
Wissahickon Valley Historical Society ~ Volume 2, Number 1

The Valley Crier



Welcoming in the New Year, and How the Celebration Started: “The date of New Year’s Day seems so fundamental that it’s almost as though nature ordained it. But New Year’s Day is a civil event,” according to the website EarthSky. “Its date isn’t precisely fixed by any natural seasonal marker.



Our modern celebration of New Year’s Day stems from an ancient Roman custom, the feast of the Roman god, Janus....” Pictured above, he looked both to the past and the

future. “For us in the Northern Hemisphere, early January is a logical time for new beginnings.... We had the shortest day of the year [in December]. By early January, our days are obviously lengthening again. This return of longer hours of daylight had a profound effect on cultures that were tied to agricultural cycles. It has an emotional effect on people even in cities today.

“People didn’t always celebrate the new year on January 1. The earliest recording of a new year celebration is believed to have been in Mesopotamia, circa 2000 B.C. That celebration ... was celebrated around the time of the vernal equinox, around March 20. Meanwhile, the ancient Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Persians began their new year with the autumnal equinox around September 20. And the ancient Greeks celebrated on the winter solstice, around December 20.

“By the Middle Ages, though, in many places the new year began in March. Around the 16th century, a movement developed to restore January 1 as New Year’s Day. In the New Style or Gregorian calendar, the New Year begins on the first of January.”

Conclusion: There’s no astronomical reason to celebrate New Year’s Day on January 1.



Holiday wreaths at the 1895 School

Cheerful Holiday Décor at the 1895 School: Thank you to Dottie MacDermott and her husband Don for decorating the front of the 1895 School. A member of the garden club, she enhances our entrance for every season! Today passersby will see lovely boxwood wreaths at the front doors (pictured above) and pots filled with greens and big, red bows at the entrance stairs.

FEMA Advice on Restoring Storm-Damaged Items: We have heard much about storms and tornadoes in the news recently. (Pictured below are the results of the 130 mile-per-hour winds at Fort Washington State Park.) FEMA and the Smithsonian have put together a two-page article on how to salvage damaged heirlooms. Their list includes photographs, framed art, ceramics, and six other types of treasures, as well as a list of online resources:

https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/202005/SalvagingFamilyValuables_sept2018.pdf



Equipment clears the fallen trees at the entrance to Fort Washington State Park near Bethlehem Pike in December 2021

The War of 1812 and the Destruction at the U.S. Capitol: On January 6, our nation will mark the first anniversary since Trump supporters tried to take control of the Capitol Building, causing 30 million dollars' worth of damage, and injuring many officials who tried to protect the precious building. In the initial reports, journalists noted that the invasion was the first time the site had been vandalized since the War of 1812.

Pennsylvania's Department of Education website states that the War of 1812 is taught in grades 6 and 9, so it is not surprising that most of us do not remember many details about that conflict.

What caused the War of 1812, what happened, and how did it end?

The War of 1812 began due to political conflict between England and France with both sides trying to keep the United States from trading with the other. Then the Royal Navy started “impressment,” taking sailors off U.S. merchant vessels and forcing them to work on British ships. Members of Congress were also outraged that Britain was encouraging Native American hostilities against its citizens in its Northwest Territory (the present-day states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin, as well as part of Minnesota). The United States declared war on Britain.

At the start of the war, the United States invaded Canada, unsuccessfully. As soon as Britain defeated France, it turned its force again the United States. As a result, in August of 1814, British troops entered Washington, D.C, burning government buildings, the Capitol, and the White House. (We have all heard how Dolley Madison left her personal possessions behind but took Gilbert Stuart’s portrait of George Washington with her as she left the building. The National Park Service says she was helped by Paul Jennings, a 15-year-old enslaved African American.) The United States won the next navy battles, finally winning the war in 1815. (We have also heard how, at one of those victories, Frances Scott Key was inspired, while watching the flag over Baltimore’s Fort McHenry, to write the Star-Spangled Banner.)

One website summarizes the impacts of the war this way: “Though the War of 1812 is remembered as a relatively minor conflict in the United States and Britain, it looms large for Canadians and for Native Americans, who see it as a decisive turning point in their losing struggle to govern themselves. In fact, the war had a far-reaching impact in the United States, as the ... [peace treaty] ended decades of bitter partisan infighting in government The war also ... reinforced a tradition of Anglophobia that had begun during the Revolutionary War. Perhaps most importantly, the war’s outcome boosted national self-confidence and encouraged the growing spirit of American expansionism” (History.com, War of 1812, 2021).



Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington, rescued from the White House during the British troops' invasion during the War of 1812. Although painted by Stuart, this was not the original.

A New Year, 2022. Coming soon:

January	No meeting. Stay healthy and stay warm
February 7	*See highlighted announcement below*
March 14	Jenn Bilger, Executive Director of Wissahickon Trails, "Connect with the Wissahickon"
April 11	Speaker to be determine
April 24	Wine and Cheese Fundraiser on Sunday, 1-3 pm, depending on COVID restrictions
May 9	WVHS elections and speaker to be determined
June	Picnic--Date and location to be determined

Also being planned:

- For April or May, a demonstration, sponsored by Wissahickon Trails, of the Evans-Mumbower Mill
- For spring, a get-together at Bluestone Country Club

*** WVHS's next meeting and speaker -- scheduled for Monday, February 7, at 7:00 PM, with the location to be determined.**

- The church's member and historian, Tamra Phillips, will present "A History of Whitpain Township's Grace Baptist Church (Founder of Temple University), on its 150th Year."
- Please note that this program is the first Monday of the month, not the usual second. The change-of-date avoids a conflict with Valentines' Day.
- As the date gets closer, **please check your email:** We may go to the Blue Bell Public Library to allow for social distancing.
- If there are COVID restrictions, the meeting may be postponed to a later date.

There was no Board of Directors meeting in December.



The bell tower at Grace Baptist Church on Skippack Pike, taken November 2021

Committee to Preserve Historic Ambler: A group of Ambler citizens has been working since last spring to preserve the history and character of Ambler's old buildings. They have been attending Ambler's Planning Commission meetings, and they will be sponsoring tours and other programs to raise awareness of Ambler Borough's rich history. As a new committee of WVHS, they call themselves the Storytellers as they promote and preserve the history of the area. More about the Storytellers will appear in next month's *Valley Crier*. To join their efforts, please send an email to amblerstorytellers@gmail.com. To read more about their initiative, see "Action is Needed by All to Restore Ambler the Right Way" in the December 2021 issue of *The Shuttle*, published by Weavers Way Co-op:

https://issuu.com/weaversway/docs/theshuttle_2021_12/1?ff



The historic Classic Coachworks in Ambler, once the Keasbey and Mattison Company garage

Franklinville School Renovation Grants: The first grant application is being reviewed. For the second grant, President Carol Kalos and Treasurer Tom Goldkamp have been meeting with contractors to obtain estimates. Repairing the front porch is the next priority, and then the board will decide on further repairs.



Deteriorating flooring at the Franklinville School's front porch, October 2021

The Quill is coming: If you would like to contribute, please send us your ideas: info@WValleyHS.org. We are looking for articles about your historical research or your reminiscences about our local area.

WVHS Volunteers (Still) Needed: Prior to the pandemic, a group of volunteers met on Thursdays to do chores at the 1895 School, and they created many friendships. If you have a little or a lot of time to assist the society, please let us know (info@WValleyHS.org). Volunteers learn about the community, the society, its collection, and they meet interesting neighbors. New volunteers will be trained. Please see last month's *Valley Crier* to see the list of about ten "jobs" that are available. These include working with the building, the displays, the library, and the museum collection. Most take only a few hours each month. **The most important is sending the monthly *Valley Crier* to the 28 members who do not use email. Download the newsletter, make copies, stuff envelopes, stamp and mail. WVHS will reimburse your expenses.**

WVHS Welcomes New Members:

Jennifer Zwetolitz
Mary Spross
Mary Margaret Monsor
Sean Kozlowski
Russell Hunt
Elaine Cuifo

New to the Collection:

- From the William Jeanes Memorial Library in Lafayette Hill, eight out-of-print books on various topics relating to our area's history
- From Pat Budenz, several additions to our Normandy Farm file: color postcards of Normandy Farm; newspaper articles about Normandy Farm and its caretaker, Arthur E. Rush; and a personal history of Normandy Farm by his daughter, Peggie Rush Hartwar

Whitpain Township Provides New Garage Roof at 1895 School: The garage contains a storage closet, the furnace for the 1895 School, and two bays, which WVHS rents to Neal Bradley for his antique cars. (See the next article for details about one of them.) On December 6th, a pleasant, sunny day for December, a dozen workers swooped across the worn garage roof, putting on new shingles and rain gutters. The garage is historic, added to the school in the early 1900s. The bussing of students began around 1918. Stored in the garage was the district's first school bus, a Ford Model "I," shown here from the WVHS website:



The photo below shows the new garage roof, provided by Whitpain Township:



Workers replacing the roof at the 1895 School's historic garage, December 2021

WVHS Member Describes How He Remodeled His Antique Dodge Brothers Car: A longtime member of the WVHS, Neal Bradley rents space from the society for his cars, and he has helped the society with many of its projects. In November, he displayed his 1917 Dodge Brothers car (pictured below) and his 1946 Pontiac at the WVHS Open House. Moreover, he was a great help during the renovation of the 1895 School. For example, he repaired the front double-doors and locks, as well as many school desks and tables. He also shaped a chair-rail molding to fill in the gaps of our existing molding. Then, amazingly, he rebuilt the Ambler Theater's red-upholstered chair, now on display, which arrived to WVHS as a couple of boxes of parts. WVHS appreciates everything Neal does for us!

Recently Neal was honored to see his description in print of how he restored one of his old cars. His article appears in the November-December 2021 issue of *Dodge Brothers Club News*, titled "Cover Car Story: My 1917 Dodge Brothers Touring Car." (The Dodge Brothers, John Francis and Horace, pioneered the car-manufacturing company,

purchased in 1928 by Chrysler.) With Bradley's and his publisher's permission, the text of the article is reprinted here:

The purchase of my 1917 Dodge Brothers touring car began one Saturday in April 1999 with a trip to our local brickyard to purchase bricks for our garden. Little did I know that this errand would result in the Dodge Brothers following me home. When I returned to the brickyard, I drove my 1969 Buick Convertible. After pricing the material ... the brickyard owner ... steered our conversation towards my convertible, and he wanted to know about the car's restoration. During our talk, I showed him photos of my 1946 Packard Clipper, which I had recently finished restoring. This gentleman's father also had a 1946 Packard. Talk about serendipity!

A week or so later, I returned to the brickyard with my 1946 Packard and drove the owner around the parking lot in it. During that visit, the gentleman mentioned that he had an old Dodge Brothers car that had belonged to his father. He was hoping to sell it to someone that would restore it.

Another week passed and I discussed the Dodge Brothers with my wife before going back to the brickyard to ask the owner if I could look at the car. Seven days later the car was in my driveway. I was the new caretaker! The seller was careful to put the fenders, hood, and radiator back on the car to make it easier to transport. A month later, I had the car completely back together and running. After driving it around a bit to see what was needed, I decided that it was time to dismantle the car and begin its restoration.

When I purchased the car, the previous owner also sold me the antique license plate from Pennsylvania that had a low number. I then sent away for the title and registration. A few days later I received a call from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. They would send me the title but not the registration number. During 1972, Hurricane Agnes caused a catastrophic flood in Pennsylvania. This flood destroyed all the records in Harrisburg. The Dodge Brothers' number registered to the car had been reassigned to another vehicle. I was told to take four pictures of the automobile that looked like it did when it

was new, and they would send me a new license plate. This was the official start of the restoration.

Underneath, the front seat was rusted out, and it was held up with a 2 X 4. It was ... the same story with the rear seat. After I replaced the floor, I was able to tie the springs for the seats and put the leather cover back on. I was then able to weld in new panels for the front and rear seats.

Mechanically, the water pump shaft was worn out and had to be replaced. So I set up four posts in my garage and drove the car into the garage between them. I jacked the car up and put beams between the body and chassis, and then I lowered the chassis so I could drive it out.

Next, I stripped the old paint, primed the body, and painted the chassis and body. Then the hood, fenders, and doors were primed, painted, and put back on.

The restoration work was completed in one year. The top was replaced a few years later. Now I had the new registration paperwork for the car too!



**During the WVHS November 2021 Open House, Neal Bradley's 1917
Dodge Brothers Touring Car on display**

**The Wissahickon Valley Historical Society is an all-volunteer organization,
receiving funds only from donors. It works to promote and preserve the history of
Ambler Borough, Whitpain Township, and Lower Gwynedd Township:**

www.WValleyHS.org

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