



Wissahickon Valley

historical society

Ambler
Lower Gwynedd
Whitpain

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A Refresher Course on Ambler History

presented by local historian
Bernadette Dougherty

Monday, March 11 at 7 p.m.
at the 1895 Schoolhouse on Skippack Pk.

Former Ambler Post Office - on Butler Pike

As part of the WPA program, Harry Sternberg created a mural that was installed at a later Ambler Post Office. The WVHS was instrumental in having the mural moved to the even newer Ambler Post Office further down Butler Pike.



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Reeds Country Store Closes, Future of Building Uncertain

Many of you may have noticed the Store Closing signs at Reeds Country Store in Center Square. At present, the future of this historic building is uncertain.

The corner site was occupied by the "Waggon Inn" as early as 1758. The original inn was torn down in the early 1800 and replaced by the current building which was operated as the Centre Square Hotel. It was purchased by William Reed in 1925. He and his family managed the all-purpose, all-product general store. During the Depression, Reed provided several local men with work on an hourly basis. In recent years, the Reed family sold furniture and antiques out of the main building as well as the barn.

Spring Cleaning On the Farm by WVHS member Carol Kalos

My mother, who had an appreciation for cultural history, told me about growing up on her family's farm in central Pennsylvania during 1920s and 30s. The house had a coal furnace and a wood-burning cookstove. There was no electricity in rural Pennsylvania until after World War II so lighting came from oil lamps. After the winter, as a result of the burning coal, wood, and oil, homes were sooty!



When spring arrived, "spring cleaning" began. My mother and her older sister did the heavy work while their mother supervised, standing in the middle of the room and pointing out the work to be done. The rooms were tackled one at a time, and using homemade lye soap, each room took a full day.

First, they moved all of the furniture to the middle of the room. Then they hung the rugs over the clothesline to be beaten. Also they took down the pictures to be sponged off, front and back; and they took down the curtains to be soaked, laundered (in water carried from a well and heated on the cookstove), and ironed (with sad irons heated on the cookstove - see above).

Next, one person would wash the windows inside and out while the others wiped down the wallpaper, and then they scrubbed the floor on hands and knees. Finally, they would wash and wax the furniture and move it back in place. The last step was to take everything out of the drawers, wash them on the inside, and neatly replace the contents.

The windows were open for most of the spring and summer, letting in dust and pollen, so this process was repeated again in the fall after the time-consuming canning season had ended. "Fall cleaning" included re-filling the mattresses with clean straw.

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ambler to Close

It was announced recently that St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church at the corner of Ridge and Race St. will be closing at the end of March. The church was founded in 1908, and current building was constructed in 1912-1913.

St. John's has hosted a group of jazz musicians who have shared a Jazz Vespers on the first Sunday evening of the month. There will be one last chance to hear them at St. John's on Sunday, March 3 at 7 p.m.

WVHS has arranged to take photos of the inside of the church to be included in its collection. The parsonage next door on Ridge is one of the oldest houses in Ambler. A marker in its yard honors member Lyman Rohr who was killed in action in WWI.

Some Background on Historic Designation by WVHS member Yen Ho

I recently took a research methods course for my architectural preservation class at Temple, and we learned about how both the National and Philadelphia Register of Historic Places work. An individual or group can fill out a nomination form for a building or site that is considered historically significant to the area or to the nation. The two registers are very different from each other: the criteria for Philadelphia asks for an in-depth analysis while the National Register focuses on four criteria: event, person, design/construction, and information potential.

After learning about how to find out if a building is listed on the National and/or Philadelphia Register, I decided to take a look at the local area around me: Ambler Borough, Whitpain Township, and Lower Gwynedd Township. This search gave some surprising results.

I live in Whitpain Township, and I hadn't known what is in the area. At least a year ago I found out about the 1895 Public School, and I started volunteering there over school break. Since then, I wanted to find out more about other historical buildings nearby. I think I knew about Dawesfield. In my class I learned to access the CRGIS (Cultural Resources Geographic System) site which is a map based inventory of historic and archaeological sites.

I looked at the CRGIS website of Whitpain and was shocked. (See map on next page - Ambler and Lower Gwynedd maps can be viewed on-line at the website listed at the end of this article.) Most of the buildings in Whitpain that have sought recognition were found ineligible. (They are coded in red triangles and polygons on the map.) As Whitpain was suburbanized in the 1950s, several historic buildings disappeared or were modernized. Also many new shopping centers and homes were built. I was disappointed to see, for example, the Blue Bell Inn not eligible for the register. Its connection with George Washington and his troops during the Battle of Germantown seems historically significant and it certainly passes the age limit of over 50 years. The Inn has been renovated and expanded over the years.

In addition to Dawesfield, other Whitpain sites included on the CRGIS list are the Whitpain High School, Franklinville School, and Normandy Farm.

I expected several Ambler buildings and sites to be listed on the National Register, but many buildings have not been evaluated or are listed as undetermined (shown in yellow triangles on the CRGIS map). Listed as eligible are the Ambler Borough Commercial Historic District, the North Penn Railroad, the Keasbey-Mattison Company Power Plant, and Forest Avenue School. Interestingly, the Ambler Savings Bank is eligible - but it refers to the former bank building that was demolished in the early 2000s.

Lower Gwynedd Township has only two buildings that are listed on the National Register: Gwynedd Hall and the Jacob Kastner Lighthouse. (Watch for more information on them in the April newsletter.) The SpringHouse Tavern's status is listed as undetermined.

My overall thoughts on all this: I was not surprised that so many places in Ambler have been nominated. Compared to Whitpain and Lower Gwynedd, Ambler history is more recent and more compact. Established in 1888, Ambler's history is easier to research. Many sites in Whitpain and Lower Gwynedd have been compromised over their longer history.

I would love to help research the sites that still exist before anything else happens to them. It'll be tough, but it's exciting at the same time.

Link to the CRGIS Website: <https://www.dot7.state.pa.us/CRGIS>

Link to National Register of Historic Places: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/index.htm>

Thanks to Yen for sharing her findings. Being on the National Register does open up grant opportunities. At least locally, under current laws it does not automatically protect a building or site from demolition or other changes. That needs to be done on a continuing basis.

Thanks to WVHS members Emmy Simon, John Simon, and the Whitpain Historical Society (especially Marie Goldkamp and David Kimmerly) for their work in getting both the Whitpain High School and the Franklinville School listed on the National Register.



Whitpain Township from CRGIS Website

Mark Your Calendar

March 11 - WVHS monthly meeting - see first page for details.

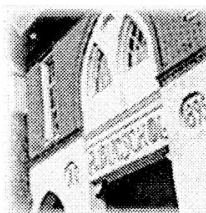
March 17 - Open House at the 1895 Schoolhouse - 1 to 3:30 p.m.

March 22 - Author Harlan Coben will appear at the Upper Dublin Township Building at 7 p.m. Tickets can be obtained on either the Upper Dublin Library site or the Wissahickon Library site.

March 28 - Skippack Historical Society - 7:30 p.m. Program: Henry Melchior Muhlenberg - Skippack Township Building, Heckler Rd., Creamery

March 31 - Historical Society of Mont. Co., 1654 DeKalb, Norristown - Program: Synagogues of Greater Philadelphia - 7 p.m.

April 14 - Grand Re-opening at 1895 Schoolhouse/Whitpain Public School - 1 to 4 p.m.



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