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*Wissahickon Valley Historical Society ~ Volume 2, Number 3*

# *The Valley Crier*



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**Announcing our March 14 Speaker (6:30 PM at the Blue Bell Library):** Jenn Bilger, Executive Director of Wissahickon Trails, will describe “Connecting with the Wissahickon and the Evans-Mumbower Mill: Their History and Mission.” Please note the *time and location*.



**In October of 2021, the miller moves a bag of corn to start his demonstration at the Evans-Mumbower Mill.**

**Storytellers, a WVHS Committee:** This is a group of citizens working to maintain the historic character of Ambler's residences and businesses. One of the group's leaders explains that as Ambler real estate heats up, developers will buy older homes and commercial buildings specifically to demolish them and put in bigger, denser projects that maximize their profit and minimize aesthetics or concern for neighbors and the environment. No ordinance prevents this!

As a result, the Ambler Storytellers have asked the Borough of Ambler to follow through on its Open Space Plan, which was already adopted in 2019, and calls for the protection of historic resources. Under "Historic and Cultural Resources," Goal 3 states: "Preserve buildings and other resources that represent important aspects of Ambler's history and culture."

The Ambler Borough Planning Commission has proposed an ordinance, which identifies 22 buildings as significant and provides some restrictions for their demolition. The Commission at January's meeting invited the property owners of these buildings for their input. Some of the owners or their representatives attended to say that they don't want any demolition restrictions on their buildings because they want to sell them to anyone, regardless of the buyer's intent to maintain or demolish the building. In contrast, the Ambler Storytellers support the 2019 Open Space Plan.

Prior to that January meeting, no letter was sent to the residents of Ambler, so the Storytellers are trying to win support for the ordinance, grass-roots style, providing an argument for preservation: Ambler could lose history that can never be taken back, and the town's character may be forever lost.

The Ambler Storytellers will be offering tours, doing research, presenting their view at public meetings, sponsoring speakers, and keeping the public informed. They welcome new members to their group, which meets on the second Tuesday of each month at 6:30 pm at the Ambler Public Library.

Please show your support by attending the Planning Commission meetings, held at the Ambler Borough Hall on the fourth Tuesday of each month at 7 pm. For further information, go to the WVHS website at <https://www.wvalleyhs.org/committees/>. To join their efforts, please send an email to [AmblerStorytellers@gmail.com](mailto:AmblerStorytellers@gmail.com).



***Ambler Planning Commission debates the need for the town's historic preservation ordinance.***

**Ambler Savings Bank Donates for Franklinville School Renovation:** Although Ambler Savings Bank donated \$1,000 to WVHS a year ago, the pandemic delayed the photo below. Then a mild, but windy, day in February provided the opportunity for some outdoor photography. The check provided funds for the first phase of restoration at the school, which included essential water drainage and electrical work, completed last summer. A second phase, based on a second grant from Pennsylvania's Keystone Communities Program, should begin soon. Pictured below are **Patrick Rice**, Vice President-Commercial Lending at the bank; **Carol Kalos**, WVHS President; **Matt Metcalf**, WVHS Director; and **Joe Langella**, WVHS Vice President. History lesson: The bank began as a building and loan in 1874, and one of its missions today is to support non-profit organizations like ours.



***Ambler Savings Bank donates for the first phase of the Franklinville School restoration***



**February's Speaker Tells Stunning Tale of her 150-year-old Church:** Tamra Phillips amazed the WVHS audience with the accomplishments of Blue Bell's Grace Baptist Church, once on North Broad Street and the largest Protestant church in the United States. She reflected knowledge and humor as she detailed the church's history. She also questioned some church yarns from its early years: Was each one true or a tall tale?

Phillips' upcoming book, *Faith Walks and Talks: The 150-Year-Old History of Grace Baptist—The Church that Founded Temple University*, is based on documents, but also emphasizes the oral histories of the church's older members.

The Philadelphia church was called the Baptist Temple until it could pay off its mortgage, not an easy task for a congregation dedicated to improving the lives of Philadelphia's poor. The church began in a tent in 1872, and later it hired the dynamic speaker, Reverend Russell H. Conwell, who built a large, beautiful structure, now Temple University's Performing Arts Center. The Baptist Temple's efforts to help the community developed into Temple University, Temple Hospital, and an orphanage. The church also established the Chapel of the Four Chaplains.

Phillips concluded her remarks by relating how Reverend Conwell told a parable about the "Acres of Diamonds," which illustrates that things of value can be found close to home. The diamond shape still appears on Temple University's publications, and the message endures.

### **An Outstanding WVHS Member: Mabel Bernhard Whittock** by Peg Johnston

It is not surprising that Mabel Whittock developed an interest in local history. She grew up in the house that her grandfather, David Knipe Bernhard, built in the early 1930s. It is in Centre Square on Jackson Avenue and Skippack Pike. Mabel has lived on the property her entire life.

On June 20, 1960, Mabel Bernhard and Bob Whittock were married. Bob had grown up in a house across Jackson Avenue. Mabel's dad then built a second

house on the site for Mabel and Bob. Mabel still resides there today.

Mabel remembers helping with the house plans and laughs when she says the house still has just one bathroom. The site does have a small barn and a big garage, which still houses several tractors. Bob was always handy with machinery and wood.

Mabel's father, Irvin Bernhard, worked at Shady Grove School (at that time a middle school) and as a Whitpain policeman. Her mother was the cafeteria manager at Stoney Creek Elementary. Bob's mother worked at Blue Bell Elementary.

Mabel attended the Whitpain Elementary School in the 1916 building - next to the 1895 building. She remembers going over to the 1895 School for art classes. Mabel was one of 37 sixth graders who graduated from Whitpain Elementary in 1952. For 7th grade and up, she took a yellow school bus to Ambler Joint High School. She would walk from her house to Cathcart Road to catch the bus.

Bob Whittock was attending Whitpain High School at the time it was closed, and so he joined with Ambler High School. Mabel remembers that not everyone was in favor of the consolidation.

She has fond memories of riding bicycles and playing croquet, card games, kick-the-can, and hide-and-seek with friends and family. Mabel had one sister, and Bob's cousin, Charlie Faust, was a neighbor. The group organized regular family carnivals, which featured games, popcorn, and cake. The money earned was donated to the Salvation Army. They had a big yard and wooded area where they played. She remembers babysitting for neighbor children. Mabel also remembers community activities - traveling carnivals and circuses, and the local Fire Expo. (The Fire Expos recently took two years off because of the pandemic, but it was held this year.) Both Bob and Mabel were very involved in the Centre Square Fire Department. The Ladies Auxiliary was famous for its luncheons that included sandwiches and Mr. Ron's rice pudding.

Both Bob and Mabel belonged to the Historical Society of Whitpain (organized in 1983) and were active members of the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society. They brought a lifetime of knowledge and memories of the area. “Ask Bob” and “Ask Mabel” were often heard when local history was discussed. They were always willing to offer a hand on a project and at events.

Mabel attends St. John Lutheran Church, where she has been a member for her whole life. Mabel and Bob have 2 children, 6 grandchildren, and 7 great-grandchildren. One daughter and her family live in the house where Mabel grew up.

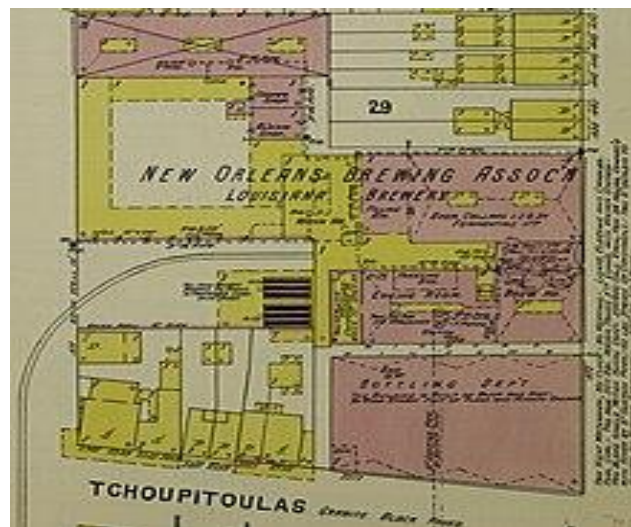
Deep roots! Close family connections!



***Mabel Whittock at her interview with Peg Johnston in fall 2021***

(Coming soon: Joan Duxbury will honor Mabel’s husband, Bob.)

**Special Maps are Available Online for History Research:** From the 1860s until the 1960s, the Sanborn Fire Insurance Company created special maps, used by insurance companies to determine the value of a community's buildings. These maps reveal, for instance, how a building was used and a town's growth. The Library of Congress helps to clarify how they might help a history researcher: "The maps include outlines of each building and outbuilding; the location of windows and doors; street names; street and sidewalk widths; property boundaries; fire walls; natural features (rivers. . . ); railroad corridors; building use (sometimes even particular room uses); house and block number; as well as the composition of building materials. . . and even the names of most public buildings, churches and businesses." All of the maps are now available through the Penn State University Libraries, and anyone can create an account to use the maps: <https://mapsqislibpennstate.hub.arcgis.com/apps/1f3ad398cd254bc5a5c7573568f1db34/explore>



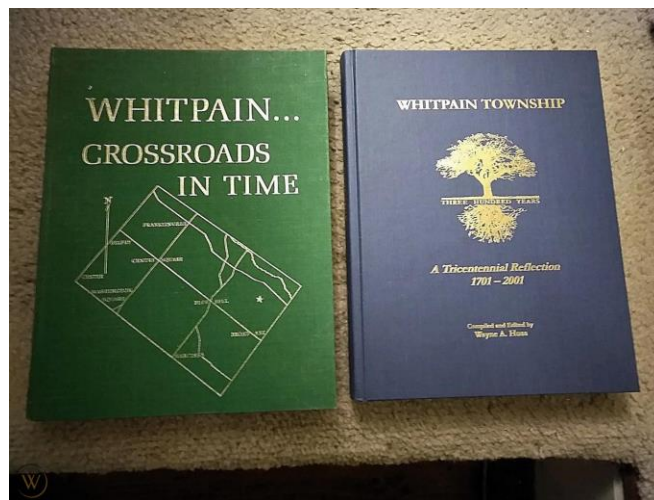
***A Sanborn map, showing New Orleans in 1896 (from Wikipedia)***

**WVHS Member Appreciates Local 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Teachers:** Bruce Reeves, who now lives in Walnut Creek, California, emailed WVHS after reading the last issue of *The Valley Crier*. One of its articles mentions how the school masters at the 1895 Public School trimmed the students' quill pens and charged for the service (*Whitpain...Crossroads in Time*, page 98). In contrast, to praise the area's teachers,



Reeves comments, it “seems to me that you might stick in a word or two about how teachers helped fund the 1895 school.”

The explanation appears in *Whitpain Township, a Tricentennial Reflection, 1701-2001* (page 174). “To help defray the cost of this new building [the 1895 Public School], the school board cut the salaries of the district's six teachers from \$45 to \$40 per month over a ten-year period...indicating that the teachers themselves contributed more than half the outlay [of the building's total cost]!” Moreover, Reeves sees a parallel to today. Certainly, he concludes, this policy serves as “a reminder that the public's attitude towards teachers and their salaries goes back a long way.” Then Reeves adds: “[It is] apropos of nothing, [because] my first day of school, in fall, 1938, was in the 1895 building, in a classroom on the second floor.”



***Two books, published in 1977 and 2002 and available at the public library, which cover Whitpain Township history***

**A Teen Romance (and History) featured in Ambler Library's Display:** February is the month for Valentines and romance, so this month's display tells the 1777 story of a 16-year-old Quaker girl, Sally Wister, and her fascination with 19-year-old William Stoddert, a Major in the Maryland Militia. They make conversation by the fire with, as Sally describes it, “no impropriety.” Sally's journal, available online, is important to historians because it provides a first-hand account of the Revolutionary War in

Gwynedd. For instance, Sally describes General Washington riding by the Foulke residence, where she is staying.



***The library display, showing Sally Wister's houses and excerpts from her journal which reveal her crush on Major Stoddert.***

**If you're a FACEBOOK user**, please remember WVHS. Vice President Joe Langella often posts local-history photos and snippets.



**WVHS is building its collection of business/industry items:** If you know of an old and/or important business in our area who should be included in the WVHS archives and exhibits, please let us know: [info@WValleyHS.org](mailto:info@WValleyHS.org)

**New to the Collection:** (Got old/historic stuff? Please remember WVHS as you do your spring cleaning.)

- From Russ and Jeannie Bellavance—a shaving brush, a washboard, a military helmet, a “sad” iron (solid cast iron), and several souvenir coins from Ambler’s 1988 Centennial
- From Jim Corey of Arnold, Maryland—an Ambler Golden Jubilee Celebration program (1938) and several newspaper clippings from his grandmother’s scrapbook

**Welcome to New Members:**

- Karen Salvadore
- Carmina Taylor

**Highlights from the February Board of Directors Meeting:**

1. The Mennonite Heritage Center has invited WVHS to contribute to its genealogy research, as well as participate in its programs and events.
2. WVHS will purchase a canopy for use at the fall festivals and other events.
3. WVHS has completed the application for two Keystone Communities Program grants to be used for renovations at the Franklinville School, where Phase One of

the repairs is complete. After a review process, Pennsylvania will release the funds to reimburse WVHS for its expenditures.

4. The board is looking for programming/speakers for 2022-2023.
5. *America 250* will begin with events in 2025, leading up to July 4, 2026. WVHS will also celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2025!

### **Upcoming WVHS Events:**

- April 11 -- Mark Ashton, lawyer and longtime WVHS member, will talk about the Golden Age of Piracy in the Americas and muse about how a class of people -- noted mostly for rape, robbery, and other hanging offenses-- are still celebrated by the Pittsburgh and Tampa Bay sports franchises.
- April 24 -- 1895 School Open House, Sunday, 1-3 PM. Originally scheduled as the Wine and Cheese Fundraiser to be held later
- May 9 -- WVHS election of officers and speaker Jeff Marshall, a retired President of the Heritage Conservancy, who has worked for over 40 years in historic preservation and land conservation. He serves on the Board of the National Barn Alliance and was a founder and president of the Historic Barn and Farm Foundation of PA. He will present his recent publication, *Barnstorming in Eastern Pennsylvania & Beyond*, which will cover many examples of historic barns throughout our area.
- 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 for WVHS members at the Bluestone Country Club

**Do you have an idea for a WVHS program or speaker?** WVHS is planning its programming for 2022-2023. Is there a topic that interests you? Do you know of

someone who would be a good speaker for our group? Please send us your ideas and comments: [info@WValleyHS.org](mailto:info@WValleyHS.org).

**WVHS prefers to send publications by email:** If you are receiving this issue of *The Valley Crier* by U.S. Mail, please note that WVHS prefers to send it to you by email. WVHS will not share, trade, or sell your email address. Using email saves WVHS funds, and it saves Earth.

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***We are an all-volunteer organization. Although receiving funds from occasional grants, WVHS depends on our generous donors. Please support us!***

***WVHS works to promote and preserve the history of Ambler Borough, Whitpain Township, and Lower Gwynedd Township: [www.WValleyHS.org](http://www.WValleyHS.org).***

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