

Ambler's First Hotel

by Newton M. Howard

The North Pennsylvania Railroad established their line from Philadelphia to Gwynedd in 1855, calling one of their depots in the western part of Upper Dublin township "Wissahickon". Many felt that the area would grow rapidly as a result of the trains arrival. The railroad benefited by transporting more dairy products to Philadelphia from the Wissahickon station than any other on their line, with farmers from all around bringing their dairy products to the Wissahickon station every morning. The expected growth of the village, however, did not occur.

It was not until 1870 that things were about to change, with the Montgomery County



Early view of Hotel Ambler on Butler Avenue looking toward the railroad. Ambler station is seen just beyond hotel. Known also as Ambler Park Hotel, Hotel Godfrey, Blackburn's Hotel, Fretz Hotel and finally the Nesbitt Apartments when destroyed by fire in 1944.

Photograph from Henry Scholz collection

Agricultural Society purchasing a large tract of land south of Butler Avenue, for use as their Fair Grounds and

race track. By now the Village of Wissahickon had been re-named Ambler to honor Mary Ambler, heroine of the Great Train Wreck of July 17, 1856. The fair grounds were called Ambler Park. With thousands attending these fairs, investors began to take a second look at the Village of Ambler, not yet incorporated.

One of these early investors was Jacob Lugar, of Horsham, who purchased from Jonathan Lukens, about 1871, the vacant land between Main Street and the railroad, fronting on Butler Avenue. He began the hotel's construction almost immediately, the contractor's price being about \$4,500. An interesting item concerns the source of stone used in the hotel's construction. On New Year's Eve, December 31st, 1869, the Fulling mill of the Ambler family burned to the ground. Lugar acquired the stone from the walls left standing to build the foundations of his new "Ambler Park Hotel". Some time later Lugar moved into the unfinished structure. Then, in a few weeks and without any explanation whatsoever, he moved back to Horsham, shortly thereafter being sold out by the Sheriff.

The property was conveyed some time in 1873 to James Wampole, of North Whales, with the hotel still not completed. Wampole had the open creek, Tannerie Run, arched over up to the railroad tracks. He also built the hotel's frame stables, with Ambler's first public hall on the second floor. This was operated by his son-in-law, David Yerkes.

Wampole, like Lugar, had possession of the hotel property for only a short time, being sold out by the Sheriff in 1875. Some unfortunate real estate speculations had caused him, the second owner, to lose the property.

Third owner, William Acuff, acquired the hotel for \$8,000 in 1875. He died in 1879, with ownership passing to his son, Alfred Acuff. He retained possession for four years, selling it to Samuel T. Godfrey for \$13,500 in 1883. During Godfrey's ownership, a disastrous fire, February 9, 1890, at the Buchanan Building, Butler and Main, destroyed that building, and spread to sheds and stables of the hotel, known then as Hotel Godfrey.

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Following the fire, Godfrey built a substantial stone stable to replace the frame buildings lost in the fire. He also at this time added a large wing to the hotel itself.

In 1892, Godfrey sold the hotel property to John D. Cooper for \$27,500, with Cooper selling it the following year to William C. Blackburn for \$40,000. Cooper, with a large profit of \$12,500, used \$5,000 of this money to purchase land at Butler and Spring Garden, part of the farm of Charles and Susan Shoemaker, to build his Wyndham Hotel. Begun late in 1893, the Wyndham was Ambler's second hotel.

Owner William C. Blackburn, who called his place Blackburn's Hotel, was killed in 1900 in a Hatfield train wreck, with ownership passing to his son, Irvin Blackburn.



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An interesting incident occurred at the hotel in 1904, in the largely Republican town of Ambler, when "a County Democrat campaigning from the upper porch was pelted with eggs at 40 cents a dozen Monday evening. The crowd tried to drown out his voice with noises, even a giant firecracker." After a ride around town, he was allowed to clean up the eggs at Hotel Ambler and leave town.

The Fretz family be-

came the next owners about 1911, and in 1919 began construction of several stores extending from the hotel out to Butler Avenue.

Through the years, after changes of ownership and name, Ambler's first hotel, known during World War II as the Nesbitt Apartments, was destroyed by fire just before Christmas of 1944, leaving many families homeless, and with a loss of more than \$50,000.

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