
Wissahickon Valley Historical Society ~ Volume 2, Number 12

The Valley Crier 

It's been a great year! The dedication and contributions of our volunteers are awesome! You are making our area a better place to live and work, and together we are making a difference as we preserve history.

Best wishes for a happy and healthy New Year. See you in 2023!

Please note that there are no WVHS activities in January.

The February 13th meeting will be a “Show and Tell,” so bring a historic or special item to the meeting and be prepared to tell the group about it—just 3-5 minutes. Prior Show-and-Tell programs were great fun with a chance for guests to learn new things and enjoy each other’s company. Light refreshments and social time will complete the evening.

WVHS Obtains Old Dinner Bell: In September, John Chambers, who decades ago lived at the former 1796 Black Horse Inn (corner of Skippack Pike and Penllyn-Blue Bell Pike, diagonally across from the Blue Bell Inn), contacted WVHS to offer us *the original Skippack Pike Toll Booth!* It

presently sits on his property in Eagleville, Lower Providence Township. Near the Toll Booth stood a dinner bell, also from the former Chambers' residence in Whitpain Township. Mr. Chambers also offered the bell to WVHS. In December, Vice President Joe Langella enlisted a truck and crew to bring the bell back to Whitpain Township! It now sits in the WVHS garage, and WVHS is looking for a safe location to display the bell.



This dinner bell, discovered in Eagleville, once stood at the Chambers' property (former Black Horse Inn), located diagonally across from the Blue Bell Inn.

Holiday Party Brings News of Skippack Toll-Booth: December's party included about 30 guests who brought delicious snacks and desserts. A special thank you to Dot MacDermott and her husband, Don, who provided seasonal decorations for the party at 1895 School. Thanks to Dotty, there are lovely wreaths at the front doors and decorative pots beside the porch again this year. To make the party more festive, there were bouquets for each table. Fine conversations emerged as old friends met and a few new faces appeared, some already volunteering for various tasks.



One of many centerpieces created by member Dotty MacDermott for the WVHS holiday party

Midway through the evening, President Carol Kalos and Vice President Joe Langella announced the details about the original Skippack Pike toll booth, offered to us by John Chambers. They stated that Whitpain Township is assisting WVHS by looking for a safe location for the structure, which features sliding windows and stained-glass around the doorways. The height of one window is intended to accommodate a man on a horse, so he does not have to dismount to pay his toll! The structure is sound and has a shingle roof, but needs painting.

There is a bit of a Christmas connection to this narrative: The 1810 “Christmas House,” was once the site of one of the other toll booths along Skippack Pike (at Cathcart Road). It got its name because it was owned by a relative of Clement C. Moore, who wrote the poem, “The Night Before Christmas.”



The “Christmas House,” once owned by a relative of Clement C. Moore, stands at the corner of Skippack Pike and Cathcart Road.

The original Skippack Road began in 1715 when Philadelphia County approved its route. (Montgomery County split away from Philadelphia in 1894.) German farmers in Skippack requested the roadway because they wanted to transport their grain to the mill at Whitemarsh. Most researchers believe that they named the road after Schippack, a town in Bavaria.

Today's word "Pike" reflects that the road was once a "turnpike," that is, a muddy path "turned" into a usable road, covered with crushed stone. When the toll-booth keeper collected a toll, usually about two cents, then he raised a "pike," a bar positioned across the road. The word "pike" comes from the medieval weapon, also called a "pike." Sources relate that the county would not raise taxes to cover the expenses of any road repairs, and residents did not want additional taxes. So to pay for the work of hauling and crushing the stone, travelers paid a toll. The turnpike was run by a private company. Skippack's toll road extended from Centre Square to Whitemarsh, and it lasted from 1853 until 1901.



Medieval reenactor soldiers carrying their pikes. The weapon's length was considered an advantage in combat.

WVHS Receives HARC Grant to Preserve Old Books: The

Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission (PHMC) has awarded, according to a press release, “\$200,000 in Historical and Archival Records Care (HARC) Grants to 37 organizations in 20 Pennsylvania counties. . . . HARC Grants fund projects designed to improve the preservation and accessibility of historically significant records maintained by local governments, historical societies, and academic institutions.” One of those awards went to WVHS: \$502.30 for the purchase of archival boxes to preserve our oldest books. These are, for example, 1800’s scrapbooks, business ledgers, and fraternal lodge records, potential primary sources for research about our area.

Why is the WVHS grant funding an odd amount? For the grant requirements, each book had to be described, and an appropriate-size box chosen for it. Then a catalog number and cost, plus sales tax, was listed for each box. That unusual number was the total estimated expense to complete the project. The acid-free archival boxes will provide long-term storage to protect the priceless old books from dust, light, moisture, and abrasion.

See the photos of the ledgers below.

WVHS Mourns the December Passing of Fire Chief: A memorial service for Centre Square Fire Company's Chief Lee Miller was held recently. He was quite helpful to the WVHS officers as they planned the September event marking the preservation of the historic 18th Milestone, located on the fire department's property. The entire community paid tribute to Chief Miller's many contributions to Whitpain Township.



The ladder trucks holding the flag at Chief Miller's memorial service belonged to Centre Square and Harmonville, the two fire companies where he had served.

Historic Walking Tours of Ambler: Two tours are available in January, and additional dates will be added, starting in April. (See the WVHS website to register at “Committees.”) The tours emphasize the history and architecture of the buildings on Butler Avenue. In the interim, the Ambler Storytellers are creating a new tour of a different Ambler location, which will emphasize the role of Dr. Mattison and his asbestos industry.



Why put so many windows in a third-floor mansard roof? Ambler Storytellers will reveal the answer on the next Ambler Historic Walking Tour, sponsored by WVHS.

“Adaptive Reuse” of Ambler’s Colony Club: The structure will be used for residential use with a minimum of changes to the exterior. The Colony Club is, according to the Montgomery County Planning Commission, a good example of “adaptive reuse,” supporting the county’s goals. The Colony Club has an interesting history, described below:

From the *WVHS Newsletter*, November 2015, by Peg Johnston:

Several scrapbooks and photos from the Colony Club of Ambler were recently brought to the WVHS [in 2015]. According to the September 23, 1987, edition of the *Ambler Gazette*, the Colony Club of Ambler was started in the summer of 1912. Women’s clubs of that era offered cultural and civic advantages to women who were usually homemakers. The club’s charter stated that its purpose was “to create among women an organized center of thought and action, and to promote such public measures as shall be conducive to community welfare.” The scrapbooks record many activities carried out by the group, which had its headquarters at a building at Ridge Avenue and Race Street. The building had been the home of the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Ambler (now Calvary United Methodist) and later of the Knights of Malta. Over the years the Colony Club members took on numerous local causes. In the 1920s they spoke out and acted in favor of the environment in Ambler. One effort involved a water wagon that was used to wash the streets every Saturday night. The Ambler Public Library had its beginnings when in 1923 the Colony Club purchased 12 books for \$20. During WWII, the Colony Club organized a Red Cross chapter. Wool for knitting was distributed, and garments and surgical supplies were provided to the Red Cross in Philadelphia.



The Colony Club's building, once a church, was raised on temporary "stilts" for renovation. Soon to become a condominium, according to the county, it is an example of "adaptive reuse."

Train Station's Freight House: SEPTA stopped work on maintaining this historic building because a creek, running under it, may destroy it. As a remedy, SEPTA has threatened to tear down the structure, but in exchange, SEPTA has offered WVHS to publish materials about the building's history. (Member Bernadette Dougherty says the situation describes "demolition by neglect.") She has proposed keeping the building by simply moving it away from the creek to a nearby location, a few feet

across the SEPTA parking lot. A reputable mover estimates the cost will be \$25,000, and Dougherty will be seeking donors for the project.

WVHS Past President Frank Russo relates how, in about 1985, WVHS helped to protect another Ambler train station building, now used by La Provence Restaurant. WVHS used volunteer hours (for painting and cleaning) and a grant from the William Penn Foundation to cover the expenses. The effort meant that the historic building and the character of Ambler were saved!



The interior of La Provence, the structure saved by WVHS in the 1980s with the help of the William Penn Foundation

New Hospitality Chair: As WVHS transitions out of the pandemic, we are now starting to serve refreshments at our meetings. Member Sally Zeller, who knows her way around our kitchen (and more!), has agreed to oversee each month's treats. Thank you, Sally!

Garden Club uses WVHS Movie Poster: In December, the Norristown Garden Club showed off their creativity by decorating several Ambler residences, many historic, for its annual Holiday House Tour. One of the featured homes was an 1890 stone mansion, built by Dr. Richard Mattison for his son, Richard, Jr. The WVHS loaned its 1968 *Where Angels Go, ... Trouble Follows* movie poster for display in the mansion's game room because scenes from the movie (and the prequel, 1966's *The Trouble with Angels*) were filmed in Mattison's home and nearby. The poster appears today as part of the WVHS Ambler Theatre display.



A movie poster from the WVHS Museum, used on the Garden Club's Holiday House Tour



The 1890s Victorian stone mansion, built in Ambler by Dr. Richard Mattison for his son, Richard Jr., a Keasbey & Mattison vice president

Another “Keasbey & Mattison”? You know Keasbey & Mattison as the asbestos-producing company that brought wealth to enhance the growth of Ambler. At one time it was the largest supplier of asbestos shingles in the world. But there is a new Keasbey & Mattison today. Its Facebook page says it is “an independent motion picture and full-service media-solutions house.”



A logo used by the first Keasbey & Mattison, Ambler industrialists



A Facebook image from the newer Keasbey & Mattison, movie-makers

Did You Know? A familiar holiday gift, the Flexible Flyer sled, was made in Philadelphia from 1890 until 1960. It was the first sled that could be steered.



A Flexible Flyer, displayed at the WVHS Museum for the holiday party, 2022

WVHS Needs a Laptop: Our present laptop is old and should be replaced. The WVHS intern needs a reliable laptop to use for a new project. If you have one to donate, please contact WVHS:

info@WValleyHS.org

WVHS Collection Listed in Penn's online "Philadelphia Area Archives": This website lists the categories of our WVHS treasures. Marie Goldkamp, past president of the Historical Society of Whitpain (now merged with WVHS), remembers the University of Pennsylvania representative spending hours to detail her society's items. Please see this impressive list:

https://findingaids.library.upenn.edu/records?f%5Brepository_ssi%5D%5B%5D=Wissahickon+Valley+Historical+Society

Ambler Storytellers meet on second Tuesdays: Everyone welcome. No need to live in Ambler. Short, organized meetings are held at the Ambler Library, starting at 6:30 PM on the second Tuesday of each month. Discussion topics include the Ambler Walking Tours, designation of Ambler as a historic district, recognition of Ambler historic buildings, and more.

WVHS Open by Appointment: WVHS welcomes visitors to the Museum, Library and Archive. Please email info@WValleyHS.org

History Writers Wanted: If you would like to write an article for the WVHS publications, *The Valley Crier* or *The Quill*, please let us know:

info@WValleyHS.org

Do you like to tell a good story? Meet new people? Keep learning? Value scholarship? If so, then consider becoming a WVHS DOCENT. Training and fun will be provided: info@WValleyHS.org

Welcome New Members!:

- **Caren Puschak**
- **Peter Wilson**
- **Dave Kings**
- **Stan Kozakowski**
- **Elsie Jones**
- **Tyesha Love**
- **Tamra Phillips**

From the Board of Directors:

- WVHS will ask for a more-recent estimate on air conditioning for the 1895 School to assist with budgeting.
- Franklinville School has no HVAC, and the plaster there is effervescing. The new porch floor must be painted (probably in the spring).
- The status of the Filemaker system is still being investigated, so that the Collection can be listed online.
- Under the revised policy, former WVHS friends who have not paid the 2022-2023 dues will receive the *Valley Crier* online, not by mail.
- Planning is underway to resume Volunteer Day.
- New signs are needed at both schools. The township's Tom Farzetta says that Whitpain is using solar panels to provide power to light its signs, solving the issue of no lighting at the 1895 School's sign.

- Interior photos should be taken of both Deck's Hardware (soon to close) and Reed's Country Store (for sale).
- A speaker is being sought for the April meeting.
- An Open House event will be planned for the spring season.

2023 Events:

- January No meeting
- Feb 13 "Show and Tell" (Bring a historic/memorable item to the meeting and briefly tell us about it)
- Mar 13 Steve Tull, on "Archeology in Center City Philadelphia." Steve is Vice President of AECOM
- Apr 10 **TBD**
- May 8 Josh Kasper on "Privateering." Josh is Assistant Executive Director of the American War of Independence (AWI) Privateer Museum, Schooner Pursuit Historical Society
- Jun 12 WVHS Picnic
- A spring-season Open House will be added to this list

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

We are a member-driven, all-volunteer, non-profit 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.