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*Welcome to 2021! In this issue, you will read about the sad demise of a local state champion tree, the good deeds of the Questers, how steam heat helped slow the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, the history behind Dottie MacDermott's boxwood wreaths, Mary Lou McFarland's decades-long contributions to our Board, and other WVHS news. Stay healthy and enjoy your wintertime reading!*

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## **Whitpain Township Bids Farewell to Historic Tree**

Picture a perfectly-shaped deciduous tree, its trunk, straight and tall, and a canopy seeming to float above it. Wentz Run Park in Whitpain Township was home to such a specimen, and its size made it a prizewinner, a Pennsylvania state champion Pignut Hickory tree. In 2020 (that awful year when bad things happened), a rare storm knocked over the pampered tree. Township officials and those who used to hike the park's trail to gaze at the tree were devastated because the tree was not only lovely and large, it was old. The arborist who cared for the tree measured its trunk at 31 inches across. Most significantly, he counted 248 rings, so the tree had witnessed local history since 1772!

In that year, the tree's seed landed beside a little stream in what was then Philadelphia County. (Montgomery County was formed from part of Philadelphia in 1784.) Today, yards from the Pennsylvania Turnpike, that stream trickles into Stony Creek, which feeds the Schuylkill River. *Whitpain Township, A Tricentennial Reflection, 1701-2001*, edited by Wayne A. Huss (2002), describes how the property was owned by Charles Jolly (We know him from Jolly Road.), who sold land in 1775 to Christopher Zimmerman (1736-1782). Zimmerman's farm extended across 200 acres, including the Mermaid Lake property (which Whitpain Township is preserving), and Wentz Run Park (where Whitpain Township's headquarters is located). According to online sources, the park is suitably named after

Abraham Wentz (1725-1774), who in 1764 built Blue Bell's Rising Sun Tavern, which was used as a meeting house for Whitpain Township government (founded in 1701).

From the Wentz Run Park, the well-marked Wentz Run Trail to the historic tree is an out-and-back trail. To visit the fallen tree, still lying across the pathway, hikers travel almost two miles over a floodplain. In fact, due to the mire, it will be a few months until the soil dries, so that the tree can be removed and its wood saved. Pignut Hickory trees are known for their valuable hardwood, used decades ago for broom handles. Now the township plans to use the special wood for planks for park benches, so the tree will continue with us.



The tree has already done its part to bring life to its woodland community, reaching along the East Coast and into Canada. The Pignut Hickory's nuts are bitter-tasting to humans, but loved by birds, squirrels, deer, and other wildlife. In fact, the first settlers found wild pigs devouring the nuts, thus the name "pignut."

Whitpain's Pignut Hickory deserved its status. Champion trees, the largest of a species, are determined by a point system, based on three measurements: the trunk circumference, the height, and the average crown spread. Slow-growing Pignut Hickories usually grow to about 60 feet tall, but this one, with Whitpain Township's care, stretched to an official 137.9 feet.

Andrew Meehan, who serves on the

township's Shade Tree Commission, and who, as an arborist (Arbor Valley Tree Surgeons), has cared for the tree for almost twenty years, relates how the tree became so distinguished. In an interview in January 2021 at the famous tree, he explained that the nearby stream offered the tree a constant water supply, so it was rarely completely dormant, even in the winter season. Furthermore, the township supplied the tree with good maintenance. Meehan, for instance, installed cables and lightning rods. He pointed out that the tree is still trying to survive; its root system is sending out new shoots, called "sucker growth." (The photo shows the tree's heartwood, the hard, dark center of the trunk. Inside the bark, the cambium, the living layer, supplies nutrients to the tree.)



Fittingly, on June 3, 2020, the spectacular tree was felled by a spectacular storm: a Derecho, an unusual thunderstorm with straight-line winds. In this case, *NBC News* reported that thousands lost power and three local people died as a result of winds reaching up to 70 miles per hour. Meehan explained that during the storm, the leaves of the tree acted as sails, catching the wind. The gale pushed across the top of the tree as its roots lifted from the moist soil below. Finally, from the force of the fall, the length of the tree split in half. Seeing the ancient tree on its side, Meehan's face revealed how he mourns the loss of the champion he had cared for, but then he acknowledged, "That's Mother Nature."

On July 4, 2026, the United States will be 250 years old. As part of the *America 250* celebration leading to that date, the WVHS is planning a tree-planting ceremony to commemorate the treasured Pennsylvania state champion Pignut Hickory tree.

## WVHS Board Extends Gratitude

If you recognize Mary Lou McFarland's name, it is because she has been collecting WVHS dues since 1985. Moreover, Mary Lou served on the Board as the president from 1987-1989, and she served more recently as the vice president for over twenty years. As further proof of her dedication, although she has stepped down as an officer, she continues to participate faithfully as a member of our Board at our monthly online meetings.

Mary Lou is able to contribute much to the Board's discussions because she works in historic preservation. She is the Senior Preservation Specialist for the Heritage Conservancy, protecting historic and open space in Bucks and Montgomery Counties. In that position, she monitors open space and facade easements, and she manages the historic resource surveys and the Historic Register and Preservation Trades program. Mary Lou is also a member of the Advisory Board for Montgomery County Parks, Trails, and Historic Sites. The WVHS Board is fortunate to have her expert assistance!



At the Board's virtual meeting in October, Joe Langella replaced Mary Lou as interim vice president, with duties including our dues collection. The society's officers are serving on an interim basis until the membership can meet in person (post-pandemic) to hold an election. Officers and Board members are elected in odd-numbered years, so WVHS, like other groups, is hoping to see a "return to normalcy." (This phrase is common today, but for the election of 1920, it was presidential candidate Warren G.

Harding's campaign slogan, and he was referring to the country's recovery from WWI and the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic. He became the 29<sup>th</sup> President.)

**Mary Lou McFarland: Photo from *Heritage Conservancy/about our team*, online**

## Meaningful Wreaths for WVHS Headquarters

Again this year, member Dottie MacDermott used her talents to create two lovely boxwood wreaths to adorn the red double doors of the Whitpain 1895 Public School. Dottie, a retired elementary teacher, learned to make the wreaths through her membership in the Norristown Garden Club, which, Dottie says, began in 1913, and is today known for its Holiday House Tour. To conclude 2020 and to begin 2021, Dottie's boxwood is an important ingredient to give our façade an authentic 19<sup>th</sup>-century holiday appearance.

In the United States, the history of boxwood stretches across colonial times until today. The early colonists were Puritans, who did not acknowledge the need for a celebration. Later, growing boxwood became fashionable among "elite" households in Europe and the Colonies. Although not native to the United States, boxwood can still be found growing as hedges at Mount Vernon, where its planting was



requested by George Washington. Around 1850, Christmas started to be celebrated in the United States, becoming a federal holiday in 1870.

Boxwood's use expanded, so by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as an evergreen, boxwood was the most popular shrub used for Christmas decorating.

As for the boxwood wreath, its history began thousands of years ago. European pagans realized that, as an evergreen, boxwood could survive the

winter, and they brought it indoors, the beginning of what would become the Christmas tradition. The wreath shape began with the ancient Greeks and Romans, who wore evergreen crowns (of laurel) to celebrate their military and athletic victories.

Many thanks to Dottie for bringing us beauty during the winter solstice when the days are short, but when all cultures appreciate ancient traditions and look forward to a new solar year.

(See The Black Opal Florist online for more details about the history of wreaths)

**Boxwood Hedge: Photo from *George Washington's Mount Vernon/the estate*, online**

## How the 1918 Flu Pandemic Affected Heating Systems



Experts now know that COVID-19 spreads because its victims inhale droplets in the air. So to ward off the virus, besides wearing a mask and social distancing, everyone should avoid poorly-ventilated rooms. Even in 1918, doctors recognized that crowded indoor spaces helped to spread any airborne disease. As a result, engineers changed how buildings were heated. They overheated the rooms, so the windows could remain open.

The first homes were warmed by a campfire, then a fireplace, then a stove, and finally a central heating system. The first type of central heating, developed

about the same time as the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, was steam heat, which worked well in both private homes and large public buildings. Today, our heating systems use water or air. But with steam, water rises on its own from a basement boiler to radiators, where the steam condenses, releasing heat. The condensed steam (water) then flows back down, on its own, to the basement. Dan Holohan, in *The Lost Art of Steam Heating* (1992), vouches for this simple system, which required no pump as our modern systems do. In an interview on *NPR* (12-10-2020), Holohan relates how radiators at first were placed on interior walls, but in an effort to control the 1918 pandemic, boilers were sized to overheat a room, and then radiators were moved to the outside walls to heat the cold air entering through the open windows.

One WVHS member relates how, in his elementary school, built by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, the standards of the day influenced the heating system to prevent disease. (The WPA was a federal program to create jobs for the unemployed during the Great Depression.) A huge boiler sat in the school's basement, groaning and hissing-- what the students called dragon noises. In the classrooms, the colder the outside temperature, the hotter the steam radiators. A student who touched a radiator could burn his or her hand, and the pipes supplying the radiators were so scorching that they were wrapped with asbestos (ironically, for students' safety)! Eventually, as the indoor temperature became ferocious, the teacher was forced to open the windows. By the end of a zero-degree day, every window in the school stood wide open. Any airborne droplets were floating away! Even today on a truly cold day in Philadelphia, one might see an older apartment building with rows of open windows; in fact, according to an online source (Xylem, Holohan blog), many large, old buildings, such as the Empire State Building (completed in 1931), still depend on steam.



The Whitpain 1895 Public School also relies on radiators, but using hot water heat. When no one is there, the thermostat is kept at 58 degrees, and Treasurer Tom Goldkamp checks the building regularly

to make sure the heating system is working. (Thank you, Tom!) It has been in place for about 50 years, but it has been updated regularly. Its boiler, located in the garage, was fueled first by coal and now by oil. The basement reveals an array of the old building's labeled plumbing and heating pipes, and in the center of the room, a bulletin-board describes their use. It is interesting to speculate about how our homes will be heated in the coming 50 years. Perhaps a solar-powered system designed to ward off disease?

## **On a Quest for History!**

"It's fun to seek—and a joy to find!" So goes the motto of The Questers—an international organization of like-minded individuals who love history—and especially the history of historical things (i.e. antiques). Founded in 1944 right here in Philadelphia, the purpose of The Questers and each of its affiliate chapters is education to "preserve the past for the future; promote education in the fields of historical

preservation and restoration; and give grants for the preservation and restoration of historical artifacts, existing memorials, historical buildings and landmarks."

When eight or more people gather to discuss the topics of antiques, history and/or preservation—and share their collections and personal knowledge with others, a Questers chapter is ready to form. Each chapter then reflects the membership and its preferences, and comes together with other chapters to form their state- and provincial-chartered Questers organizations. According to the Questers website, today the combined membership is 568 chapters with approximately 8,000 members in the US and Canada.



Locally, we are lucky to benefit from the generosity of two Questers chapters: The Spring House Chapter in Lower Gwynedd Township and the Blue Bell Chapter in Whitpain Township. We are luckier still to have been the beneficiaries of a number of grants over the years for the preservation of our society's artifacts and collections. Most recently, the Blue Bell Questers helped to fund displays about local women and their accomplishments while the Spring House Questers funded the restoration of a stained-glass window from the Mattison estate, as well as the purchase and installation of light-blocking shades for the Whitpain 1895 Public School.

The Questers international headquarters is located at 210 South Quince Street near Washington Square in a federal-period, three-story brick building, and it is open for tours by appointment. More details appear on their website: [www.questers1944.org](http://www.questers1944.org)

## **From the Society's Inbox**

In the last few weeks, we have received several messages from homeowners seeking information about their properties. We are pleased that our community is truly interested in its history.

## From our Archive

The *WVHS Newsletter* in January 2014 notes that in Lower Gwynedd, the Beaumont House (1817) had been expanded, and it was opened as a guest house for visitors to Foulkeways Gwynedd Community Retirement Community. To save the historic building, it had been moved to accommodate the widening of Route 202. A county website reports that later in 2014, the project won Montgomery County's Award for Excellence in Planning and Design.

## Prohibition

Help us **discover** history. Please send us what you know about Prohibition in our area:

[info@wvalleyhs.org](mailto:info@wvalleyhs.org)

## COVID-19

Help us **preserve** history. Please send us your ephemera and stories about how you are facing the pandemic: [info@wvalleyhs.org](mailto:info@wvalleyhs.org)

## Please follow us on Facebook.

WVHS Vice President Joe Langella and Social Media intern Emma Siegel oversee the posting of historic photos on a regular basis. **We enjoy connecting with you!**

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



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