

YESTERYEAR A Sneak Peek Into Blue Bell's Past

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Wissahickon Valley Public Library



Last month we looked at the history of Skippack Pike.

There are many beautiful old 18th and 19th century buildings along Skippack Pike, but one of my favorites is a utilitarian looking 20th century building located at 650 Skippack Pike. Why? Because I love libraries and it is the main branch of the Wissahickon Valley Public Library.

I also like it because it is a great reflection of the nature and history of American society. In most countries, library services are provided by the government, if at all. In America, we've done it differently, with many "public" services being provided by small groups of civic-minded citizens.

The first library in Whitpain was created as a subscription library by 35 local patrons in 1817. It was democratic in that anyone could subscribe, but it was not open to non-subscribers.

The Whitpain Library Company thrived during the 19th century, but barely limped into the 20th, after which Whitpain was without local library service for many decades.

The first two libraries in the Ambler area were also subscription based. The Union Library of Ambler dates to 1887, and its history was intertwined with Keasbey & Mattison and with the local Women's Christian Temperance Union. In 1923, the women's Colony Club of Ambler created a library, which by 1930 was serving patrons from Ambler, Lower Gwynedd, Upper Dublin and Whitpain. In 1930, the Colony Club realized that they could no longer sponsor the library, and they created a new non-profit entity, the Ambler Public Library, to take over their collection. The Colony Club Library officially became the Ambler Public Library on February 9, 1934. In 1961, the Ambler Library opened its building at 209 Race Street, which is still the Ambler branch of the Wissahickon Valley Public Library.

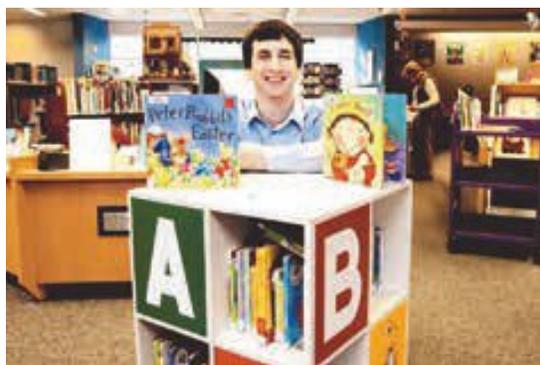
As the Ambler Public Library was growing, people in Whitpain were making do with occasional bookmobile services. In the 1960s, the Women's Club of Whitpain decided that they needed more and better local library services, and they created the Library of Whitpain, which opened in early 1967 with a few hundred books near the corner of DeKalb and Skippack Pikes.

The following year, the Commonwealth forced the merger of the Ambler, Lower Gwynedd and Whitpain school districts into the Wissahickon School District. Ah, now you can see where this is headed. It made sense at that point to merge the Ambler and Whitpain libraries into a new entity that could provide library services to the entire school district. What to call it? How about the Wissahickon Valley Public Library! The merger took place in 1969, and the Wissahickon School District appointed the WVPL as its agent to provide library services. The WVPL is governed by a nine-member board, with three members each from Ambler, Lower Gwynedd and Whitpain.

The population of Whitpain exploded in the 1970s and 1980s, but the Blue Bell branch of the WVPL was still in tiny, cramped quarters (for a time it was in the 1895 School House). I joined the board of the WVPL in the late 1980s as an Ambler representative, and it was soon clear to the whole board that we needed a much bigger main branch, and that the main branch should be someplace readily accessible and in Blue Bell. But where? And where would we get the money for such a large project?

At that time, a roller skating rink at 650 Skippack Pike became available. We became very excited. It was large, had a clear span of space and could even accommodate a community room. But what about the money? This is where we had to be very creative and where the importance of good local officials became evident. We worked with the board of the Wissahickon School District to create a unique legal relationship, which permitted the District to issue municipal bonds for our projects. We also did public fundraising. The combination was enough to renovate the skating rink into the magnificent library we have today. Luckily we were right about both the demand for services and the location. Annual usage of the facility has grown tremendously over the years.

The WVPL is still operated by its volunteer board. Its operations are funded by a blend of public and private funds, including the library tax assessed by the WSD, funds from the Commonwealth, donations from local citizens, work by local volunteers and donations from three other civic groups, the Blue Bell Chapter of the Friends of the Library, the Ambler Chapter of the Friends of the Library and the Women's Club of Whitpain. Only in America!



This is the fifth in a series of articles about local history brought to you by the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society. If there is a topic you would like to propose for a future article, please contact me at rcbellavance67@gmail.com. If you enjoy these articles, you may want to consider membership in the Society. To learn more, please visit WValleyHS.org.