
Wissahickon Valley Historical Society ~ Volume 2, Number 7

The Valley Crier



4th of July! America 250 Is Around the Corner. As we celebrate the Fourth of July in 2022, anticipation grows! It's just three more years until 2025 when we *begin* the country's birthday party, which will extend through 2026. The 250th year since the signing of the Declaration of Independence will be called the Semiquincentennial. See the official *America 250* website for details and for good reading about American history. *WVHS is looking for ways to add to the festivities, and members' suggestions are welcome.*



SEPTA Notifies WVHS of Ambler Station's Historic "Freight House" Demolition.

WVHS recently received an email from SEPTA, stating that it plans to tear down the Freight House at the Ambler Train Station. (The Freight House was most recently the warehouse for Bussinger Trains and Toys, and a nearby train building served as the store's retail space.) The purpose of the letter was to ask WVHS to choose mitigation to reduce our "pain." For example, SEPTA offered a choice of either their putting up a historic panel at the location or printing a booklet describing the history of the site. With the help of former WVHS board member (and historic preservation expert) Matt Metcalf, WVHS has learned that the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office (PA SHPO) previously notified SEPTA that the state has designated the building as historic. He has recommended that WVHS remain resolute to avoid a "domino effect," where SEPTA will continue to demolish its older structures.

Today, the Freight House suffers from "demolition by neglect," meaning needed renovations were halted until the building lost its value. A Bussinger employee reports that SEPTA made repairs to the building until about four years ago, then simply never returned. Now SEPTA may argue that the structure will cost more to repair than it is worth. Another issue is that, in its letter, SEPTA notes that the Freight House is in "disuse." However, the clerk at Bussinger states that the store was asked to leave "due to the unsafe conditions."

If you know of an engineer who would volunteer to examine the freight house and offer a new opinion, please notify WVHS: info@WValleyHS.org. A WVHS member has requested that we take a second look at the structure.



Photo from SEPTA, showing the Ambler Train Station's Freight House. (May 2022)



Photo from SEPTA, showing the reverse side of the Freight House. The orange barricades obstruct a cavity under the building. (May 2022)

The Freight House Offers an Interesting History. SEPTA's email states, "The freight house was likely built by the North Pennsylvania Railroad in the 1870s [which began in the 1850s] and moved by the Philadelphia & Reading Railway during early 20th century improvements. SEPTA acknowledges the historic nature of the freight house and the adjoining former passenger station complex at Ambler Station. As part of the process, the history of Ambler Station and its relationship to Ambler and the Lansdale/Doylestown Line have been researched, recorded, and submitted to the PA State Historic Preservation Office for inclusion in their database, PA-SHARE (State Historic and Archaeological Resource Exchange)."



A photo from 2011 when a plaque was dedicated to memorialize Mary Ambler, the eponym for the train station and later the town.

Ambler “Demolition Ordinance” Voted Down. At its May meeting, the Ambler Borough Council voted against the Ambler Planning Commission’s proposed Demolition Ordinance, saying, in part, that it was too weak to be effective. Ironically, although Ambler’s official plans call for historic preservation (already approved), this situation leaves the borough with *no* ability to protect its historic buildings. WVHS President Carol Kalos and members of the Ambler Storytellers, a WVHS committee addressing this issue, have been attending the Planning Commission meetings since January to speak about the advantages of historic preservation. (There were objections to any regulations, especially for residences.) Members of the Planning Commission now recommend that WVHS take its concerns about demolition to the Borough Council, stating that they must follow only the directives of the council, but the Borough Council states that it will not address the issue again. As a substitute to an official policy, one of the Borough Council’s members has suggested that WVHS raise awareness of the value of the local architecture by creating walking tours; the Ambler Storytellers have already begun work on this project.

Words to Remember:

WVHS Board Member Charlie Miller often warns,

“Once it’s gone, it’s gone forever!”

Condominiums Are Proposed to Replace Centre Square’s “Reeds Nightclub.”

Reed’s Country Store opened in 1925, and the business closed just shy of its 100th year. The location, at the corner of Skippack Pike and Dekalb Pike (Route 202), was the site of the Waggon Inn (with two “g’s”), established in 1758. (See the next article for the history of this location.) Behind that corner building, but facing Skippack Pike, sits Reeds Nightclub, where Franklin Realty Development Corporation has (still unofficially) proposed the construction of 90 condominium units with underground parking. At this writing, the proposal and illustrations have been deleted from the Whitpain Township

website. In a prior publication of the land development proposal, Reed's Country Store appeared to remain while Reed's Nightclub was demolished and replaced with new construction.



The Centre Square Hotel, the location of the Reed's Country Store

A Brief History of the Reed's Store Location. The first establishment at this site, called the Waggon Inn, was built in 1758. Its road sign depicted what looked like a Conestoga wagon (first made by Lancaster County farmers to haul their products to Philadelphia). In the fall of 1777, during the American Revolution, George Washington directed his troops along Skippack Pike, so they marched by the Waggon Inn on their way to the Battle of Germantown. When the owner of the inn, John Porter, announced that he did not like "rebels" as customers, Washington ordered guards to stand at the door "with drawn swords while the Army passed" to keep out any soldiers yearning for an ale on their way to war. Evidently, Porter favored the Redcoats! Neighbors called him "Tory John Porter"; thus, his business failed. With new owners, the inn continued, changing hands several times.

The Firefighters' Flag--Its Meaning and Origins. The Firefighters' flag appears as an American flag with one red line. (A police flag is similar, but with a blue line.) According to several websites, it is meant to show "support for fire service personnel and injured and fallen firefighters." It is sometimes displayed outside fire stations, and it is not meant to be disrespectful although some people are critical because they consider it "an alteration of the flag."

The idea of the red line extends to the 19th century. The National Archives describes the Battle of Crimea in 1854, where British forces, in red uniforms, successfully held off an attack from the enemy (Russia) by forming what later became known as a "thin red line." Since firefighters are associated with red, that expression later entered our culture as the "thin red line," meaning a row of firefighters, battling a fire.



A Firefighters' Flag to Honor the Injured and Fallen

An End-of-Year Party for WVHS Members. In June, Bluestone Country Club, a private club, kindly hosted about 30 WVHS members and their guests for refreshments and a tour of the property led by the superintendent. He explained that what was once farmland became the Meadowlands Country Club in 1949. But in the 1930s, the lovely clubhouse building was a distinguished private residence, and some of the estate is

used today for weddings. The first two floors of the large building have been renovated while the third-floor space was sacrificed for utilities and ductwork. WVHS members speculated about what artifacts might be found in the corners of the unused fourth floor. WVHS appreciates the help of member Kevin Burke, who arranged for the WVHS paid members to share a special social time together in a beautiful, historic setting.



WVHS members learning about the history of Bluestone Country Club

One Last Contribution. Last fall local historian Buck Amey visited the 1895 School to donate a complete set of Ambler High School yearbooks. (WVHS is featuring these yearbooks in its current exhibit, called “Congratulations, Graduates,” at the Ambler Savings Bank.) Then in December, Buck brought his Ambler Fire Police uniform to add to the WVHS collection. It still sits in the lobby, waiting to be accessioned. Sadly, he

passed away in June. An expert on the history of Ambler, he was a former librarian for the Fort Washington Historical Society and a revered volunteer and leader in our community. For his complete obituary, search online for William F Amey, Jr.



Buck Amey's fire police uniform, which he donated recently

Additional Local History Articles Now Online. *Blue Bell's Finest* is a social magazine for residents of Blue Bell Country Club, and each month, WVHS President Carol Kalos writes a short local-history article, most often about Whitpain Township, which appears in the magazine. (This month, the publication will change its name to

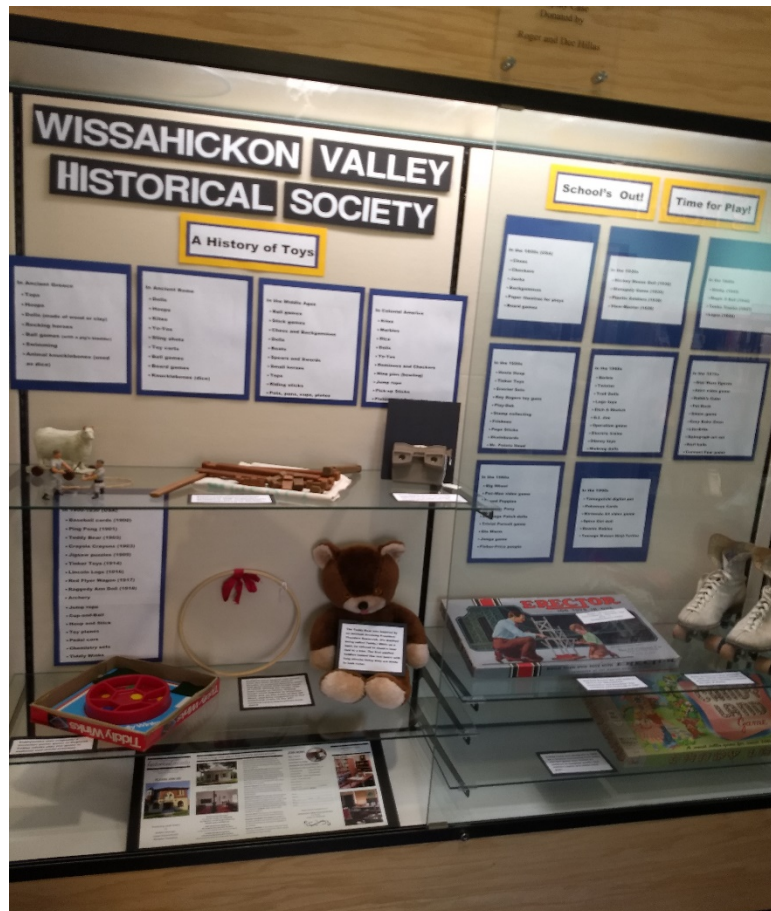
Stroll Blue Bell to indicate that it is part of other similar *Stroll...* magazines published nationwide.) Eleven new articles are now available on the WVHS website, under “Local History.” Links to seventeen articles from 2015-2017, written by then-President Russ Bellavance, also appear at that site. Many thanks to the magazine’s publisher and WVHS member, Kevin Burke, for offering WVHS a place to highlight local history. If you are interested in sponsoring the WVHS articles or advertising in the magazine, please let us know: info@WValleyHS.org.



The May 2022 cover of Blue Bell's Finest, featuring Tamra Phillips, the WVHS February 2022 speaker, whose book is Faith Walks and Talks, a history of her 150-year-old Grace Baptist Church.

June WVHS Exhibit at the Ambler Public Library. In June the WVHS display at the WVPL Ambler celebrates the end of the academic year. Entitled “School’s Out: Time

for Play,” it describes a history of children’s toys from ancient times (when animal knuckles were used as dice!) until recent decades, and it showcases some of the old toys from the WVHS Museum. These include a 1905 pair of roller skates, a 1950s Candy Land game, and more.



Vintage toys from WVHS, the June display at the WVPL, Ambler

Cancellations: The Board of Directors did not meet during June. The picnic, scheduled for June, was postponed, following county guidelines, due to high COVID levels.

History Writers Needed. Are you thinking about history? Reading about history? If you would like to write an article for the WVHS *Valley Crier* or *Quill*, please send us your ideas: info@WValleyHS.org.

1895 Public School, Open by Appointment. If you would like to do research or simply see the exhibits, please let us know. WVHS is open by appointment:

info@WValleyHS.org.

Suggest a WVHS Program. The Board of Directors is assembling the programs/speakers for next year. (See “Save the Date” below.) If you have a favorite topic, speaker, or a place you would like to visit, please feel free to make a recommendation: info@WValleyHS.org.

An Amusing Error. During the last open-house event, past president and board member Frank Russo acted as a docent in the basement. While perusing the exhibits there, he noticed the object pictured below, positioned on the kitchen-table display, along with vintage plates, serving ware, and linens. Moreover, his expert eye noted that this ceramic pot is... (oops) a chamber pot! Hundreds of visitors have passed this table, but no one seemed to notice, or they did not say? WVHS will correct its records.



A pot—for kitchen or other?

**Save these Dates -- for WVHS Activities in the Next Society Year,
2022-2023:**

- **Sept 12** Speaker Matthew Kalos, PhD, Anthropology Professor at Brookdale College: on archaeology and the Battle of Paoli
- **Sept 14** Starts at 12 Noon. A community ceremony at the Centre Square Fire Department, to mark their preservation of the historic MILESTONE along Skippack Pike.
- **Oct 16** 1-3 PM. Open House at the 1895 School, featuring a special Amchem exhibit (Please note this date.)
- **Oct 17** Tom Wiekowski, PhD, Chair of the Cheltenham Historical Commission and Vice-President of the Old York Road Historical Society: on his new book about three generations of the Barkers, influential 19-century bankers
- **Nov 14** Jeff Marshall, retired President of the Heritage Conservancy and President of the Historic Barn and Farm Foundation of PA: on his book, *Barnstorming in Eastern Pennsylvania & Beyond*
- **Dec 12** Holiday Party
- **Jan** No Meeting
- **Feb 13** Show and Tell?
- **Mar 13** Steve Tull, Vice President of AECOM: on Archaeology in Center City Philadelphia
- **Apr 10** TBD
- **May 8** TBD
- **Jun 12** Picnic

WVHS works to promote and preserve the history of Ambler Borough, Whitpain Township, and Lower Gwynedd Township.

We are a member-driven, all-volunteer organization. Although receiving funds from occasional grants, WVHS depends on our generous donors. No amount is too small. Please support us!

Many people like to include a gift to charity in their will or estate plan to support causes that are important in their life. Please consider including a gift to WVHS to benefit the promotion and preservation of our local history for future generations.

*If you would like to discontinue receiving *The Valley Crier* from WVHS, please choose “Reply” and mention your request.*