
Wissahickon Valley Historical Society ~ Volume 2, Number 8

The Valley Crier



We Should All Know History: A knowledge of history helps us to think critically and leads us to a more just society. When policy makers and historians clash, we historians can be strong as we deliver our message. The members of WVHS can consider the value of history, so they can communicate that message to help society and to advance our WVHS. We can have an impact.

WVHS's Ambler Storytellers' Committee Influencing Public Support for Historic Preservation: Ambler Borough's "Demolition Ordinance," meant to create a 90-day delay on Ambler demolition, was sent from the Planning Commission to the Borough Council, and the issue was voted "dead." However, thanks to the efforts of the Ambler Storytellers, the public is finding out more about this problem! When the Storytellers' push supplied the details of the months-long discussion, the outcome of the debate was explained recently in the online *AroundAmbler*. Its headline states: "Ambler's mayor breaks tie to end discussion on proposed ordinance that would have required a 90-day delay in demolishing old buildings." The mayor's reason for her vote was that the proposed wording had "no teeth" to stop demolition.

And then the issue was described in more detail in the July 25th
Ambler Gazette:

<https://www.thereporteronline.com/2022/07/25/ambler-demolition-delay-ordinance-nixed-council-votes-to-end-discussion/>

Associated with this discussion is the statement (sent by SEPTA to WVHS) that it plans to demolish the Ambler Train Station's Freight House: SEPTA has provided WVHS with more detailed evidence pointing to the need to demolish the Freight House, one of three historic buildings that sit together. (Two of the buildings were used until recently by Bussinger Trains and Toys.) SEPTA's maintenance at the toy store's warehouse has been made difficult by constant flooding, so SEPTA says that it is not practical to repair it. A corner of the building sags due to water damage underneath. In its email, SEPTA has included a detailed, 42-page history of the train station, including a bibliography, 12 maps, and 30 photographs. These will make an important addition to the WVHS Archives.

A recent SEPTA message describes a booklet it will prepare for WVHS:

SEPTA would be happy to provide a brochure to the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society for your use and distribution. SEPTA will provide a digital copy, as well as printed copies, once the brochure is complete. The proposed booklet will focus on the history of the former North Pennsylvania Railroad/Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Line, as well as the importance of Ambler and the Keasbey & Mattison company to the history of the line.

Because of SEPTA's demolition of a historic building, WVHS is reminded to look to the future. WVHS former board member Matt Metcalf, who teaches

historic preservation courses at Bucks County Community College, advocates for “smart growth” in planning for the future. He is concerned that this is the first loss of many if we are not careful.

"Not every old building can (or should) be saved. But there needs to be a plan here to save historic Ambler--and there isn't one. Every old building we lose takes away from what makes Ambler special--and gives us a gap-toothed smile. Ambler deserves better," Metcalf said.

He suggests Ambler community members complete a National Register nomination to create a National Register historic district and then bring it to the Borough Council. "You do not need 'permission' to write up the nomination. Write it up and bring it to the Council," he said. "They should swell with pride when they actually begin to understand what they have."

Metcalf adds that the National Register district does not come with demolition delays or the like, which are unique to local register districts. But it does identify historic properties and enables building owners to apply for tax credits for rehabilitation projects. It might also unlock special preservation funding sources for the borough.

A Secret Cave that used to house Revolutionary War outlaws—British spies and armed thieves also known as the Doan gang – was recently discovered in Bucks County. More details are here:

https://vista.today/2022/07/secret-revolutionay-war-cave/?utm_source=VISTA+Today&utm_campaign=87e9b40205-Morning_Drive_Campaign5_28_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_75b1fa784c-87e9b40205-275583346



Secret cave found in Bucks County

Barry Johnson Cleans the 1895 Blinds: Member Barry Johnson read the WVHS request in the last *Valley Crier*, and he boldly volunteered to clean all the venetian blinds at the 1895 Public School! Barry used data to keep himself motivated, so in the end he reported that he used over six hours to clean 17 ½ blinds in the heat of July. (Barry also reports that he is a new grandfather. Congratulations Barry!!!)



Tall windows demand a tall ladder. Barry Johnson was a master of cleaning the blinds at the 1895 School.

WVHS Needs Someone to Please Paint One Flat Surface at the Franklinville School: Spending the WVHS grant funds coming from Pennsylvania's Keystone Communities Program, contractors will begin work at the school within the next few weeks. They will remove the old porch roof. Then **WVHS needs someone to volunteer to prime the new**

porch roof before the new membrane roof is placed on it. The roofer says that there is little prep work involved; he needs simply a coat of primer. If you are interested in helping, please contact WVHS soon at info@WValleyHS.org



See the flat red roof on the Franklinville School porch? It needs a coat of primer paint before it gets its new membrane roof. Volunteer needed...

Library Display at WVHS Ambler: July's exhibit included many of the old milk bottles usually on display at the 1895 Public School, along with an article about how those old bottles were made and an explanation about how Silver Lake Farm, a local dairy farm, owned by the Zimmerman family, became today's Mermaid Lake, a recreation area being developed by Whitpain Township. Also included in the exhibit is a description of local dairies and Skippack Pike's "The Creamery," which processed raw milk to

make various dairy products sold to Norristown residents. “The Creamery” site today is an office building, still using that name.



Mermaid Lake was once a dairy farm, Silver Lake Farm.



“The Creamery,” a Skippack Pike office building, once pasteurized milk and produced butter and cheese.



Before refrigeration, this creek kept the dairy products cool at “The Creamery.”

Celebrating the Fourth of July: American flags lined the sidewalk in front of the 1895 Public School to mark Independence Day. In this photo, the shadows look unusual because it was taken this year near dawn on July 4th. In 2026, on July 4, the country will celebrate 250 years, and *America250Pennsylvania* is suggesting some “Programs, Projects, and Events” for us to sponsor. **Please go to the website and then make suggestions to WVHS** about how we can celebrate 250 years of nationhood: <https://www.america250pa.org/celebrate>



Flags line the sidewalk at the 1895 Public School on the early morning of the Fourth of July, 2022

Additional News from the Board of Directors' July Meeting

1. The Owen Evans property is still listed for sale although negotiations are continuing with a possible developer.
2. Adding to the research completed by Carol Kalos, the ranger at the Peter Wentz Farm, Marc Brier, has been compiling primary sources about Colonial troop movements along Skippack Pike.
3. The Ambler Storytellers are calling attention to a large, multi-level residence proposed for North Maple Avenue in Ambler. Because the property borders Whitpain Township, its supervisors heard a presentation about the plans and made no objections. Details are here:

https://boroughofambler.com/download/planning_commission/planning_commission_agenda/The-Ambler_Site-Plan-CPD-4-006.pdf

My 6th Grade at the 1895 Public School...by Carol Robinson Wolf

I think I remember 6th grade with Mrs. Lucca the best of all my years at Blue Bell Elementary School.

It was 1973-4...it's hard to believe I was only eleven years old. I'm not sure why the school's administration arranged to have a class held on the first floor of the 1895 public school building – we called it the “old, old building” to distinguish it from the “old building” where all the other 5th and 6th grade classes were held. It might have been a space problem, but that seems unlikely, as we were at the very tail end of the baby boomer

population and class sizes were shrinking at that time. It could have been part of a broader trend focused on experimental ways of learning...the “open classroom” concept was rolled out a year later when Wissahickon Middle School was built. I’m not sure...I was only eleven at the time, as I mentioned.

Whatever the reason for the unusual classroom venue, Mrs. Lucca (Sheryl was her first name, I believe) took full advantage of the opportunity. There was a lot of unstructured time where we could pursue different interests. We had a giant cardboard house for reading, which we got to decorate with tempera paint, adding windows and bricks and grass and flowers. She also got ahold of a large spool of blank movie film, which she set up on a two-reel gadget, so we could draw directly on the film with permanent markers. When we finally got to the end of the film, we re-wound it and watched it...it was very, very cool.

For an interdisciplinary class, we teamed up to do a sort of “backwards archaeology” project. Our team created and buried an imaginary civilization, complete with artifacts, a system of writing, etc. Another team dug it up and tried to deduce what they could from the clues we had left.

To help us prepare for middle school, we had a few classes with other teachers, walking over to the building next door to take science and social studies and music. We also joined the other classes in the cafeteria for lunch, followed by recess outside. A few times we all brought bag lunches and “ate in” ...probably when the weather was super cold or rainy. It was a fun change of pace. Another time, around Thanksgiving, we invited the other 6th grade classes over for potluck snacks. We all researched and prepared “authentic food” from the first Thanksgiving. I brought maple

syrup-sweetened popcorn, which was supposed to be a Native American treat. (I just did a quick Google search, and it looks like there's an Ojibwa recipe that's similar to what I made.)

The Whitpain branch of the public library was upstairs, so we were frequent visitors there.

I'm not sure if we were the first class that used the building (I think so), or if we were the only class. From a kid's perspective, it was a terrific success as an experiment. Thanks for the opportunity to think back and write down my memories.

Carol Wolf graduated from Wissahickon High School in 1980, going on to study art and design at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City. She now lives in northern New Jersey with her husband Bill. She enjoys gardening and genealogy and is currently building a collection of American colonial-era coins, specializing in New Jersey coppers.

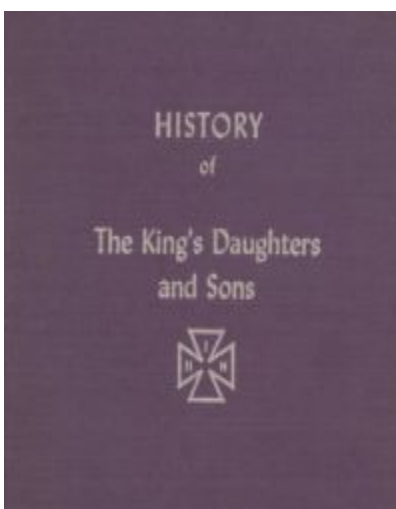
[In next month's *Valley Crier*, read about the sixth-grade experiences of Jennifer Warner Karpovich, who also attended the 1895 Public School in 1973.]

Writers Wanted for the WVHS *Valley Crier*: Please consider writing an article for the *Crier*. If you have a favorite history topic you could write about, we are happy to publish about your reading/research or about your reminiscences (as Carol Wolf does, above).

Wissahickon High School Senior Receives WVHS Scholarship: The WVHS scholarship recipient, **Danielle Ciliberto**, will enter West Chester University, where she says she will use her scholarship to purchase books and other supplies. In its thank-you letter to WVHS, the high school reports that almost \$352 thousand was given out in scholarships this year when the theme was “Choose Happiness,” selected to honor a WHS teacher’s son who was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. His words were used to inspire WHS students throughout their senior year and as they graduated.



The King’s Daughters’ Newsletters: A group of members are working on a new program to highlight the military careers of the local men and women who served in WWII. Their goal is to look for additional biographical data about them and to have the presentation ready for November’s Veterans Day.



The King's Daughters Newsletters offer the local news of the Ambler area during WWII.

On the Passing of former WVHS Curator Emmy Simon...
by Peggy Johnson

Erminia “Emmy” Simon served as both curator and historian of the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society for many years. She established a system of inventorying the objects in the museum collection, set up exhibits, and was key to getting the Whitpain 1895 Schoolhouse listed on the National Register of Historic Places. More importantly, she’ll be remembered as someone who encouraged others to take on new tasks and helped them learn how to do them. Emmy shared her experiences and knowledge with generosity and good humor. She encouraged WVHS members to learn how to accession, evaluate, and share the artifacts and documents in its collection as well as how they fit together to tell the story of the area.

In 1959 Emmy and her husband Werner “Pete” Simon moved to the Blue Bell area where he worked for Univac. Emmy brought with her a strong interest in history and experience with numerous arts and crafts. She had graduated from Hunter College with a degree in music education. She was always exploring and learning various arts and crafts. For many years she was a member of the Philadelphia Guild of Hand-weavers where she curated the annual weaving exhibitions, won several awards for her works, and taught classes in spinning, dyeing, and weaving. Her interest in spinning and its history led her to purchase an antique spinning wheel which led her to collect 17th and 18th century American antiques. Several looms were kept busy in her house, and she enjoyed teaching others to weave. Emmy became an antique dealer and established “Erminia C. Simon Antiques.”

The WVHS is grateful for Emmy’s consistent and expert support. She certainly helped make the organization one to be proud of and worthy of continued support.

Our thoughts are with Emmy’s children: Edward, Laura (Rich) Carro, and John (Keiko), and her four granddaughters: Emily, Sarah, Sabrina, and Amanda Rose.

Past President Frank Russo has offered his memories about Emmy:

Emmy Simon was a very active member of Wissahickon Valley Historical Society. She joined the Executive Board during my presidency when she served as the Curator of Museum Collections. She was well suited for this position because she had a background in the antiques field and was knowledgeable about objects that came

into the collection. I remember her as being a good friend to my mother, Marie, and Emmy could always coax a chuckle from her. I am saddened by her passing, but happy that I had her in my life. She was a wonderful friend.

Evans-Mumbower Mill Open House: Sunday, August 21, 1-4 PM. Bring your friends and neighbors, hike along the Wissahickon, visit with the Blacksmith, and see the 18th-century water mill grinding corn. **(Located at Swedesford and Township Line Roads in Upper Gwynedd.)** WVHS will be there to welcome guests. If you can sit at our table for an hour, please volunteer: ***info@WValleyHS.org***



The Evans-Mumbower Mill, located in Upper Gwynedd, at a site chosen in 1745 by the first miller, Abraham Evans. The mill is named after the first and last miller (who was Mumbower.)

The WVHS Society Year 2022-2023 begins in September. Please look for your dues-reminder, coming to you soon.

A Noontime Event in September: All are invited! Starting at **12 Noon on Wednesday, September 14**, WVHS and the Centre Square Fire Department will hail the narrative of the colonial-era Milestone, again located on Skippack Pike near the fire department's sign. The firefighters "saved" the Milestone as construction equipment worked on the nearby highway, and they have now re-set the marker. Light refreshments will be served at the fire house following brief remarks.



One of the local Milestones along Skippack Pike

Save these Dates -- for WVHS Activities in the Society Year, 2022-2023, which begins on September 1:

- Sept 9 or 18 Picnic? (It may be re-scheduled, depending on COVID and the weather.)
- Sept 12 Speaker Matthew Kalos, PhD, Anthropology Professor at Brookdale College: on archaeology and the Battle of Paoli (Location to be announced—Library or 1895 School)
- 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 ? Wine and Cheese Fund-Raiser? (TBD)
- Oct 16 1-3 PM. Open House at the 1895 School, featuring a special Amchem exhibit (Please note this date.)
- Oct 17 Tom Wieckowski, 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.

Visit our web site to learn more:

<https://www.wvalleyhs.org/>

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