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

# *The Valley Crier*



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## **Announcing a Great Speaker!**

**Our program for Monday, March 13, at 7 PM at the 1895 School:**

**Stephen Tull: The archaeology research  
along Philadelphia's I-95 highway**

Stephen Tull is more than a man with a trowel! A Registered Professional Archaeologist, he has managed numerous multi-million-dollar projects throughout the Eastern United States. Since 1993, his firm, AECOM, has completed "cultural resource studies" to save the historical record. Today, he is the project manager for the I-95 dig, uncovering the lost history of Philadelphia's neighborhoods.

He has a staff of over 100 professionals, and in "old" Philadelphia, his group has collected almost 2 million artifacts! Besides just "the dig," the responsibility includes permits, documents, and overseeing a small Center City museum, which displays what his group has found. See details and pictures at <https://diggingi95.com>

He says his PowerPoint will have two parts. First, he will explain why and how the federal government requires archaeology work prior to major construction projects. Then, using the artifacts he has dug up in Philadelphia, he will explain what they say about the people living here for the last 8000 years, from the Natives to the Industrial Revolution's workers.



***AECOM's journal about its Philadelphia archaeology research  
(Queensware is earthenware)***

**Sad News:** WVHS mourns the passing of our dear long-time member Don MacDermott, husband of Dottie. Additional details are not yet available.

**In February, WVHS sent *The Quill***, our journal about local history, to our paid members. **If you did not receive *The Quill***, it means that you have not paid your 2022-2023 dues! WVHS sends *The Valley Crier* to a long list of our supporters (potential members) who appreciate hearing the news about our organization and its events. For questions, please email [Info@WValleyHS.org](mailto:Info@WValleyHS.org)

**Special Open House for School District's Transportation Employees (Volunteers Needed):** Imagine driving to work each day, parking beside the 1895 School, and never seeing what's inside. Now those bus drivers, crossing guards, and office staff are thrilled to be invited inside! WVHS is hosting a special Open House on **Wednesday, April 26**, from **10 AM -Noon** to accommodate the men and women who work next door. **Docents are needed!** Please send an email to volunteer: [Info@WValleyHS.org](mailto:Info@WValleyHS.org)



## **OP-ED about Ambler's Historic Preservation in *Hidden City***

**Philadelphia:** One of the WVHS Ambler Storytellers, Michael Frost is a writer concerned about how Ambler Borough Council's historic preservation ordinance was vetoed. His article explains how the village grew, why it is loved, and the attitude of its officials.



Frost has a way with words! He describes how the Ambler Historic Walking Tours help to educate the public about the rich character of Ambler's architecture, and he portrays WVHS President Carol Kalos as a woman with "zeal." His article created a flurry of emails to WVHS! It appears here:

<https://hiddencityphila.org/2023/02/op-ed-saving-the-town-that-asbestos-built/>

**Whitpain Township Installs New Outdoor Lighting at 1895 School:** At the end of January, the township installed wonderful new light fixtures at the 1895 School. Walking here is safer than before, and for the first time in years, lighting shines on our sign. (We know we need a new one.) And more recently, they added a lovely vintage light fixture in a dark corner at the garage. WVHS appreciates their work!



*Photos from Joan Duxbury (Feb 2023)*



## **WVHS and Whitpain Township Plan Relocation of the Historic**

***Skippack Pike Toll Booth:*** In September, John Chambers, who decades ago lived at the former Black Horse Inn (built in 1796 at the 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 farm, six miles away. Near the Toll Booth stood a dinner bell, also from the former Chambers' residence in Whitpain Township, which Vice President Joe Langella has already moved for WVHS safe keeping. He and President Carol Kalos have met with township officials several times to discuss the challenges of where the Toll Booth will be located, preparation of the new site and its lighting/security, painting of the structure, and the technicalities of lifting and moving a 150+ year-old building with stained glass windows. Although the building needs paint, it is quite sturdy. Today the Toll Booth looks like a neglected shed, but in the future, it will be a gem, the pride of our area.



***Toll Booth for the Skippack Pike (1853 -1901)  
at John Chambers' residence, February 16, 2023***

**Tidied Bulletin Board at 1895 School:** Joan Duxbury and Sally Zeller have made our bulletin board more presentable. The board is not cork; it is mason board, so it is not easy to tack. The new look includes two posters to remind our visitors that work is still being done at both WVHS museums (and donations are still needed)! Work on the board is continuing. See the “Before” and “After” photos below.



***The de-cluttered bulletin board at the 1895 School***

The U.S. Fighter Pilot who shot down the Chinese balloon over South Carolina used the Call Sign “Frank.” He was honoring an ace WWI pilot, called the “...Balloon Buster,” who shot down the enemy’s balloons: [https://doughboy.org/meet-the-arizona-balloon-buster-the-ace-wwi-pilot-famous-for-shooting-down-enemy-balloons-on-suicide-missions/?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=govdelivery](https://doughboy.org/meet-the-arizona-balloon-buster-the-ace-wwi-pilot-famous-for-shooting-down-enemy-balloons-on-suicide-missions/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery)



*Lt Frank Luke in 1919. He shot down 14 German observation balloons.*

## *The Ever Popular WVHS Show ‘n Tell!*

**WVHS Members Share “Show ‘n Tell”:** The February meeting was an informal gathering with outstanding refreshments from Diana and John Geisler. Here is a list of the presenters and what they described:

- Zbigniew Bieniaszewski (Zibi), an old bottle he found along the Wissahickon, which came from Ambler’s Angeny Drug Store (1904-



1959). Fun Fact: The drug store started at the Ambler Opera House and was located most recently at Main and Butler. It featured the first soda fountain in Ambler.

- Neil Binkley, a 1916 book with leather-embossed cover and art deco-patterned title page, an inspiration for his work as a graphic designer.
- John Cassel, a certificate from “Whitpain High School,” showing the Consolidated School and portraits of the teachers, including his father, Ralph Cassel.
- John Geisler, a queen bee “home,” a container, used to mail a Queen Bee with her hive. Fun Fact: Honeybees originated in Europe. The Lenape called them “white man’s flies.”
- Ethel Hutchinson, a quilt, the Double Irish Chain pattern, which she made using some stitched squares someone gave her. Some of the original patches were from feed sacks.
- Carol Kalos, her great-grandfather’s 1870s model of a hay wagon with a then-new brake system, which he prepared for the U.S. Patent Office.
- Marty Kalos, his grandmother’s book, *Second Book in English for Foreigners*, copyrighted in 1917, the year she came to the U.S.
- Peg Krengel, a box of the dozens of notices she received about COVID. Fun Fact: Experts feared customers were getting the virus by touching gas-pump handles, so gas stations provided plastic gloves to patrons pumping gas.
- Joe Langella, a porcelain model of a lady’s hand, found along a creek at his 1786 home in Lower Gwynedd, once owned by the Bassetts Ice Cream family.

- Bob Raines, his father's WWII 1941 uniform. He was a combat surgeon and received the Presidential Citation for his service in France.
- Oliver Will, a Barnes Bible, and a 1862 Consistory book, some in German, from his 1740 church.
- Peter Wilson, 1970s posters showing Pasadena's Colorado St. Bridge, saved by historic preservationists. Peter helped with the fund-raisers there.
- Mike Zibi, an old harness/bridle holder, printed with an advertisement for Geo Lehman of North Wales.
- Jen Zwetolitz, a WWII pigeon carrier (box), used at the Battle of Normandy and containing bottles of Normandy sand. Fun Fact: The pigeons wore two tags (one on each leg), one with the memo, and the other with the bird's ID data.
- *Please excuse any errors, misspellings, or omissions*

**Are you a member of a local club or organization?** WVHS will be inviting local leaders to join us for our meetings. Please send us the name and contact information for your favorite club or organization to:

[Info@WValleyHS.org](mailto:Info@WValleyHS.org)

**Mecco Construction Company: A Legacy Built in the Wissahickon**

**Valley:** Have you ever taken a stroll down Union Meeting or Valley Road in Blue Bell—or on Butler Pike in Broad Axe—or in Fort Washington—and if so, have you ever noticed and admired those granite schist homes that all look a little bit alike? Have you ever wondered when they were built—and by whom?



*Dorothy "Dori" McCrane (nee Mercaldo) standing in front of a Mecco home under construction in the 1950s*

That sturdy construction was the handiwork of the Mecco Construction Company (Mecco standing for Mercaldo Engineering & Construction Company). Mecco was the family business of the Mercaldo family—long-time Wissahickon Valley (and Whitpain Township) residents. From the mid-1940s and into the 1950s, Mecco built upwards of 200 of these houses in and around Whitpain Township. The company no longer exists—but its output—these “stand the test of time” stone homes today stand as an enduring legacy to this immigrant Italian American family.



***A Mecco-built home as it looks today***

Last fall WVHS had the opportunity to interview two Mercaldo family descendants—sister and brother, Dorothy “Dori” McCrane and Steve Mercaldo.

Dori and Steve shared that the origins of Mecco go back to their grandfather, Luigi Mercaldo, a Master Stone Mason who emigrated from Italy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and settled in Mount Airy. Luigi and his wife Clotilda had ten children—five of them sons: Anthony, Frank, John, Joseph and Thomas.



***Mercaldo Family Patriarch Luigi Mercaldo***

From the mid-1940s and into the 1970s, the five Mercaldo Bothers built Mecco into one of the largest and most respected homebuilders in the Delaware Valley. They were known for expert craftsmanship and their



homes had unique amenities—including 2½ baths, three bedrooms, slate roofs, fireplaces—and they were among the first homes to have laundry chutes! In addition, it was their tradition that each entryway and cornerstone be inlaid with a U.S. coin—for good luck! Today, those coins are still visible in Mecco homes.



***Dori Mercaldo on her tricycle in front of her Mecco-built home at the corner of Union Meeting and Valley Road in Blue Bell***

Mecco was also involved in general contracting, and out of a need for water to complete many of their projects, they founded and ran the Blue Bell Waterworks—ultimately selling it to the North Wales Water Authority in 1972.

WVHS thanks Dori McCrane and Steve Mercaldo for sharing their family history—a history that has an important piece of our country’s “immigrant story” and that has left an indelible mark on the landscape of the Wissahickon Valley!

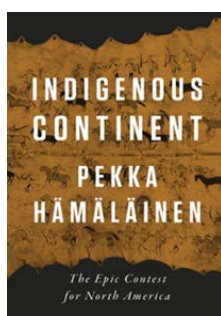
**Researchers who Google “Blue Bell” will find Blue Bell, Texas, home of the famous Blue Bell Ice Cream:** A BLOG from Julia Rapp on Feb 14 states:

For Montgomery County natives, it may come as a surprise that the company behind this “frosty fave” is not from the Blue Bell they all know and love. Blue Bell Creameries was founded in Brenham, Texas in 1907 and rose its way to becoming the **second highest-selling ice cream manufacturer in the U.S.** [Bold added].The name was inspired by the Texas blue bell, a wildflower native to the state. Local history buffs may know that Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, wasn’t always Blue Bell. The town was originally named Pigeontown after the flocks of passenger pigeons that gathered there. In 1840, the town was renamed to reflect the popularity of the Blue Bell Inn. While the Texas creamery takes the top spot for ice cream production, Montgomery County’s Blue Bell still came up with the name first.



**February was Black History Month:** Be sure to see the Germantown Colored Girls Museum. Here is the LINK: [Black History Storytellers: The Colored Girls Museum / PHL17.com](https://www.coloredgirls.org/)

**The Museum of the American Revolution offers an excerpt from the book titled *Indigenous Continent*:** It argues that, contrary to former beliefs, the (U.S.) continent was slow to become colonial because the natives held power. Read more at [\*\*\*https://www.amrevmuseum.org/read-the-revolution/indigenous-continent?utm\*\*\*](https://www.amrevmuseum.org/read-the-revolution/indigenous-continent?utm)



**The U.S. Needs More Civics Education:** The American Association of State and Local History, AASLH, emphasizes this idea on its BLOG, stating: “It is time to link the work you do for history to the labor of promoting and supporting civic values and knowledge. Our country needs it, our communities would be better for it, and over the next four years leading to the 250th, the public will be ready for it.” Find more at

<https://aaslh.org/civics-now-through-2026>



**“The Highlands” Gets a PA Historical Marker:** It is one of 37 just announced by the PA Historical and Museum Commission, and it is the marker closest to WVHS. (The program had been on pause due to the pandemic and supply-chain issues.) Nominated by their local areas, the markers are difficult to achieve. This year’s markers “span a broad range of subjects, including art and music, literature, early American history, legal battles, industrial history, medical advancements, religious affiliations, social activism and civil rights, and sports legends.” **The Lower Gwynedd Historical Advisory Commission is establishing its own Historical Marker system,** so it is seeking nominees that deserve recognition:



people, places, events, etc. To offer a suggestion, please contact Matt Metcalf at [metcalf\\_matt@hotmail.com](mailto:metcalf_matt@hotmail.com)

### **Penn State Traditional American Indian Powwow, April 22-23:**



**Traditional American Indian dancers and Native Drum Groups from American Indian reservations and communities across the United States and Canada will travel hundreds, some thousands, of miles to State College on April 22 and 23, for the *Penn State Traditional American Indian Powwow* — one of the finest Traditional American Indian powwows in or outside of Indian Country.**

Penn State adds that “American Indian vendors from all over the country, including Cherokee, North Carolina; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Pine Ridge, South Dakota, will be on site to sell Native-made beadwork,



quillwork, silver, turquoise and wampum. Native foods such as American Indian fry-bread, corn soup and buffalo from the Northern Tribal Nations will be available for purchase as well. This powwow typically attracts thousands of visitors and has earned a national reputation.”

**Wissahickon Trails, *Virtual* Speaker, “Mills of the Wissahickon”:**

Thursday, March 23, at 7 PM. Details are here:

<https://wissahickontrails.org/events/lecture-mills-of-the-wissahic>



**A Moment in History: Upcoming Cheltenham Historical Commission Event:  
*Abolition along Old York Road***

**When:** 10:00 AM-3:00 PM, Saturday, April 22

**Where:** Abington Friends Meeting, Jenkintown; Richard Wall House, Elkins Park...

The Cheltenham Historical Commission, in partnership with the Abington Friends Meeting and Penn State University Abington, will conduct a program honoring the efforts of Cheltenham and Abington residents to ban slavery in America. The tentative program includes a presentation on the work of Abington abolitionist Benjamin Lay at the Abington Friends Meeting. Lunch will be served. The after-lunch session will be at the Richard Wall House and feature a dramatic reading of Pastorious' "Remonstrance," the first formal protest against slavery in America at the Wall House in February of 1688. An unveiling of a permanent marker will follow. Program details and times will be announced next month. Admission is free.



**Abolitionist Benjamin Lay**

**Welcome New Members:**

- **Steve Batschelet**
- **Neil Binkley**
- **Linda Greene\***
- **Jane Marie Smith**
- **Oliver Will**

***\*Linda Greene is a direct descendant of Mary Ambler!***

### **From the February Board of Directors' Meeting:**

- Ambler Freight House—WVHS is waiting to hear from SEPTA about moving it to a nearby location
- Reed's Country Store—Sales representatives do not respond to our phone calls
- The Owen Evans' 1710 house will be saved, but houses probably built around it, according to the site's planner
- The Board is planning activities for 2023-24
- Whitpain Police suggest that WVHS add a security light at the rear of the Franklinville School
- At the Franklinville School, there is still painting to be done, but to meet our grant regulations, WVHS must find a painter who pays "prevailing wage." It's difficult to find someone due to the extra paperwork for the contractor
- Sally Zeller is cleaning in the kitchen, and she will be purchasing paper items for all to use
- An Ice Cream Social will be planned for spring
- An Open House at Franklinville School will be planned for spring

### **Calendar of Events**    *All events at the 1895 School*

- Mar 13<sup>th</sup> (SEE ABOVE FOR DETAILS)
- Apr 10<sup>th</sup> (Monday), 7 PM – Mark Ashton on "Thomas Ustick Walter, Architect from West Chester to Washington"
- Apr 26<sup>th</sup> (Wednesday), 10 AM-Noon – Open House at 1895 School for Wissahickon School District employees who work next door
- May 8<sup>th</sup> (Monday), 7 PM – Josh Kasper on "Privateering." Josh is Assistant Executive Director of the American War of Independence (AWI) Privateer Museum, Schooner Pursuit Historical Society

- Jun 12<sup>th</sup> (Monday), 6:30 PM – WVHS Picnic
- A spring-season Open House and an Ice Cream Social are also planned

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*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.*

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"Reply" and mention your request.*