewer and paving
1923	Towson, Maryland Clarksburg, West Virginia	sewer and paving sewer and paving

1924	Towson, Maryland Clarksburg, West Virginia	sewer and paving sewer and paving
1925	Roland Park, Baltimore, Maryland Clarksburg, West Virginia subcontractor to Buckley & Company, Philadelphia	sewer sewer unspecified work
1926	Cheltenham Township, Pennsylvania Morgantown, West Virginia subcontractor to Buckley & Company, Philadelphia	sewer sewer unspecified work
1927	Jenkintown, Pennsylvania Glenside, Pennsylvania Oreland, Pennsylvania Lansdale, Pennsylvania Wyncote, Pennsylvania	sanitary and storm sewer sanitary and storm sewer sanitary and storm sewer sanitary and storm sewer sanitary and storm sewer
1928	Jenkintown, Pennsylvania Lansdale, Pennsylvania Glenside, Pennsylvania Wyncote, Pennsylvania	sanitary and storm sewer sanitary and storm sewer sanitary and storm sewer sanitary and storm sewer ¹¹

In addition to providing this impressive list of projects, Pietro also noted on the letterhead “the names of the banks with which I have dealt from 1896 to 1928.” Thirty-one financial institutions

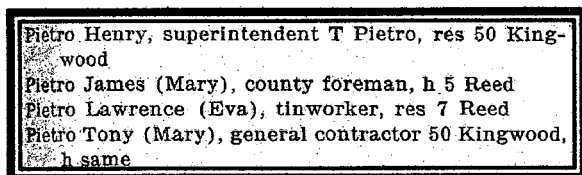


Fig. 13 By the early 1920s, *City Directories* reflected the growth of the company, although at this time apparently Pietro brother Lawrence was not employed by the firm.

appear on this list, including Morgantown banks, institutions in Pittsburgh, and others in many of Pietro project communities. According to the letterhead, the rolling stock and equipment associated with the company’s paving and sewerage services carried a value of \$125,000. The equipment included five cement mixers, two steam rollers, steel

¹¹Discussion with Morgantown and Monongalia County officials revealed that minutes of the City Council and County Commissioners are not indexed and thus, the identification of specific local projects was not feasible within the scope of the present project.

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forms, water pipes and small tools, four trench machines, two large trucks, two small trucks, 2,400 trench braces, seven gasoline pumps, two air compressors, and a complete blacksmith shop.

Despite the undeniable success of the Pietro operation, it was not wholly without risk. A unsigned copy of a somewhat rambling 1926 letter from one brother to the other lamented:

I rec'd your letter last evening and I was certainly shocked to hear that after 30 years without having an accident on our work it had to happen now, I would of [sic] been more willing to lose my home than to loose the life of one of our laborers, whether it was white or colored.

You know that I always buy plenty equipment of all kinds to protect the lives of my laborers and property . . . I suppose it was an act of God for which no one has control over it and could have prevented it.

As you ask me the amount that the bonding company will pay it will be about \$5,000, but this is a matter of law under the state compensation in which the accident happened.

If the dead man has any family you give them any assistance that you can in connection with the bonding company, etc. And also give the bonding company all the details in which the accident happened.¹²

As shown on the above list, the Pietro operations extended far beyond the confines of Thoney Pietro's adopted Morgantown, although obviously a considerable level of work was done in the city. Pietro was apparently known to laborers and clients alike, as indicated by this letter from an African-American mason from Ohio:

The writer is Joshua Smith, brick and segment block layer. I am looking for a job of that kind. Can you use a couple of good men on your job? If so, please state wages paid and we will come and put out the goods for you. The writer is a collared [sic] man and the best segment block layer in the United States. Don't miss us.

The dealings of the brothers had not been without its own share of stress. Apparently, the c.

¹²Letter dated August 20, 1926 from the Thoney Pietro Collection, part of the West Virginia and Regional History Collection at West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia

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1915 establishment of the construction company occurred because Thoney Pietro—small of stature and Napoleonic in demeanor--was not always able to secure work on his own name. Prior to that time, each brother had worked independently as laborers. Gloria Cunningham recalls, “that’s why he brought the brothers in.”¹³ James, the eldest, invested \$1,200.00 and the others each put in \$500.00 to get the company started. Their first job was a paving project in Williamson, West Virginia, where their ethnicity and that of their workers caused a stir. Ms. Cunningham recalled,

The people in Williamson were not accustomed to anyone of foreign extraction—they were sort of mountain people. They [the Pietros] took their own crew and nobody would put them up. The undertaker let them sleep in the funeral home in the boxes that the coffins came in. Then at the end of the week, everyone realized that these foreigners weren’t going to slit their throats, so then they opened up their homes.”

In 1923, following a paving project in Indiana, Pennsylvania and in the wake of a family disagreement, Thoney Pietro offered to purchase the corporation’s outstanding stock of the company. An apparently unexecuted copy of Thoney Pietro’s letter to the stockholders set forth his offer:

Owing to the serious illness of the daughter of Mr. Paul F. Well, secretary of the Thoney Pietro Company, and also to the fact that the auditor of the company has not yet prepared a report, of statement of the business done for the preceding year, the regular annual meeting of the Thoney Pietro Company was continued from the 6th day of January, 1923 to the 27th day of January, 1923, as per notice regularly and duly advertised in the Morgantown newspapers.

At the coming meeting it is the intent of the undersigned to offer a resolution for the purpose of dissolving the company, or surrendering the charter and winding up its business. I feel that the duties imposed upon me by the stockholders are too great, and I cannot, in justice to myself and family, undertake to give the best years of y life and time in attending to all of the business of the company without any assistance, for the benefit of the entire stockholders at a salary so insignificant for the services that I perform that I hesitate to mention what it is. In addition to that, my traveling expenses are about half paid; in other words, I do not put in all my expenses by several hundred dollars. In addition to all this, the executive, administrative, and the management

¹³Cunningham interview, op. cit.

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of the entire corporation, as well as a large part of the secretarial duties, and of the correspondence, devolves upon me, individually. I have on many, many occasions advanced money out of my own pocket, loaned my own credit, gave the company the benefit of my private banking account, put up as collateral security for bonds my own private, personal promissory notes, and also real estate, to the tune of many, many thousands of dollars. All this was done and advanced by me for the benefit of the company, and required my services, my energy, and ability, without absolutely any assistance; it is a physical impossibility for me to act as the executive, administrative, and secretarial head of the corporation, as well as to manage all of its business; especially is this true when we have contracts in different parts of the state and in different states—such as is now existing. I may add, in this connection, that the Towson, Maryland contract I fear will cost us a great deal more money than we realize under the terms of the agreement; this, of course, is unfortunate but it is one of those unforeseen things that sometimes happen, over which we have no control, though we have always used our best judgement, skill, ability, and experience in bidding on, accepting, undertaking, and completing all contracts. I have done all of the above for years, without assistance and it has come to the time now where I do not feel physically qualified or able, in justice to myself and family, to go on with this enormous burden and responsibility any longer. In other words I have been, and please do not think the statement egoistical, the entire Thoney Pietro Company, and have financed individually, all of the contracts and work performed by it.

Thoney Pietro then offered to sell all of his stock to the other shareholders for fifty cents on the dollar or to buy their shares at the same price. He ended the letter, “with best wishes and kindest personal regards, I am cordially yours,” followed by a blank signature line for the signature of the “President of the Thoney Pietro Company.”

Following the dissolution of the firm, Thoney Pietro and his brothers Lawrence and Henry continued in the construction business and were selected for a variety of Works Progress Administration projects in the 1930s, including retaining walls which are still considered to be significant engineering and construction accomplishments. By the 1940s, only estranged brother James was listed in the *City Directories* as a “road contractor.” When James Pietro died in 1956 at the age of eighty-two, his obituary recorded that he had been County Superintendent of Roads for many years during which time



Fig. 14 James Pietro (1873-1956) was Thoney Pietro's older brother. James Pietro established and maintained his own reputation as a successful contractor.

he supervised the paving of many of the original streets in Morgantown and Westover.

James Pietro was also memorialized as having donated the first trees planted in Court House Square and for his work in filling in the hollow and "doing other construction work in creating what is now Pony Lewis Field at Morgantown High School." At the time of his death, he was living in one side of the Pietro duplex house at 5 Clement Street (now 325-329 Pennsylvania Avenue).¹⁴

The Stock Market Crash of 1929 apparently had little effect on Thoney Pietro's fortunes, since, according to Gloria Cunningham, his funds were invested in the Mellon Bank in Pittsburgh, which did not fail, rather than in local institutions which did fail. It was during the Depression that Pietro, by then in his fifties, embarked on the construction project with which he would be associated for the rest of his life: a palatial stone home east of Morgantown in the area known as Rockley Heights.

Between 1929 and 1933 Thoney Pietro was engaged on what was likely the largest construction project of his lifetime: the creation of a country estate on a hilltop approximately five miles east of Morgantown. Crafted of West Virginia sandstone laid by Italian master masons, the \$200,000 home which became known as "Pietro's Castle" has the appearance of a Medieval fortress complete with crenellated towers. The lead masons were two artisans remembered by Gloria Cunningham only as Pepino and Teobaldo. Erected without the use of a crane, Pietro built a spiral ramp around the perimeter to allow workmen to push stones up the ramp to work sites on all sides of the building. Many unemployed laborers found work in the construction of the twenty-three-room mansion which was completed as the Depression was deepening. Thoney Pietro and his family lived at the castle for the next ten years,

¹⁴Morgantown Post, October 6, 1956, p. 1.

playing host to an array of local, national, and international luminaries. A broadside which was printed by Pietro proclaimed

This Castle has been visited and has entertained the following high personages: Prince, Marquis, Counts, Official Cavaliers, Cavaliers, Bishops, Monsignors, Consuls, Governors, Senators, Congressmen, Judges, Mayors, University Presidents, University Professors, School Superintendents, Writers, Etc.¹⁵

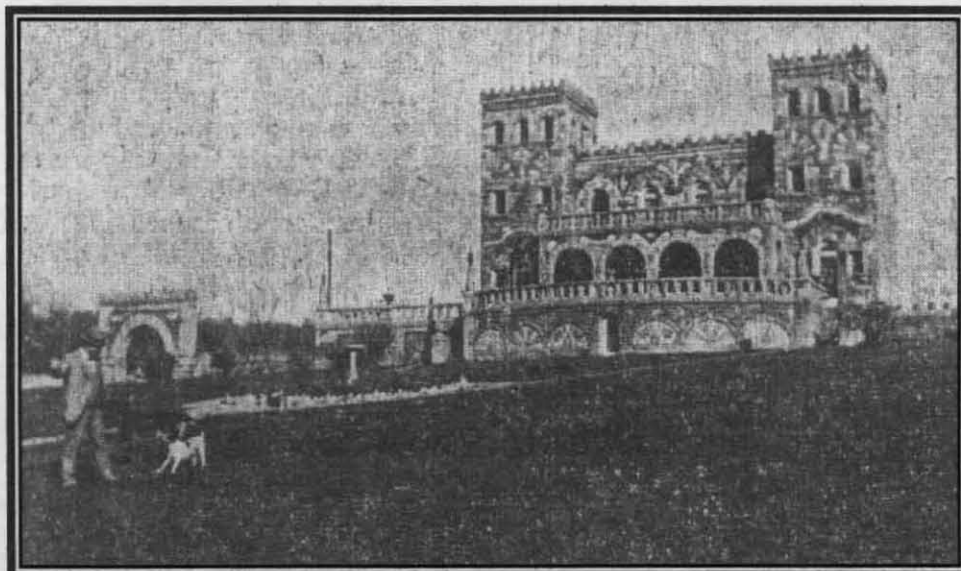


Fig. 15 This 1930s view of Pietro's Castle shows Thoney Pietro at the left, giving the appearance of the country gentleman playing with one of his dogs; the dogs had a stone doghouse on the grounds.

Always the ardent friend of Italy and things Italian, Thoney Pietro flew the Italian tri-color on one of the towers at his Castle and the Stars and Stripes from the other tower. He was a prime mover in the establishment of the Dante Club at West Virginia University and was the recipient of a long list of awards and honors from Italophile organizations. His sentiments did cause him some trouble shortly after the outbreak of World War Two, however, when it was suspected that he might be spying for the Axis powers and transmitting to Italy from one of the towers. He was taken into custody by the sheriff (who ironically, was one of Pietro's tenants in the duplex which he had erected behind his Kingwood

¹⁵The Pietro papers at West Virginia University include some references to specific visitors, but no comprehensive "guest list" was ever maintained.

Street home). He was released after the suspicions proved groundless.

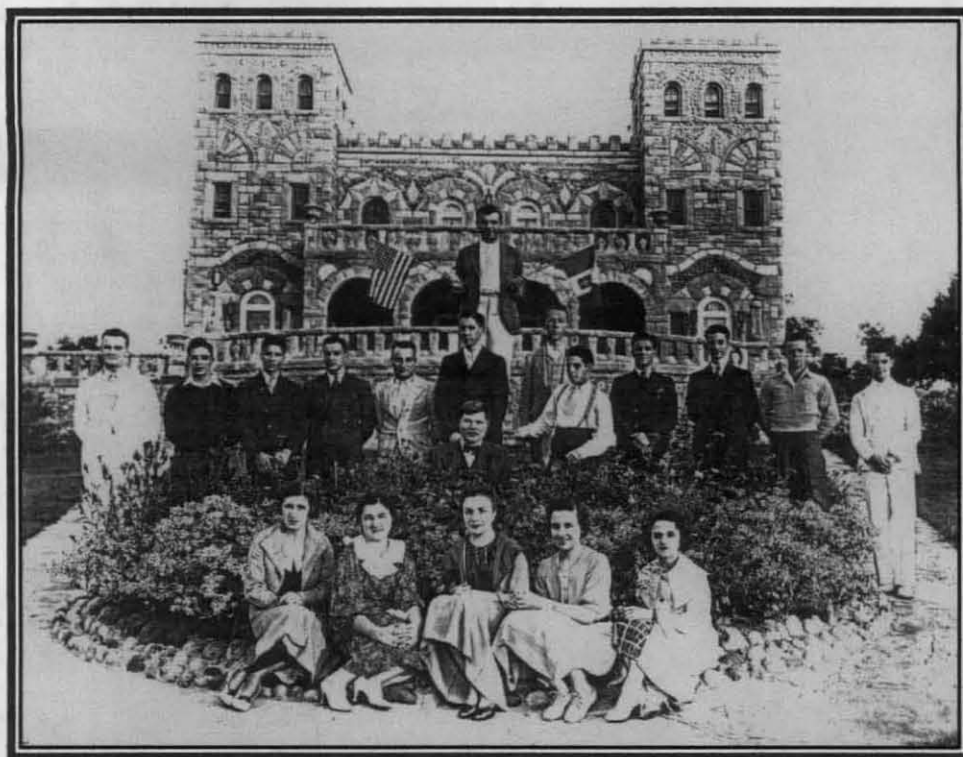


Fig. 13 The Castle and its owner are shown here in a photo of a 1930s outing celebrated by the Dante Club, which Thoney Pietro founded in Morgantown. He appears in the middle and his son, George is in the rear holding both the Italian and American flags. Thoney's niece, Helen (daughter of James Pietro) is the second from the right in the front row.

The castle drew the attention of many from near and far. In 1949, following the publication of a photo of the house in a Pittsburgh newspaper, Mr. and Mrs. Thoney Pietro received a letter from Ida Mae Dedig who wrote

I was just sitting here in my modest livingroom, relaxing after getting my two sons and daughter off to work, looking over last evening's paper and noticed a picture of your beautiful home and remembered seeing it once before. Naturally I took time to read [the] news item about it. Although we are complete strangers to one another, I live very close to your old neighborhood. I want to congratulate you on the

wonderful things you have accomplished . . .¹⁶

As his fortunes increased, Thoney Pietro became a benefactor of a variety of charities in the Morgantown area. Always the supporter of the land of his birth, he received a variety of awards and honors of Italian and Roman Catholic derivation. He listed the following in a typewritten manuscript:

1934	La Ledaglia D'Argento de Benemerenza della Diffusione della coltura Italiana all'estera
1946	enrolled in Ordine dei Cavaleiri dello Spirito D'Italia, as an honorary member and Commendadore
1947	Citation for Meritorious Service--American relief for Italy
1948	Asociacion Biosofica Universal, Ordre de L'Espirit Criox de Service de Parmiere Classe
1948	Life member of Societa Geografica Italiana
1949	Reliquary presented by the Very Rev. Virgil Liucci, O. F. M., containing the ashes of the bones of St. Anthony of Padua
1949	Conferito la Stella della Solidarieta Italiana per il contributo alla Reconstruzione del L'Italia
1951	Blessing from Pope Pius

Thoney Pietro retired from active work in the early 1940s, but his philanthropic activities continued into his retirement. In 1941 he gave enough stone to erect an outdoor oven (not extant) for the University Demonstration High School of West Virginia. At about that same time, Pietro purchased a marble bust of Dante which he wished to present to West Virginia University. The West Virginia University Library website chronicled the travails of the bust:

¹⁶Letter in Thoney Pietro Collection, West Virginia and Regional History Collection at West Virginia & University, Morgantown, West Virginia.

In 1940, Thoney Pietro, a retired, wealthy general contractor and Morgantown resident for many years, wanted to present the University with a gift as a token of his appreciation of happiness which had come to him since his arrival from Italy. Pietro ordered the bust of the famous Florentine 13th-century poet, Dante Alighieri, from Peter Bazzanti and Son of Florence. The colors on the pedestal were to be green and brown to blend with the colors in the University Library lobby. When completed, the bust was shipped to Baltimore, Md. where it encountered problems with the U.S. Customs. Customs insisted on a \$113.00 duty even though Pietro had a letter from Customs headquarters stating that objects used for educational purposes were exempt from duty. After fruitless letters and even a futile trip to Baltimore by Pietro, Customs turned the bust over to the Treasury Department which in turn sent the bust to the Library of Congress in 1941. When University President Irwin Stewart arrived in July 1946, Pietro told him the story of the Dante bust. During a visit to Washington, President Stewart visited the Library of Congress and found the bust of Dante in the basement gathering dust. President Stewart wrote his former classmate and then Chief Librarian, Luther H. Evans, about the Dante bust and hoped he could find a way to have the bust sent to the institution to which it was originally intended. Evans was willing to help; however, under the law the Library of Congress could only turn over the bust if manuscripts or materials of equal value to the duty were exchanged. Library funds were inadequate to meet the monetary value; therefore, Pietro supplied the money for the microfilming of copies from the West Virginia Collection. The Library of Congress was then willing to accept the microfilm for the bust. Finally, on April 22, 1948, President Stewart notified Pietro that the "long-awaited" gift had arrived.¹⁷

In presenting the bust, Thoney Pietro waxed poetic over his relationship with his natal and adopted homelands:

Mr. President and Friends:

Today is for me a most important day. Today I am permitted to do something which is very close to my heart. Today, I am trying to do something which I hope will bring closer together my beloved America and my beloved Italy.

¹⁷<http://www.libraries.wvu.edu/history/overview.htm>

America has been good to me and I have tried in many ways to pay my debt to America. One way has been to try to bring about a better understanding between these two peoples. I am a little man, I cannot influence governments or the big men, but a nation is made up of little people and if the little people of two nations understand each other, the big men will have to.

The gift I am making is only a symbol which I hope will for years to come remind our young people of Italy, not the strife-torn misguided Italy of recent years; but the real Italy of music and laughter, art and friendship. That Italy will come again and when it does its greatest and best friend will be America, and you are that America.

Long live America! Long live Italy! All who look at the great Dante will remember me. Thank you and God bless you.

President Irwin Stewart replied:

On behalf of the Board of Governors, I am happy to accept this bust of Dante Alighieri presented to West Virginia University by Mr. Thoney Pietro of Morgantown.

Coming at this time, Mr. Pietro's gift is a reminder of the great contributions which Italy has made to the background and development of the United States.

I trust that in her present hour of trial, American contributions will help modern Italy to continue to serve, as did ancient Italy, as one of the important links in western civilization.

Thoney and Mary Pietro remained in the Castle until the late war years. Gas rationing and their advancing age apparently precipitated their move back into town, where they moved into the same unit in the Clement Street duplex which had been occupied by the sheriff who had detained him years before on suspicion on being an Italian spy. In his seventies, he offered the Castle property to the Roman Catholic Church on condition that they erect a chapel on the spacious grounds. In 1949, the property became the College of Our Lady of Good Counsel, operated by the Order of St. Francis. All did not go well with the transfer, however, since the church did not immediately build the chapel as agreed. Pietro, always deeply religious and an unswervingly committed Catholic, ceased attending church and was forced to litigate the issue. Finally Pittsburgh architect William D. Simboli was commissioned by the church to design a stone chapel for the property; it was dedicated on June 29, 1955.

Pietro remained in the duplex for a short time and then built a modest home near the Castle along with a small museum building to display the tangible remnants of his long career. He remained in this last of his homes for the remainder of his life, where his daughter Mary Virginia stayed with him and cared for him in his old age. He died in 1972 at the age of ninety-five.

Thoney Pietro's legacy is that of the penniless immigrant-turned-philanthropist, proud of his Italian beginnings but equally proud of his life as a naturalized citizen of the United States. His tangible legacy includes countless miles of brick streets--many now buried beneath asphalt--across West Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, as well as the city block in Morgantown between Kingwood Street, Pennsylvania Avenue, Pietro Street and Pietro Court and, of course, Pietro's Castle. The tradition of stone crafting which he and his brothers brought to Morgantown is also seen in several stone walls and at least two substantial stone houses (the 1932 442 Ash Street home built for tailor Joseph Bandiera and the c. 1936 house at 344 Watts Street whose early occupants include millworker Rocco Salucci).

THE THONEY PIETRO LEGACY: A PHOTO ESSAY

The contemporary photos which follow illustrate the breadth of the work of Thoney Pietro and the legacy which he left in Morgantown. Ranging from paving projects along Wagner Road to “Pietro’s Castle” in the Rockley Heights area of Monongalia County, the legacy of Thoney Pietro is far reaching. The Pietro brothers, principally Thoney and James “Jimmie” Pietro, but also including Lawrence and Henry, left an indelible mark of the cultural landscape of the community. And, admittedly, while Thoney may have been the best “promoter,” the legacy of Jimmie Pietro is inextricably linked with the heritage of the Morgantown area, be it in the stone house on Watts Avenue or the construction of a wall which no one but Jimmie Pietro could handle and which lives today as part of his legacy.



This modest frame house was the first building which Thoney Pietro built after having arrived in America in the 1890s. He apparently occupied rented quarters until this home was built.

THONEY PIETRO: HISTORIC CONTEXT REPORT
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July, 2002

In 1910 Thoney Pietro erected this Bungalow at 70 Kingwood Street and remained here with his family until building the property next door at 74 Kingwood Avenue in 1925. This was the last wood frame house which Pietro would occupy.



Pietro Court is a paved alley which runs beside two of the first properties in Morgantown which were home to Thoney Pietro.



In the retaining wall at 70 Kingwood is set this marble stone identifying the ownership of the alley which became Pietro Court

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Thoney Pietro's emergence as a speculative real estate investor is marked by these two properties which he erected side-by-side, fronting on what is now Pennsylvania Avenue. Likely erected in the 'teens or early 1920s, the small Bungalow and the far more spacious duplex were built using the same buff brick veneer of which Pietro would erect his own home nearby at 50 Kingwood Avenue in 1925.



Shown above and at the left, the Pietro duplex reflects the sophistication of formal design, incorporating Neo-Classical Revival-style motifs with a lingering feeling of the Mediterranean Revival style. Identical units were located on either side of a centered entry; eventually the two original apartments were subdivided into considerably smaller, far less pretentious units.



In 1924, Thoney Pietro engaged Morgantown architect Carl Reger to design a new home at the corner of Kingwood Avenue and what is now Pennsylvania Avenue. Pietro and his family remained here for only a few years, until his crowning achievement, the country home that would come known as "Pietro's Castle" was completed in 1933. Highly detailed and constructed with the finest materials, the house at 74 Kingwood has been converted for use as an office and apartment, but still retains significant elements of its historic fabric. Among these elements are the stair hall centered within the plan, the former livingroom on the left of the stair hall, and the sunroom with a tile hearth and floor. The woodwork for the house

came from the Herdman Sash and Door Company of Zanesville, Ohio, and the tile was provided by the Mosaic Tile Company, also of Zanesville, a leading producer of architectural tile until the 1950s. Other features include plaster relief ceilings and some original light fixtures. Illustrations of these and other elements appear on the next page.

THONEY PIETRO: HISTORIC CONTEXT REPORT

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The stair hall of the Pietro House retains its original stair, balustrade, and handrail, and opens into the livingroom, shown at the right. In addition, various original light fixtures have survived along with plaster relief work on the ceilings and crown molding—surely some of the finest in the City.



The Mosaic Tile Company's work appears in the floor, hearth, and mantle of the sunroom.



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The Thoney Pietro Company safe remains in a small room at the rear of the Kingwood Avenue house which was likely Pietro's office. The original lettering has been purposefully damaged over the years, reducing "Thoney Pietro" to "Honey Pie." This distinctive architectural feature was discussed on an Internet website as follows:

I received an e-mail describing an old safe that was installed behind a door in the back hall of a large house that had been divided into apartments. The name of the long dead owner of this house was inscribed on the front of the safe in gilded letters: Thoney Pietro. My reader said that in the early seventies "My friend who wanted to dye herself, not just her hair, purple, took a razor blade to the letters one night and reduced them to *honey Pie*." I can imagine that, living in that apartment, *honey Pie* writ large whenever you passed the door.¹⁸



In June, 1935, noted documentary photographer Walker Evans (1903-1975) captured this view of the Pietro Court area. Looking from the Walnut Street Bridge, the block is somewhat framed by the uprights and cross members of a telephone pole.

[from the Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration Office of War Information Collection], No. LC USF 342-000890-A.

¹⁸<http://www.apersonalsite.com/pixnbook/journal/oct99/oct2899.html>.

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This substantial 1930s home on Watts Street clearly reflects the stone craftsmanship which the brothers Pietro brought from Italy in the 1890s.

The Joseph Bandiera House of 1932, located at 442 Ash Street, is another of the homes in Morgantown which mirror the legacy of the Italian stonemasons "Pepino" and "Teobaldo." At the time of the survey, it was the residence of the son of the original occupants.



This highly detailed porch was installed on this property at 468 White Avenue. While its builder has not been identified, it clearly reflects the intricacies and motifs employed in the construction of Pietro's Castle.



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Thoney Pietro's livelihood and fortune were made largely from projects such as paving Wagner Road in Morgantown. The miles and miles of roads which he paved are a major part of his legacy, but many of them have been paved over with asphalt and are no longer visible. By far, however, the single most recognizable tangible legacy which he left was the country home, known as "Pietro's Castle," which he built between 1929 and 1933, occupied until the war years, and eventually donated to the Roman Catholic Church.

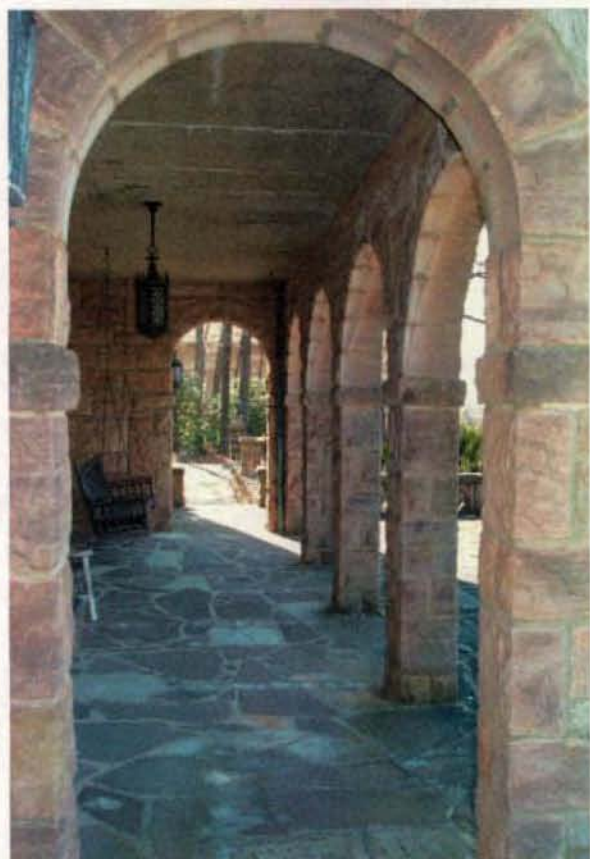
THONEY PIETRO: HISTORIC CONTEXT REPORT

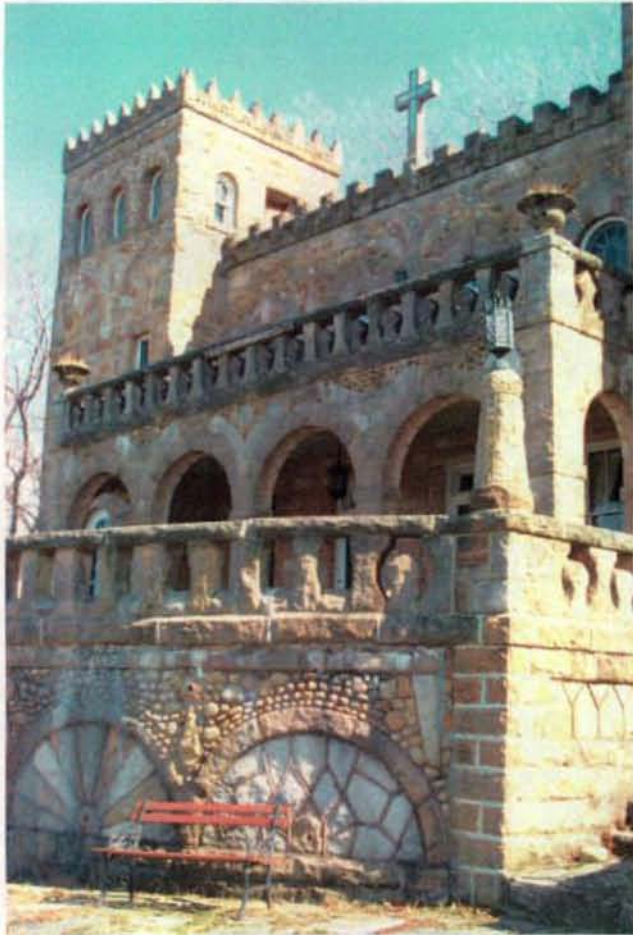
Taylor & Taylor Associates, Inc.

July, 2002



Built of locally quarried sandstone set principally by two Italian stonemasons recalled by Pietro grand-niece only as Pepino and Teobaldo the Castle took four years to build. It became the centerpiece of social activity in Morgantown during the balance of the 1930s and even into the early World War Two years. The views on this page illustrate only a small proportion of the detail and character of this remarkable property.





The cultural landscape of the Castle is dotted with artifacts recalling the skill of its builder and the legacy which he left to his adopted community. In addition, the role of the church, the present owner, is also reflected in the administrative building built to the left of the Castle and in the religious statuary randomly scattered throughout the site.

THONEY PIETRO IN WILLIAMSON

The photos which follow were selected from the Thoney Pietro Collection at the West Virginia State Archives. Twenty-eight glass plate negatives of these views were donated to the collection in 1994 by Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Groves of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The photos illustrate the Pietro Construction Company's early paving and sewerage project in Williamson, West Virginia. The project took place in 1916, according to the list of projects appearing on aforementioned Pietro letterhead from the late 1920s. A dapperly-dressed Thoney Pietro appears prominently in most of the views.







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SURVEY AREA MAPS



- | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. 74 Kingwood Street: | 17/589869/4386758 |
| 2. 333 Pennsylvania Avenue | 17/589890/4386793 |
| 3. 325-329 Pennsylvania Avenue | 17/589864/4386783 |
| 4. 70 Kingwood Street | 17/589890/4386753 |
| 5. 572 Kingwood Street | 17/589885/4386768 |
| 6. 10 Pietro Street | 17/589885/4386804 |
| 7. 442 Ash Street | 17/589854/4386163 |
| 8. 344 Watts Street | 17/589874/4386392 |
| 9. 468 White Avenue | 17/590184/4386108 |
| 10. Wagner Avenue Paving | 17/589285/4386209 |



11. Pietro's Castle

17/596880/4388759

