



[www.wvalleyhs.org](http://www.wvalleyhs.org) [info@wvalleyhs.org](mailto:info@wvalleyhs.org) Summer 2021

*Dear Members,*

*In this issue, you will find articles to teach you local history and to inform you about what WVHS is accomplishing. The officers and board appreciate your membership! In this issue are articles about:*

- Normandy Farms and preserving recollections about its history*
- farm tools generously donated to us by a local family, the Dolls*
- an emergency hospital in Ambler for the 1918 flu*
- a thanks to Dottie MacDermott for planting flowers*
- a section of the 1895 wall damaged and removed*
- the renovations at the Franklinville School*
- a brief summary of the Board of Directors' discussions*

*We hope you enjoy this July edition of the Newsletter. There is much to report, so look for another special issue in August.*

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## **Normandy Farms: Its History, Preserved at our Archives**

**By Marie Goldkamp, Secretary of WVHS**

The mystery beyond the white stucco walls at Morris Road and DeKalb Pike is revealed in the history of Normandy Farms. The property can trace its beginnings to 1730 when it was owned by Jacob Levering. In 1834, John Heist built a house, still standing, on this property. Mrs. Heist had inherited the farm from her relatives, the Leverings. A later house on the property became a tavern, called the Franklin Tavern or Franklinville, convenient for travelers on their way from Norristown to Doylestown. Thus Franklinville became the name for a section of Whitpain Township and for the one-room school built there in 1858.



*The back of the 1834 manor house at Normandy Farm Hotel and Conference Center, once the Franklinville Tavern. It is located at the corner of Morris Road and DeKalb Pike. Note the white stucco and red trim. The decorative lights are used year round (photo taken June 2021).*

The Heists sold the farm to the wealthy William Singerly, owner of the *Philadelphia Record*, who expanded the farm to 825 acres and who built the barn, one of the largest on the East Coast. In time, he had financial troubles, so the farm was broken up, but the house and main part of the property was purchased by Dr. William Powell Wilson, a botanist from the University of Pennsylvania. He sold to Ralph Beaver Strassburger and his wife, May Bourne Strassburger.

Ralph Strassburger was a Naval Academy graduate, class of 1905. In 1911, he married May Bourne, daughter of Frederick Bourne, the President of the Singer Sewing Machine Company. In 1912, with four million dollars as a wedding present from the bride's parents, Ralph and May purchased the Franklinville Inn and other buildings on an 83-acre tract. He was involved in national politics, published the *Norristown Times Herald*,

and engaged in genealogical research. (His two thick volumes, tracing Pennsylvania German families in the 1700s, are available at the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society's library.)

Normandy Farms was only one of Strassburger's estates. He also owned several estates in France. Because of his love for all things French, the white walls surrounding Normandy Farms were built with shingled-roofed, arched gates. The barns and stables were also restored. The estate resembled a French manor house – hence the name Normandy Farms. Initially Strassburger bought the farm primarily to raise thoroughbred horses. Through the years, Strassburger continued to purchase adjoining farms. By 1922, the estate comprised almost 1,000 acres and more than 30 houses and barns. About 1929, Strassburger converted Normandy Farms into an Ayrshire dairy-cattle farm, and three silos were erected to hold feed for the 300 cattle. A milking barn was also built.

*A shingle-roofed, arched gate, looking out from present-day Normandy Farm Hotel and Conference Center to DeKalb Pike (photo taken June 2021).*



By 1941, Normandy Farms included 1,500 acres – the largest farm in Montgomery County. However, in 1947, Strassburger was indicted for failing to pay taxes. He left

with his wife and son, Peter, for France. In 1951, the herd of cattle was sold, and the land was converted to crop farming. In 1959, Strassburger died in France. His wife, May, and Peter returned to Normandy Farms. They were forced to sell portions of their estate. After May's death in 1975, the portions sold included tracts that later became the Normandy Farms Estates Retirement Community and the Blue Bell Country Club. When Peter died in 1993, only 73 acres remained. This property was sold to land developers. Thirty-six acres were set aside for open space and preservation of historic buildings.

In 2000, Hansen Properties acquired the land with the historic manor house, barns, and other structures. This property, which opened in 2003, is known as Normandy Farm Hotel and Conference Center. Our Historical Society is grateful to Hansen Properties for the historic renovation of the buildings. In 2001, 76 luxury houses, called Windermere, were built on land adjoining the hotel buildings.

The Normandy Farmstead (the house, barn, and other structures) is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

When the Normandy Farm Hotel and Conference Center opened in 2003, the Historical Society of Whitpain (now merged with the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society) held a fundraiser in one of the ballrooms, which was originally Singerly's huge barn. Approximately 200 guests attended the event and were elated to see the renovations of the building.

One of the speakers at the event was Art Rush, whose father worked at the farm for 65 years. Art also worked at the farm and became manager at the end of the Strassburger era. Art described his chores on the farm from his boyhood days to adulthood. He fed, groomed, and rode the horses. He also helped feed the cattle. He would climb the ladder of the silos, throw down the silage, and wheel it to the barn to feed the cows. He especially delighted in following the night watchman, checking various locations through the night. He enjoyed his years on the farm.

Another speaker was Bud Hansen III, who explained the historic renovations of the buildings. He stated that many of the architectural features in the ballroom are original to the barn, including the three silos. The fundraising event was a success. The funds

raised at the event were used for renovations of the Franklinville School (called Peter's School by the Strassburger's), originally on the Normandy Farms property, but now belonging to our Society.



*The iconic three silos at Normandy Farm. Now their interiors are a part of the venue for weddings and conferences. Note the white stucco wall and the red barn roof (photo taken June 2021).*

Recently, many photographs of Normandy Farms were donated to our Society by Frank Palopoli, the real estate developer who sold Normandy Farms to Hansen Properties in 2000. The photos were taken about 1995 when his real estate firm took possession of the property from the Strassburger estate. The images include the manor house, barns, silos, gates, springhouse, and tennis room. The seventy images include depictions of the white barns with deep-red trim and roofs. The grounds were neatly clipped, and gravel paths connected the buildings. Although some of the white walls were deteriorating, overall the farm was still in good condition.

Those donated photos reveal an important view of our local history, and they add to our collection about Normandy Farms. Our Society is grateful to Mr. Palopoli for donating these treasures, which are now archived in the WVHS library.

## **The Story Behind a Recent Acquisition: Farm Tools Fit for an Art Museum**

**By Peg Johnston**

In the late 1920's, Karl Doll, a German immigrant who had been working as a chauffeur at the Highlands, purchased a 5-acre plot at 1502 Blue Bell Road (across Butler Pike from Deaver Drive). Karl had been a cobbler in Germany and brought shoe-making tools with him. However, shoe-making was a dying trade in the early 20th century, so Karl, like many immigrants, moved on to another trade. By 1933, he had constructed a small house on the plot, married his true love, and started a family. His granddaughter, Brenda Doll, relates her family's story.

The Dolls planted many types of vegetables, tended an orchard of fruit trees, and raised large flocks of chickens and turkeys. At one time on their land they grew Christmas trees. During WWII, they sold eggs from their chickens to Fishers Delicatessen on Main Street near DeKalb Pike in Norristown. Karl and his wife had one son, Carl. Carl and his wife, Nannie Lou, raised their four sons on the farm and contributed to the community. Carl graduated from Ambler High School, was a member of Kiwanis, and served on the Wissahickon School Board. One of Carl and Nannie Lou's sons and his family still lives in the house.

Thanks to the Doll family for sharing their story and the collection of tools that were used on their five acres by three generations of Dolls. The implements include a small tiller, a sod cutter, a two-man saw (each worker pulled, not pushed), a wooden rake (a special design used to gather grass in the garden or orchard), and a scythe (for cutting tall grasses). These implements reflect a craftsman's expert hand at their design. Today their cared-for, polished wood makes them ready for a display in an art museum. They will certainly be appreciated in our Society's agricultural display.



*Some of the tools used by the Doll family for three generations.*

The earliest European settlers in the Whitpain, Lower Gwynedd, and Ambler areas were farmers. Generally, these first settlers bought large tracts of land and remained rather isolated and independent. For instance, the original Whitpaine (original spelling) estate was 4500 acres. In time, the farms became smaller. The arrival of more immigrants meant a growing economy. Gristmills were built, and inter-connecting roads and, much later, train tracks meant that villages and towns gradually sprang up along the routes. Most of the farms provided food products for the local markets, as well as for Philadelphia and Norristown. Produce was transported to Philadelphia by the train from Penllyn and Ambler stations and by private vehicle to Norristown and Ambler. While Ambler Borough developed as a commercial center, agriculture played an important part in the economy and daily life of Whitpain and Lower Gwynedd Townships well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Our Society's collection is constantly developing to show artifacts from farm and factory. The Doll family's contribution of farm implements is especially valuable to reveal more about local farming practices.

**In the next issue: Peg Johnston interviews three sisters who attended Whitpain Schools in the 1960s and '70s. Here's just one of the photos they shared with us:**



***Blue Bell Elementary, Grade 1, 1969-1970***

**Pennsylvania Emergency Hospital in Ambler during 1918 Spanish Flu**  
**By Carol Kalos**

During the 1918 Flu epidemic, the hospitals were full, so Pennsylvania created about 80 “emergency hospitals” throughout the Commonwealth. The hospitals recruited doctors and nurses to staff the hospitals, which, according to sources, created shortages in some areas of the state. The shortage was already severe because many doctors and nurses were serving in Europe during World War I.

The photo below shows the PA Emergency Hospital located at the Ambler Train Station. Some investigation adds to what the caption states. First, WVHS Board Member and Ambler history expert Frank Russo thinks the building is the “railroad freight building that stood until the 1970s.” In addition, Frank relates how Newton Howard clarified that the freight station was located “in the freight yard on south Main Street across from St. Joseph’s Church.” Further, the *Ambler Gazette* for October 17, 1918 (page 1), mentions there was a Captain Griffith (perhaps from the Red Cross) who suggested an emergency hospital in Ambler and Fort Washington. Other sources mention hospitals were also located in Lansdale and Conshohocken. The newspapers in 1918 devoted most of their space to reporting about World War I, so little was written about the emergency hospitals, and there were no headlines about the flu. The newspaper’s social pages did list a few individuals who were “convalescing from the grippe.” However, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission reports that about 350,000 PA citizens died from the flu, and Philadelphia had the “highest death toll” in the country.



A woman stands before the entrance of an emergency hospital set up in Ambler in 1918 to care for victims of the flu epidemic that was sweeping the nation. (Courtesy of Wissahickon Valley Historical Society.)

***Postcard submitted by Frank Russo, appears on page 99 in Images of America: Ambler. Ed. Frank D. Quattrone Portsmouth, NH: Arcadia Press, 2004.***

## **A Thanks to Dottie**

Once again member Dottie MacDermott has added the beauty of plants to our headquarters at the 1895 Public School. Last December she hung wreaths at our front doors. (See the December issue for details.) In May she put out three lovely pots of annuals. Drivers on Skippack Pike can enjoy her big red geraniums. And a variety of additional bright flowers now welcome our volunteers as they come and go. Thank you, Dottie.



*A sampling of Dottie's cheerful flowers at the 1895 School*

## **A Section of the Historic WVHS Wall Removed**

Whitpain Township has removed a portion of the fieldstone wall at the 1895 Public School at the corner of Skippack Pike and School Road. WVHS officers and township officials began discussing this action about two years ago. According to the 1895 School's application (called its registration) to the National Register of Historic Places, the wall is original to the property. However, the removal of the corner of the wall was essential, according to Tom Farzetta, Director of Public Works. The township said that vehicles were hitting the wall as they made the sharp right turn from Skippack Pike onto School Road. The damage caused costly and frequent repairs. Then a tractor-trailer was stuck on the wall, loosening several more stones. Finally, in May, a township crew, in cooperation with PennDOT, removed the growing pile of loose fieldstones and the hazardous corner of the wall. They hauled away the valuable stones and stored them safely at a secure township yard for cleaning and re-use. The Board is considering how

those fieldstones might be used again at the 1895 Public School or the Franklinville School.



*The end of the wall along Skippack Pike, which used to wrap around the corner to School Road. Taken May 2021.*



*The corner of School Road and Skippack Pike, where a portion of the 1895 School's fieldstone wall was removed (photo taken May 2021).*

## **The Renovations at the Franklinville School**

**By Carol Kalos**

Work has finally begun at the Franklinville School, and the water issue should be under control. Dean Bender, head of Dry Basements by Dean, completed his portion of the job on June 8. He was recommended to WVHS by Whitpain Township. The issue was that water was accumulating in the shallow (2 ½- foot) crawl space under the building. First, Bender's three employees re-dug the shallow trenches that line the outside of the two sides of the building. They started by removing the rocks that had covered the old trenches; then, digging by hand, they made those trenches wider and deeper, and extended them about thirty feet into the back yard.



*Work begins at the Franklinville School. Tarps leading from the front door to a hatch door, the entrance to the crawl space beneath the building. Taken May 2021.*

Digging the trenches revealed the foundation of the aging school below the soil level. As a result, the workers realized that water was seeping into the crawl space through holes in the foundation. To make it waterproof, they hauled in water to mix concrete to coat the outside of the foundation. (There's no running water at the school; students got water from a well, now covered.) The workers also realized that a vapor barrier in the crawl space, meant to keep the building dry, was actually collecting water, so it was removed.



***One of the pipes to carry water away from the foundation of the building. The trenches were dug by hand to protect the old structure. Taken May 2021.***

To be extra thorough, the workers also dug a new trench across the front edge of the porch. Then at the bottom of each trench, they added gravel and installed six-inch plastic pipe to drain water away from the building. Finally, they recovered the trenches,

first with soil and then with those rocks. Now the water coming off the roof travels to the trenches, to the back of the building, and into the back lawn. The anticipated sump pump was thankfully not needed. Instead, gravity does its job, and the huge puddle is finally gone.

One humid, ninety-degree day, while working at the school, Bender says he ate his lunch while sitting on one of the benches on the front porch. He noticed that the shade from the trees and a gentle breeze created a surprisingly pleasant place, and he thought of the hundreds of children who had eaten lunch at that same site. He said he was proud to work at this historic location.

The Board of Directors has considered the long list of other essential things that need to be done at the Franklinville School. They have already hired an electrician to replace the electrical panel. The Keystone Communities Grant will cover the drainage work and the panel with its new circuit breakers. But hazards still exist: an aging roof, a rotting front porch, a crumbling back porch, and old electric baseboard heat.

The Board will begin with the front porch. It has a leaking roof, rotting ceiling, and a rotting floor; and the subfloor is unknown. Other items on the to-do list are replacing the main roof, installing heating and cooling, rebuilding the back porch, and finally painting, inside and outside. Contractors are busy, so they are slow to respond to the Board's questions.

However, a bigger problem is finding the funds to do the work. Thousands of dollars are still needed! **To donate, please send a check to P.O. Box 96, Ambler, PA 19002, or go online to our homepage, at [www.wvalleyhs.org](http://www.wvalleyhs.org) All contributions are appreciated and all donors will be recognized!**

### **News from the Board of Directors**

The May Newsletter reported on the Board's discussions through April. Since then, a major issue requiring the Board's decisions has been the plans for the Franklinville School, described above. In addition, the Board has covered these topics:

- The WVHS phone is being answered by interim vice president Joe Langella.
- WVHS is looking for ways to contact major Wissahickon Valley businesses to ask them to submit their business history to our collection. Their contributions will balance our Amchem and Marsden Glass exhibits and will help WVHS gain support from the business community.
- WVHS would like to be open for 100 days per year to be eligible for certain PA grants, but we need to find and train more volunteers, so we can host more frequent open-house events or “work days” at the 1895 School.
- WVHS continues to answer frequent questions about properties, genealogy, and related issues. Thanks to our experts who assist the researchers!
- WVHS would like to sponsor historical markers to recognize local landmarks. In addition to structures and sites, of special importance is what the Board is now calling Revolution Road, Washington’s route through our area. (After the Battle of Germantown, British troops followed the Patriots as far as the Blue Bell Tavern!) Several possibilities are being investigated.
- The Board has begun a discussion with the township concerning how to improve the signs at the 1895 Public School and the Franklinville School.
- *Blue Bell’s Finest*, a magazine for Blue Bell Country Club residents, is publishing WVHS history articles, written by interim president Carol Kalos. Then the articles will be added to the WVHS website.
- Yen Ho, our local history blogger, is moving with her family to Vietnam, where she was hired as a librarian. She will be missed. (Read more about her in our Fall Newsletter.)
- A United States flag in our collection, once lost on a dark shelf, will be framed and hung at the 1895 School. (Donations appreciated...)
- Some tools and other items from the Franklinville School have been accessioned and will be displayed there when the construction is complete.

- More of the archives and library should be digitized and catalogued. Member Bob Bradley is investigating new software. He has added a bibliography of the WVHS genealogy holdings to our website.
- If the pandemic allows, an 1895 School Open House will be on Sunday, November 7, with a theme of World War II to mark the 80<sup>th</sup> year since the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941.
- For the last several of its meetings, the Board has discussed various aspects of the WVHS Bylaws, concentrating on one section each month. Revised Bylaws, once completed, will be presented for approval at a future membership meeting. While not making changes to the organization or its present member procedures, the new Bylaws will be clearer and more concise. Thank you to member and lawyer Mark Ashton for his professional contribution.



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