

# An Historical Look

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## Wissahickon Village Becomes Ambler Village

by Newton M. Howard

It's a simple request. The citizens of our Village of Wissahickon are being asked, in the Year of Our Lord 1869, to choose a new name for both the Depot and the Village. Seems like something that could be accomplished quickly with no problems whatsoever. But that's not to be.

We've been called Wissahickon ever since 1855 when the North Pennsylvania Railroad established their line from Philadelphia to Gwynedd, calling their depot at our sleepy little community "Wissahickon." The area surrounding the depot soon became known as Wissahickon Village, though still a part of Upper Dublin Township.

And now, years later, Railroad officials realize that another station with the same name as ours exists on another of their lines. Occasional mix-ups, due to two Wissahickons, has lead to a decision to eliminate one of these, our station being the one chosen for re-naming.

We've been invited to select a new name for the depot, and this is where the troubles begin. At least four family names have been suggested. These are the Harmer, Thomas, Reiff and

Ambler families. The Thomas family has been prominent here for generations, with much of the land below Butler Avenue owned at one time by the Thomas family. Also, and perhaps more importantly, Isaac Thomas had been an early postmaster when he operated the general store on Bethlehem Pike in Upper Dublin on present-day St. Mary's property.

Another family in the running for the re-naming is the Reiff family, owners of nearly all the land west of the railroad for generations. They owned a number of grist mills, one of which stands today on Butler Avenue, although altered so much as to be unrecognizable in its role as a twin dwelling. The Reiffs' followers feel the town should be named for them because of land given to the Railroad for building its first station. This however is questionable since a land deed shows a purchase of land for \$2,000 by the railroad.

Third family suggested is the Harmer family, first settlers of the land in question. They had received the land grant from William Penn way back in 1682, and it was felt their name should be considered for that reason.

Last, but not least, the Ambler family feels theirs



Mary Johnson Ambler, the little Quaker lady for whom Wissahickon Village was re-named Ambler Village in 1869, the year following her death. She was honored for service given at the scene of the Great Train Wreck below Fort Washington station. Tuesday July 17th, 2001, marks the 145th anniversary of this 1856 tragedy. This is believed to be the only formal portrait of Mary Ambler in existence.

*Photograph from Collection of Newton M. Howard*

would be an ideal choice because since about 1832 the family has owned large tracts of land, operating the local fulling mill for years. Both Mary and Andrew have

since died, but four of their eight sons, Joseph, David, Isaac and Evan are prominent members of our Wissahickon Village today.

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Each of the four names suggested has its merits, as well as its followers, making it impossible to agree on any one name. Very early on, though, two of the names have been eliminated, the Harmer and the Thomas families

Now that it's narrowed down to a choice between the Reiffs or the Amblers, a very bitter argument has ensued. For months the battle has raged to such an extent that the Railroad officials have finally stepped into the hostile atmosphere to pick the new name.

Their choice is Ambler, the reason being given by the railroad is the aid given by Mary Ambler at the scene of the Great Train Wreck of July 17, 1856, where she spent the entire day working with the victims of the wreck in summer temperatures reaching 102° in the shade. Mary Ambler had died in 1868, and now, in 1869, the decision has been reached to call our old Wissahickon Village by her name.

Not every one is happy about this name change, in fact, there are many problems as a result of the railroad's decision. After the station and the Village have been renamed Ambler, followers of the Reiff family, and even the Harmer and Thomas backers, are refusing to use the new name in addressing freight to the Village.

Rejection of the new name "Ambler Freight Station" so irritates the railroad officials that they have told us that no freight will be accepted here unless addressed by its new name. We have been forced against

our will to use the new name of Ambler whether or not we agree with them. Gradually we are using the new name, but not without leaving bitter feelings toward the Ambler family perhaps for years to come. Evidently, time does heal all, for today hardly anyone living has objections to the name. After all, the old name has been preserved in our Wissahickon Fire Company and the Wissahickon School District.

## Wood Carving Demo

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