



www.wvalleyhs.org info@wvalleyhs.org Summer 2021 Vol. 2, Issue 2

Dear Members,

Here is yet another “extra” edition of our Newsletter. We have so much to pass along to you! In this issue are articles about:

- The experiences of three sisters who attended Whitpain Schools*
- A tribute to Jean and Russ Bellavance*
- How to find historical articles in the Ambler Gazette*
- A new and improved Newsletter coming to members*
- Encouraging news for Pennsylvania genealogists*
- Requesting your ideas for a name for the Newsletter*
- Requesting your ideas for America 2050 in 2026*
- The work so far at the Franklinville School*
- News from the July Board meeting*

We hope you enjoy this late-summer reading!

Sisters Remember the Whitpain Schools

By Peg Johnston

One of the joys of volunteering for WVHS at the 1895 Schoolhouse is meeting adults who attended the school as students. They bring life to the stories of the building and their friends and teachers; and we learn more about our historic site.

Recently we were contacted by Meg Louise Poling Zalewski, who said that she and her sisters (Polly Renee Poling-Rauenzahn and Brenda Sue Poling) would like to visit the schools they had attended in the 1950s and '60s while they were here for a sisters' reunion. With Covid restrictions, it wasn't possible to host them this time, but they graciously wrote out some of their memories for us to archive. We look forward to meeting them in person.

The Poling family lived (with a fourth sister Becky) at 618 School Road, which meant they could walk to school – to either the 1895 building, the 1916 building (today the Blue Bell Korean Presbyterian Church) or the “brand new” Blue Bell Elementary building. During the '50s and '60s, the first floor of the 1895 Schoolhouse was used for a class – usually with a teacher who preferred to have his/her class there. As Meg remembers, in 1961-62 when she was there, the upstairs of the 1895 building was also used as the police headquarters, and she watched, on occasion, a police officer taking people upstairs – either as visitors or in custody.

Originally the 1895 Schoolhouse served the district's eighth-graders on the first floor and the ninth-through-eleventh graders on the second floor. After the nearby 1916 building was completed, the elementary classes moved there. The building had a gym/small auditorium. The cafeteria was moved to the 1916 school as well. Until then, lunch was eaten in the 1895 building's basement.

Meg remembers having to bring a blanket for nap time and having cookies and a carton of **SunnySlope** milk as a snack.



By the late 1950s, the new Blue Bell Elementary building was opened. It had a cafeteria/gym in the middle and four wings of four classrooms spreading out from it for grades 1 through 4. The classrooms were labeled A, B, C, and D. The top students were in A, and it was close to the main part of the building. Polly remembers that being in the A classroom was a big deal.

Lunch was served in the new building. Polly remembers that the bathrooms in the newer building were “awful.” Each classroom had its own bathroom, and what went on in there could be heard by everyone in the classroom. She remembers it being “embarrassing.” Fairly soon bathrooms were installed outside the classrooms.

Polly does remember attending Blue Bell Elementary Camp, which included tennis lessons, lots of crafts (“popsicle stick baskets, lanyards, and more”), and games. When Blue Bell students were ready for 6th grade, they transferred to Shady Grove, where the 6th graders were kept on the lower level – separate from the older students. There was also a Girl Scout troop, which continued to the Cadet level in Junior High at

Shady Grove. She remembers a highlight being a trip to the 1964 World's Fair in New York City.

Day-to-day routines from those years have been lost. For instance, books were shared from year to year. Names and years were recorded within the front book cover. Polly remembers the smell of mimeographed math sheets. A daily schedule included a morning prayer – at least until 1962 when the Supreme Court ruled that it violated the First Amendment to the Constitution.

In their notes, both Brenda and Polly mentioned the annual June Fair, held in the parking lot of Blue Bell Elementary. This event was celebrated in Carolyn Haywood's 1973 book, *Away Went the Balloons*. (WVHS has a copy of the book in our collection of children's books.) The Beverly Cleary "Betsy" series was also popular with the girls. Meg remembers a large library in the 1916 building.

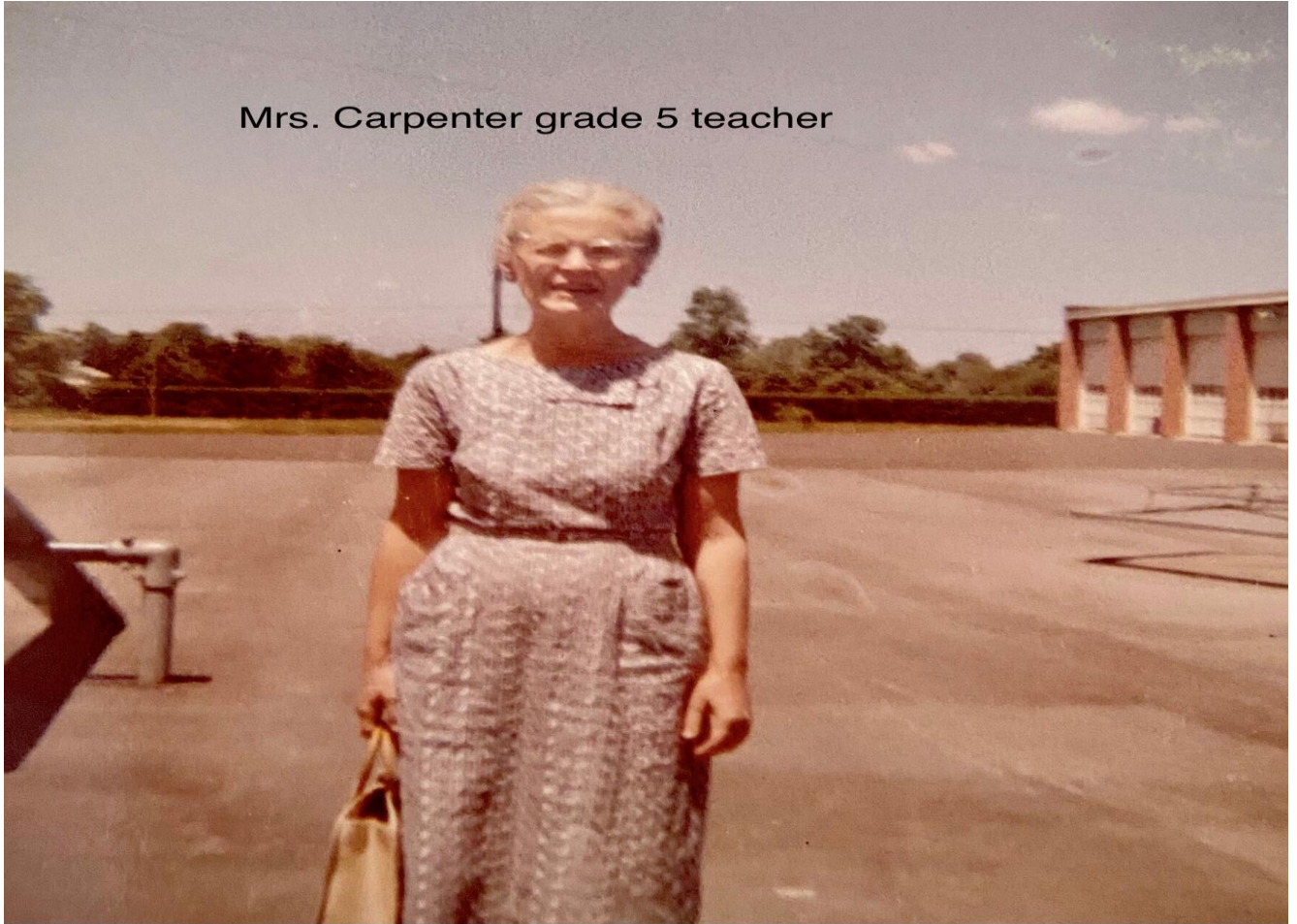
Elementary school hands-on activities made lasting memories. Brenda related making a miniature town out of decorated cardboard milk cartons. Another project from her 4th and 5th grade teacher, Mrs. Yoder, was making marionettes and putting on a show each year.



When Meg was in the fifth grade, students were allowed to choose who they would sit with. She remembers that this was stressful – especially for a shy person or a person of color. Meg remembers that her mother would tell her, “You will not let XXXX be the last one to be picked. You will pick her right away,” meaning Meg was to pick a person of color since there were very few and they were often slow to be chosen.

The girls all mentioned specific teachers, as well as special activities in their remembrances. It reminded me of how different school was in 2020-21 for students and how great it will be for students and teachers to be together in person in future years.

Mrs. Carpenter grade 5 teacher



Many thanks to the Poling sisters for sharing their memories! The information they shared is now included in our archives. We are hoping they can join us for a tour next time they are all in the area.

Their words have inspired me to send questionnaires to my four sisters, so we can share memories of our Wisconsin country school-days with the historical society there.

A Tribute to Jean and Past President Russ Bellavance

By Peg Johnston

A few weeks ago, Peg Johnston set out to interview as many of our more long-standing members that she can find. She is trying to preserve the history of our community and

our organization. The experiences and memories she discovers are worth saving! Here is the result of her first interview with Jean and Russ Bellavance:

Soon after Russ and Jean Bellavance moved to Ambler in 1979, they noticed an announcement about a walking “House Tour of Ambler.” It was led by Frank Russo (now a Board member) and sponsored by the WVHS. They were surprised and pleased to discover that their own home at Bethlehem Pike and Mattison Avenue was on the tour. Then Russ and Jean joined the Society and have been active members ever since.

At that time, the WVHS was meeting at Boehm’s Church and other local historic sites while seeking a permanent headquarters. In the early 1980s, the Society entered into a transaction with the Wissahickon School District and Whitpain Township to save the 1895 Whitpain Public School from being demolished and to make it the new home for the Society. Shortly thereafter, Russ was elected President, serving several terms, and Jean was helping with numerous Society activities.

Russ’s active involvement was reduced from 1992 to 2001 because of his service on the Wissahickon School Board, which met on the same night as the Society’s meetings and programs. From 1996 to early 1999, his available time was also affected by his work in Harrisburg as the Chief Counsel for the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development. Jean, who served as the librarian at the Gwynedd Mercy Academy Elementary School for many years, continued to be very active throughout that time.

Beginning in 2001 and continuing through recent years, Jean and Russ hosted the Society’s annual holiday party at their historic home. Many members have fond memories of that long tradition, including helping to decorate for the party. Everyone brought their favorite side dishes and desserts, and they thoroughly enjoyed singing Christmas carols.

In 2004, Russ changed careers and became a social studies teacher at Great Valley High School, teaching mostly AP European History, as well as AP Government and Economics. He was then able to return to a more active role in the Society and was elected its President in 2007, a post he held until 2020! During the time of his presidency, Russ created many programs for both the Society and his church (Pleasantville U.C.C.), and he has presented those programs to numerous outside groups, such as local Quester chapters. He also wrote a series of local history articles for a neighborhood magazine. In retirement, he has become an instructor for the Center for Learning in Retirement at Delaware Valley University, teaching two courses, the U.S. Constitution and Turning Points in Western Civilization.



Russ and Jeanne Bellavance with a Certificate of Appreciation for all their selfless years of service to WVHS

Thanks to a strong Board and many willing workers, the Society took many steps forward during this period. Some notable achievements were a new roof, extensive renovation of the entire building (thanks to the assistance of Whitpain Township), the merger with the Historical Society of Whitpain, the showcasing of parts of our collection in the Ambler, Lower Gwynedd, and Whitpain municipal buildings, and the Society's participation in Whitpain's Community Day, Lower Gwynedd's Pike Fest, and Ambler's Main Street events. Russ is thrilled to see strong new leadership maintaining the Society's established initiatives while taking it in new directions.

Russ and Jean are two of the most senior members of the Society in terms of years of active membership, and they look forward to continuing to assist the Society in the years ahead.

Old *Ambler Gazettes* Available Online

Did you know that back issues of the *Ambler Gazette* (1894-1944) are available online and that they are indexed? An easy way to find an article is to Google "Wissahickon Public Library Ambler Gazette." The newspaper's "Search" (and "Advanced Search") box will appear in the upper left. Fill it in, experiment a bit, and you will have hours of local history-reading ahead of you! The library will be happy to supply you with additional help.

https://digitalarchives.powerlibrary.org/papd/islandora/object/papd%3Awivp-gazett_12408]

News for Pennsylvania Genealogists

If you are looking for information about local and/or Pennsylvania families, there are two new sources available to you. First, WVHS has added to its website a Bibliography, which lists our Society's holdings of books on genealogy. (See "Museum and Library.")

Also, you can enter **ancestry.com** for free if you are looking for Pennsylvania records. For details, start at <https://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Research-Online/Pages/Ancestry-PA.aspx>

Local History Presentations Available on YouTube

During this year of COVID restrictions, the Northeast Philadelphia History Network has been providing monthly speakers on a variety of history topics online. Most importantly, all of them are now available with YouTube! And if a viewer is bored, thanks to technology, they can gently skip forward without offending the speaker. Here's a list of what's available. **(Each red listing is a link.)**

--YouTube Videos of Recent Northeast Philadelphia History Network Presentations--

- **[Rhawnhurst Neighborhood](#)** by Walt Sollberger - May 5, 2021
- **[Holmesburg Prison Klondike Bake-Oven Deaths](#)** by Allen Hornblum - April 7, 2021
- **[Sandy Run & Holmesburg Water Works](#)** by Adam Levine – Dec 2, 2020
- **[Thomas Holme's 1687 Map, Part 1](#)** by Fred Moore – Nov 4, 2020
- **[Bridges of Poquessing Creek, Part 2](#)** by Patty McCarthy – Oct 7, 2020
- **[Historic Delaware River Estates in NE Philadelphia](#)** by Jack McCarthy - Sept 21, 2020

WVHS to send the Newsletter to more people, more often; a Bulletin to benefit the members.

When the pandemic winds down, the WVHS activities will be returning, including our monthly meeting and speaker, WVHS will again be sending out a monthly publication that will be referred to as our Newsletter. The Newsletter will contain among other things, announcements about WVHS activities, new members, recognition of our

volunteers, and descriptions of the latest contributions to our collections. This Newsletter will be sent to anyone and everyone and used to publicize our events to as many email addresses as possible as a way to grow our membership. The Newsletter will also appear on the WVHS website each month to announce our speakers and to draw guests to our activities.

In addition, WVHS will publish a “Bulletin” (in the format of what you are reading now) that will include historical research with a focus on our local area. The aim is to publish this Bulletin at least three times a year, and make it one of the benefits of WVHS membership. Older issues of the Bulletin will be posted on the WVHS website.

Send Your Ideas—a New Name for the Newsletter!

Enjoy the alteration with some alliteration! Have a good time when you make up a rhyme! When WVHS can again meet together, the Newsletter will be sent out monthly to announce the WVHS activities, as well as new acquisitions for our archives and collection. To mark the change, we need a new name for the Newsletter, so please put on your thinking caps! **What should we call the Newsletter?** Nominations will be accepted until August 31. So **send your ideas** to info@WValleyHS.org. The Board will announce the winner, who will receive a \$50 gift certificate to the **William Penn Inn**.

***America 250* Announces Mission Statement**



WVHS has received more information about planning for 2026. *America 250*’s new Mission Statement is “to commemorate our 250th anniversary with inclusive programs that inspire Americans to renew and strengthen our daring experiment in democracy.” If

you have suggestions about how our area can celebrate 250 years, please let us know: info@wvalleyHS.org. The Board has already considered a tree planting and burying a time capsule, but more ideas are needed--please share yours!

Most Recent Renovations at the Franklinville School

In June, electrician Jim Carroll of JFC Electric in Ambler installed new circuit breakers and improved the outside lighting. (Carroll works with Dean Bender, the contractor who drained water away from the building.) When Carroll took off the old electrical panel, sadly he discovered water in the wall, an issue we are still trying to fix. He says he will return to check the ten wall sconces, which are shorting out. He also advised us that the electric baseboard is a potential fire hazard.

The Board is still trying to get estimates for the work at the front porch. The pandemic has raised the price of lumber and other materials. One contractor even suggested delaying the work for about “a year or so” because the price of building materials is expected to come down.

Needless to say, WVHS is still looking for funding from another grant and from individual donors. Your support is appreciated.

From your Board of Directors: From the July meeting

1. Plans are developing for an Open House on Sunday, November 7, 1-3 pm. It will have a World War II theme to remember the 75th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. If you have items to contribute or you would like to assist in the planning or activities that day, please contact info@WValleyHS.org.
2. WVHS was asked to “loan” its nonprofit-status number to another history group. The Board declined.

3. An open house event for the Franklinville School to recognize donors has been postponed because the floor of the front porch has not yet been restored and is deemed hazardous to walk on.
4. Members are invited to a membership meeting on September 13, and pandemic restrictions will be considered. The Board will include a 50/50 Drawing. A large audience is expected, so a location has not been found.
5. Peg Johnson is working on a new display of agricultural tools recently added to the collection.
6. Joan Duxbury and Sally Zeller have been cleaning and polishing on all three floors of the museum, preparing for our reopening. They are experimenting with coasters on the feet of the chairs to protect our original floors.
7. Grace Baptist Church on Morris Road will be celebrating its 150th anniversary in 2022. WVHS has contributed a congratulatory letter to its commemorative booklet.
8. The Board continues to investigate the best way to mark what we are calling Revolution Road, Washington's route through our area after the Battle of Germantown.
9. The Board is preparing a list of speakers for the next Society Year. If you would like to recommend someone, please send their name and topic to info@WValleyHS.org.
10. The proposed new Bylaws are close to completion and will be presented to the membership at the second meeting of the Society Year (October 11), which officially begins on September 1, 2021. Time is being reserved at the first meeting so our members can reconnect after not seeing each other in person for over a year!

11. Members will be asked to submit their ideas for a new name for the Newsletter, which will be sent out monthly as a reminder about our meetings and events. (See above.) It will also contain a list of new members and new contributions to the collection. The Board will send the Newsletter to as many households as possible. In addition, WVHS will publish a Bulletin about three times each year to highlight research in our area. It will be a benefit of membership.
12. Congratulations to Emma Siegel, who has been formatting our Newsletter. Emma graduated from Wissahickon High School in May, and she will be leaving later this month for her first year of college at Syracuse University, where she will be majoring in Marketing Management and Public Relations. She sends her regards to WVHS!

~A SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT~

WVHS will be meeting on Monday, September 13, at 7 PM. There will be a short membership meeting, followed by a speaker, Jeanne Sorg, Ambler Mayor and Montgomery County Recorder of Deeds. She will speak on Researching Historic Deeds.

We are looking for a location to hold this meeting. The space at the 1895 Public School may not be large enough. If you know of a room where 50 or more guests can congregate comfortably, please contact WVHS: info@WValleyHS.org.

Please follow us on Facebook!

WVHS Vice President Joe Langella oversees the posting of historic photos and short stories on a regular basis. **We enjoy connecting with you!**

<https://www.facebook.com/wissahickonvalleyhistoricalsociety>



A Final Note. Peg Johnston's new display of farm tools in the basement of the 1895 Schoolhouse reminds us to appreciate the beauty of simple things. Those old tools really are beautiful. Appreciating simple, everyday objects inspired the following 1930s free-verse poem:

"The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams

*so much depends
upon*

*a red wheel
barrow*

*glazed with rain
water*

*beside the white
chickens*

William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow" from *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I, 1909-1939*, edited by Christopher MacGowan. Copyright 1938 by New Directions Publishing Corporation. Source: *The Collected Poems: Volume I 1909-1939* (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1938)



Wissahickon Valley Historical Society, Box 96 Ambler, PA 19002-0096