

A Sneak Peak Into Blue Bell's Past

Montgomery County Community College

Past & Present



By Russ Bellavance, President of the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society



When we looked at Normandy Farms, I mentioned that Ralph Strassburger had a friendly competition with his brother-in-law Alexander Thayer as to which one could create the largest and best farm. As we know, Normandy Farms was eventually broken up, with parts of it now comprising the Normandy Farms Hotel and Conference Center, Normandy Farms Estates and, of course, Blue Bell Country Club. But what about Thayer and his property that he called Gwynallan? Well, the portion of it that we will look at today, which had been known as the Greenwalt-Walker-Bernhard farms, is now Montgomery County Community College.

Alexander Thayer was a retired Philadelphia insurance broker who married one of Mrs. Strassburger's sisters and moved out to Whitpain Township. He began acquiring farms on both sides of Morris Road, locating his home in a restored mansion on the northeast side, on the residential property now known as Normandy at Blue Bell. He acquired the MCCC property in six separate acquisitions during the period from 1927 to 1930. These acquisitions totaled just over 190 acres and included six tenanted houses, numerous springhouses and pump houses, and more than a dozen outbuildings. The largest building was the Big Barn, - which is now the MCCC Art Center along DeKalb Pike. Three of the residences date back to colonial times, including the Walker House that sits at the northwest corner of Morris Road and Cathcart Road.

Mayor's first wife died in the early 1940s. Apparently, it was such a good marriage that Thayer then married his late wife's sister! Thayer died

in 1968, and the estate looked for a buyer for the property. By then, many of the buildings were in very poor shape. Visually, the property was not particularly attractive, being almost treeless, muddy and windswept. But the property did have certain advantages: it was large, mostly undeveloped and well located.

It happened that at that same time, the new Montgomery County Community College was looking for a new location. Its initial home was in Conshohocken, but it was bursting at the seams and needed a real campus with enough room for parking for its commuter students. The board appointed a committee to search for a new location. Their first choice was the lovely horse farm that still exists in Whitemarsh Township along the south side of Butler Pike just east of Skippack Pike. But the owner decided not to sell. The next choice was the Gwynallan tract. The committee loved the location, but there was a concern about the tributary of Stony Creek that runs through the property. The location of that creek, and the desire to have the campus demonstrate good environmental practices, led to the final design of the campus, with the major parking areas being on the down-campus side of the property, and the majority of the buildings being up the hill on the other side of the creek.

MCCC bought the property in November 1968 for \$700,000. One of the early decisions was what to do with some of the really old buildings on the property. There was a strong desire to preserve them if possible, but - because of the dilapidated condition of many of them - budgetary considerations did not permit preservation and restoration. We are grateful that the barn and the Walker House could be preserved and adaptively re-used.

The college spent approximately \$16,500,000 for the initial construction of the campus, which included the first four buildings. Three of them were up-campus and help form the quad at the top of the property, with the physical education building being built down-campus off of Cathcart. The quad area was unprotected by any trees and students faced fierce winds during the cold winter months. Dur-

ing the very early period at this location, the site looked sufficiently uninviting that the college used architectural renderings rather than photographs in their PR materials! Today, of course, the college looks very inviting and "collegiate". The original four buildings have been joined by newer buildings, which have added a lot of architectural interest to the campus.

Of course, every location in Blue Bell should have either a ghost story or a George Washington story. The MCCC campus has both. Ever since the Revolution, people have said that the property is haunted by the ghosts of soldiers who had died there on the retreat from the Battle of Germantown. Early stories from MCCC's archives say that students claimed that they could hear the anguished cries of those ghosts, especially at exam time. Another legend is that there had been the stump of a great oak (or maybe it was a maple) on the Walker

farm portion of the property (then owned by Paul Bower) and that someone had grafted a pear tree branch on the stump. The grafted pear branch bore unusually large and exceptionally tasty pears. George Washington happened to be riding by one day. He loved pears and, apparently without bothering to ask, helped himself to one. It was so delicious that he sought out Mr. Bower and commended him on the quality of his pears. The legend doesn't say whether he offered to pay for the pear.

I would like to thank Montgomery County Community College and Lawrence Greene, its archival librarian, for help in providing information used in researching this article and for permitting us to use copies of the old pictures used for this article. MCCC is one of the great treasures of our community.



The largest original building was the Big Barn, which is now the beautiful MCCC Fine Arts Center where many shows and concerts are held like Capitol Steps in September. Photo by Alex Lowy Photography, LLC



Walker House is one of the oldest surviving buildings on campus. It was renamed East House because the first trustees did not want any buildings named after people – even people long dead!

This is the tenth 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 rcbellavance@gmail.com. If you enjoy these articles, you may want to consider membership in the Society. Please see our website at wvalleyhs.org for more information.