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Dear Readers—

As you may know, over a year ago, the format of the WVHS Newsletter was changed a bit. Rather than receiving monthly “announcements” (not needed due to the pandemic), the emphasis now is to present a few longer articles just three times a year, creating three editions: fall, winter, and spring. Although this is your spring Newsletter (March, April, May), look for a special summer issue soon. Our writers created too many articles for one issue. Even without monthly meetings, much is happening, and there’s much to report: new history questions investigated, new items arriving at the collection, renovations at Franklinville School, and more....

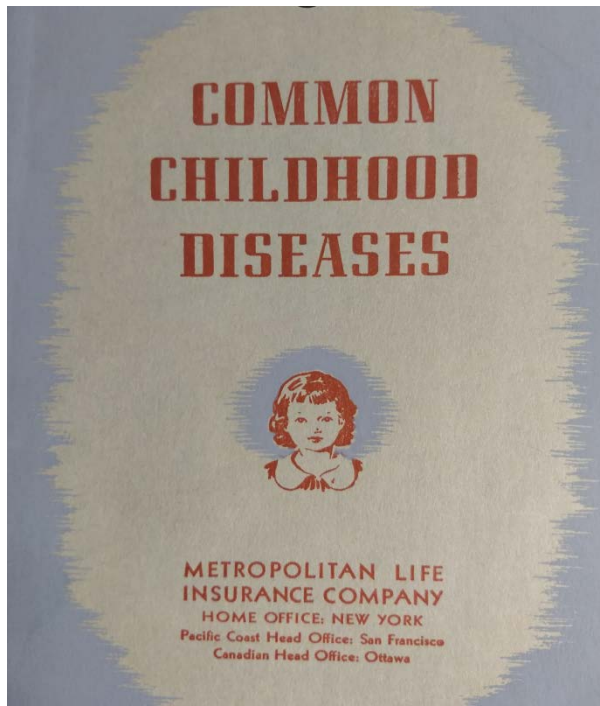
WVHS hopes you are enjoying the loveliness of the spring season. In this issue, you will find articles about

- A comparison of the Polio and COVID-19 experiences--with vaccine relief
- A related article describing a 1745 childhood epidemic in Gwynedd
- A follow-up to our last issue, Whitpain school’s first use of steam heat
- The mystery of an antique camera at our museum’s door
- WVHS adding more old Ambler photos and vintage ads to its website
- WVHS welcomes its new members
- From the Board of Directors...
- The latest on the renovations at the Franklinville School

For Older Americans, COVID-19 Parallels Polio

By Carol Kalos

Those over 70, individuals in Group 1A receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, remember also being among the first to receive the Salk vaccine for polio. The terrors of that crippling disease, followed in 1955 by the relief brought by a vaccine, parallel what our nation has experienced during the last several months.



In fact, the *New York Times* relates how “for Americans of a certain generation, the [vaccine] rollout evoked searing memories of an earlier era — one that rescued their childhood from fear and the sudden loss of classmates and siblings” (12-25-2020). Personal entries in a small book from the 1950s reflect that experience.

The 36-page blue paperback booklet is titled *Common Childhood Diseases*. Published by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in 1952, the time of polio, it advises “mothers” (today we would say “parents”) on how to keep their children healthy. Besides describing the symptoms of the diseases, it emphasizes preventing the spread of germs. The advice sounds so familiar: A child should learn to,

among other things, cover his mouth when he coughs or sneezes, “especially during epidemics”; wash his hands with soap and water; avoid “exposure to crowds and poorly ventilated public places”; and stay in strict isolation or quarantine if exposed. (In keeping with the times, the text uses only masculine pronouns.)

The booklet reveals how the life insurance company dutifully kept statistics on childhood deaths. The miseries of the diseases described inside that booklet are more threatening than what children encounter today; the illnesses include mumps and two kinds of measles, and the booklet refers to the frightening disease statistics of the early 1900s, two generations earlier. But it also celebrates how the childhood death-rates for measles, whooping cough, scarlet fever, and diphtheria were down considerably (with diphtheria deaths down the most, almost 79 per cent between 1911 and 1951).

(In the next article, read more about a local diphtheria epidemic in 1745.)

On the inside back cover of the booklet, a 1950s mother recorded her child's immunizations. (In addition, today's children also receive immunizations for tuberculosis and hepatitis B.) Her neat printing states that her 7-month-old received a DPT series--diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), and tetanus. In 1956, the mother listed a three-shot Salk Polio Vaccine and later a three-"Type" Sabin Oral Polio Vaccine to prevent the three different polio variants. (Her last entry, dated 1968, lists a smallpox vaccine and a tetanus shot, required for college. By 1972, smallpox was eradicated in the United States, and by 1980 it was eradicated worldwide.) With the Salk vaccine, children could play together. Before the defeat of polio, parents made certain their children avoided groups to avoid the polio virus.

Polio spread more quickly in warm months, so throughout many summers, when the disease was at what *USA Today* (3-21-2020) calls "epidemic proportions," children were kept at home. Like today's children, they faced isolation. (The *History of Vaccines* online shows that the worst years were 1952-1954.) The booklet states that polio in the 1950s was a mystery: "The manner [of polio's]...spread is unknown. [And] there is as yet no specific means of preventing [it]...." So the booklet advises parents, "Keep children away from all public gatherings and from public beaches and swimming pools" (p 21). (Today scientists know that the virus exists in contaminated water.) Stay-at-home orders were strict. According to the CDC, just as today, in some areas travel and commerce were restricted.

Parents obeyed the isolation warnings because polio, affecting the spinal cord, could mean paralysis or death. Polio victims who could not breathe were placed inside an iron lung, the precursor of tracheal intubation. (See photo.) Parents were terrified! A 2009 PBS documentary describes how "apart from the atomic bomb, America's greatest fear was polio." The horrifying CDC statistics explain why: "During 1951-1954, an average of 16,316 paralytic polio cases and 1879 deaths from polio were reported each year. [Then] polio incidence declined sharply following the introduction of [the Salk] vaccine to less than 1000 cases in 1962 and remained below 100 cases after that year." (Today, the CDC reports that the United States has been polio-free since 1979, but the virus still exists, especially in Asia.)



It is no wonder that the nation cheered when Jonas Salk discovered a polio vaccine. The *Forbes* website says that in spite of Salk's success, he did not patent his discovery and did not profit from it. Although he tried to avoid the limelight, Salk became a national hero. The *History of Vaccines* online relates how Salk, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, took seven years to reach his goal of preventing polio. In the last two years of his research, the March of Dimes funded the field trials, which included 1.3 million children. (Sources say the COVID-19 vaccines

were each tested on 30,000-40,000 adults.) Then in 1961 Albert Sabin produced a different kind of polio vaccine, replacing the polio shot with an oral vaccine, placed on sugar cubes.

In comparison to Salk's many years of development, the vaccine for COVID-19 came quickly, and it works differently. In simple terms, *Medical News Today* online explains the reasons for the present success: First, scientists had been studying coronaviruses "for over 50 years," so they already had much data. Also, researchers "mobilized quickly" to share their coronavirus data with other scientists. And finally, worldwide, governments funded new research generously, so research could proceed rapidly. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines use mRNA (messenger RNA). Thus, "when challenged with COVID, the immune system attacks the...surface protein of the virus" and kills it. The Johnson and Johnson vaccine and the polio vaccines work in another way.

The Salk vaccine (and the J&J) are a killed-virus shot while the later Sabin is a live-virus vaccine, delivered on two sugar cubes. Today, the Salk vaccine is used in the United States. Elsewhere, although there is a small risk from the live virus, the World Health Organization will continue to use the Sabin sugar-cubes until polio is completely eradicated. The number of cases was slowly declining until this year, when the number of cases rose because, as *NPR* states, the virus has developed "rogue strains" (a possible warning for us), and fewer Sabin vaccines are being offered (Jason Beaubien on 10-30-2020). There are two unusual reasons why fewer vaccines are being given: In the Afghan-Pakistan region, the Taliban blocks medical workers; and in Africa and Asia, the World Health Organization is keeping its workers at home to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Thus polio rates are influenced by COVID rates! In spite of the setback, authorities believe that polio will soon be extinguished worldwide.

Will COVID-19 and similar viruses ever be eliminated? The Spring 2021 *Research Penn State*, a magazine highlighting the university's most relevant science research, is discouraging when it warns that "there are probably dozens or hundreds of other viruses...ready to jump [from animals] to humans" (Boni 17). However, there is some good news: Vaccines in the future will last longer (Jose 14) and will become more efficient for all age groups; in addition, the ability to treat viruses will become more manageable (Kuchipudi 15). In the meantime, Penn State science researchers recommend that we should wash our hands, wear a mask, and social distance -- just as *Common Childhood Diseases* recommended in 1952.

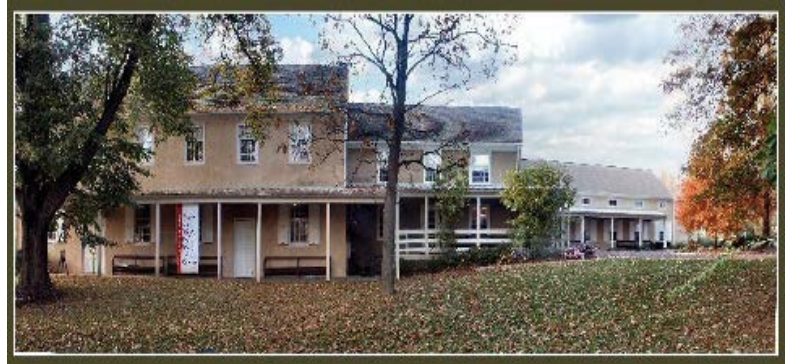
More information about fighting polio, including the role of President Franklin Roosevelt, who had polio, appears at this site: <https://interactive.wttw.com/playlist/2020/03/30/polio-chicagoland>

Another Historic Epidemic Attacks Children in Our Area: Diphtheria

By Carol Kalos

An article published on the Gwynedd Friends Meeting website describes how that community recorded an astonishing 63 childhood deaths over a period of about two months! (Typically, there had been two or three a year.) What happened? The article, "Gwynedd Friends Meeting

Burial Records 1715-1749, including the fatal epidemic of 1745,” relates how the “transcribers,” James and Matthew Quinn, used burial records to deduce what had happened. They mention the addresses of several familiar locations. Here are the website’s words (Minor changes have been made to the text to improve its readability.):



The burial records were written as they happened and appear to be for Gwynedd Preparative Meeting only. It is apparent that many of the deaths among Friends are not accounted for in this record, perhaps because they are buried on their farms and perhaps because the burial book was not faithfully attended to. This transcription was made from microfilm stored at the Friends Historical Center at Swarthmore College.

As can be seen, about 2 or 3 people were buried per year in a normal year. In 1745, a fatal epidemic visited Gwynedd that killed many of the children. Although a yellow fever epidemic was known to occur throughout colonial America in 1745, the pattern of deaths (mainly children) and the rapidity of its spread (all the deaths occurred in 2 months) suggest [diphtheria](#). Waterborne diseases would be less likely as archeological remains suggest settlers at Gwynedd used wells and spring houses for their water.

The epidemic seems to have had a profound effect on Gwynedd. From 1725-1745 Gwynedd was called the School for Prophets, but not afterwards. Many fewer births are found in the Gwynedd records in the years following 1745.

The epidemic seems to have started at the home of Thomas Evans, who described himself as an innkeeper, and his wife Elizabeth Evans. Their house is likely the one still standing in Lower Gwynedd on Sumneytown Pike near the intersection of Evans Rd. From there, it spread to the Rees Harry family (located west on what is now Prospect Ave. near Old Church Rd. in Upper Gwynedd) and then northwards to the John Davies home, located at about Prospect and Hancock now. Within a month it had spread throughout the Gwynedd Preparatory Meeting area, hitting families in Towamencin (Joseph Lucken), Montgomery (John Jones), and New Britain, Bucks (John Forman) and Whitpain, as well as throughout Upper and Lower Gwynedd.

A diphtheria epidemic broke out in [Philadelphia in 1746](#), perhaps a continuance of the one that hit Gwynedd the year before. Diphtheria had also hit New York and New England in 1744, the year before it hit Gwynedd (*Genealogical Encyclopedia of Colonial America*, by Christina K. Schaefer, p 21, on-line through [Google Books](#)).

Complete records of the burials are available at http://www.gwyneddmeeting.org/history/burial_records.htm

Photo: The Gwynedd Friends Meeting (1823), as it appears on its website's "History" section. (This website is outstanding, leading its readers to thousands of pages of local history!):
<https://www.friendsjournal.org/legacy/abington/gwynedd/history.htm>

A Follow-up to Our Last Issue's Article: Steam Heating a Result of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic

The last issue of the WVHS newsletter described how the first central heating system for homes and public buildings was steam heat. The advantage of using steam was that it created extremely hot radiators, so windows could be opened, allowing for good ventilation, and thus eliminating the spread of disease germs.



Evidently, the Whitpain School District, later to become part of today's Wissahickon School District, was one of the first to use these steam radiators. The WVHS registration form (application) to the National Register of Historic Places, prepared in 2006, describes Whitpain's Consolidated School, newly built in 1917. (The photo to the left shows the 1895 Whitpain Public School and the Consolidated School as they appear today.) The registration form mentions the use of central steam heating, how the grade levels were arranged, and how the 1916 school

bus affected the school district's decision to consolidate the schools:

The Whitpain Public School building was superseded by the much larger four-classroom *Whitpain Township Consolidated School building, which contained plumbing, electricity, and central heating via steam radiators* (Italics added). In contrast, the Whitpain Public School 1895 building had no electricity, no plumbing, and an inefficient central heating system. In 1917, students from surrounding schools were consolidated into the Whitpain Township Consolidated School building for grades 1 to 8, and the Whitpain Public School building served as the high school grades 9 to 11. This consolidation was due in part to the increased use of the automobile, specifically the school bus, which the Township had in operation in 1916. In 1929, an addition was added to the rear of the Whitpain Township Consolidated building. It contained several classrooms, an auditorium, and cafeteria in the basement. Concurrently, the Whitpain Public School building ceased operations as the public school.

Note that the WVHS registration for designation is available online (but difficult to find because the record is not yet digitized). The 1895 Public School is listed as "Whitpain Public School." Here's the link:

https://gis.penndot.gov/CRGISAttachments/SiteResource/H111628_01H.pdf

And here's the link to the registration form for National Historic designation for the Franklinville School: <https://www.nps.gov/nr/feature/places/pdfs/14001102.pdf>

Who Left the Old Camera at WVHS's Door?

During the winter months, Peg Johnston arrived at the 1895 Public School to find a wonderful, very old camera at the front door. (Yes, work is always going on at the museum.) The camera is about a 4-inch square. (See the photo at right.)

As each item enters the Collection, Peg asks the donor for the "story" of the item. In some cases, the memory of how the item was used and its connection to local history is as important as the item itself. If you donated this treasure, please let us know, so we can hear *your* story. (Email us at info@WValleyHS.org so we can contact you.)



We Welcome New Members!

Vice President and Membership Chair Joe Langella reports that our society has welcomed new members since September, the beginning of our society's program year. They are **Kathy Hunsicker** (Lower Gwynedd), **Matt Metcalf** (Lower Gwynedd) **Tamra Phillips** (Whitpain), and **Bob Stafford** (Whitpain). Please encourage your friends and family to join. For details, click on the "Join Us" tab in the upper right of our website, *WValleyHS.org*. New members help our society thrive!

WVHS Website Includes New Items: Photographs and Vintage Ads; and "Join Us"

Joan Duxbury has been posting some new items on our website. First, at "Local History," go to "The King's Daughters WWII Newsletters" and then scroll down to find photographs of Ambler-area military veterans. Some of the pictures accompanied those newsletters and others came from the WVHS museum. Also, at "Local History," go to "Local Vintage Ads." Joan says the ad collection came from the *Ambler Gazette* and "things around the schoolhouse."

Vice President Joe Langella has added a new "Join Us" tab on the home page of the WVHS Website. The new page provides information about how to join, donate, volunteer, or present a program. We invite you to participate in our society's happenings!

The home page also contains a new “Donate” button for those who are contributing to preserving the Franklinville School. Please feel free to invite your friends and neighbors to help us by donating.

From the Board of Directors

Did you know? Whitpain Township snow-plows our parking lot. And, the township is seeking a grant for a new roof for the garage at the 1895 Public School, helping to preserve our collection. Thank you, Whitpain Township leaders!

Have you noticed the old stone wall in front of the 1895 Public School? Sadly, to prevent traffic accidents, the Township, in cooperation with PennDOT, removed a portion of the wall at the corner of Skippack Pike and School Road. The intersection creates a sharp turn, especially for long vehicles, who have hit the wall at that corner several times. Last winter a tractor trailer was stuck on the wall, pulling down some of the field stones. The wall is original to the building, according to the property’s application (registration) to the National Register of Historic Places.

Other Agenda Highlights: 1. We are shopping for a new laptop. 2. We are considering the best way to contact local businesses about donating their history and memorabilia to our collection. (Can you help us?) 3. We are hoping to begin having our monthly speakers in the fall.

The Franklinville School Renovation

Three years ago, Whitpain Township conducted an “Assessment Study” of the school. Its purpose was to identify where repairs should be made, to estimate the cost of repairs, and help to set the priorities, i.e., what work should be done first.



The WVHS Board recently obtained a Keystone Communities Program grant of \$20,000, only enough to cover about a third of what is needed. Following the township engineer’s advice, the Board decided to first have a sump pump installed to eliminate the water that settles under the building. This process involves digging trenches, installing new pipes, and putting in a new electrical panel, so there is electricity to run the pump. The second step will be to make repairs at the front porch. It needs a new roof, new floor, and new subfloor. Two contractors, both recommended by the township, have been brought in to give estimates, and at this writing, the Board is still waiting to hear from one of them, but the work on the sump pump should begin in about two weeks. (See the photo to the left and the

crumbling bricks at the back of the Franklinville School.)

If enough contributions arrive, the porch can be repaired. Then the next steps will be to install HVAC, repair the main roof, replace the back patio, and paint the damaged walls, inside and out. **Members are encouraged to make donations so this historic building can be preserved!** Contributions can be made online from the WVHS homepage. (Scroll down to see the yellow “Donate” button.) Or please send a check made payable to **WVHS, P.O. Box 96, Ambler, PA 19002-0096.**

Your donation will certainly be appreciated! Your name will be included in our donors’ list, which will appear on our website and on the invitation and program to our Franklinville School’s reopening celebration.



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