

The King of Prussia Gazette

Preserving Upper Merion's Past to Enlighten its Future

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President's Message by Michael Morrison

A YEAR OF CHALLENGES

I was pleased to see in the recently distributed new Upper Merion Township map, a reference to Vision 2020. Officially accepted (but never adopted) on February 3, 2005, Vision 2020 was a study created as, "a vision for the community and the framework necessary to achieve it [by the year 2020]." It is very encouraging that the Upper Merion Township Supervisors are aware of and referencing this important document; but, let's examine it further.

One section of the document reads, "Identify local buildings of historic interest and work for their preservation." Your King of Prussia Historical Society created such a list and is eager to share it with township officials. That is just one opportunity for the township to engage the Society in achieving a Vision 2020 objective. If more township officials were Society members, which we encourage, there would be a greater awareness of the Society's contributions toward Vision 2020 and the preservation of our past.

In another recommendation we see, "Assist Chamber of Commerce to convert King of Prussia Inn into an information center and local history exhibit." Your King of Prussia Historical Society agrees with this statement completely. Furthermore, we feel that the Historic King of Prussia Inn should be open to the community, serve as a Welcome Center for tourists, a Trail Head for the soon to be completed Chester Valley Trail, and a museum and meeting place for the Society and other local non-profit groups. The community has for too long found restricted access to our iconic and beloved building, and it is the goal of the Society to someday return it to the people of Upper Merion and surrounding communities.

One of the challenges we face in 2014 is to become completely independent in every way, and that takes memberships. So I am asking that we each invite a neighbor or friend to become part of our organization, and help it grow. As we grow, we will open many doors and continue to make progress. Once township officials recognize we are a viable organization with a commitment to stay, then I believe our dialogue will expand and lead to more collaboration and achieving our common goals.

We are fortunate to have made many friends in surrounding societies, and earlier this month we partnered with the Radnor Historical Society to present, "The Railroads of Upper Merion," hosted by local author and friend, Michael Shaw. I look forward to sharing ideas with neighboring societies on a regular basis. One recent initiative is being

called "The Mt. Pleasant Project", a collaborative effort to document changes in that community betwixt and between several townships and counties. Those participating in this effort are faculty members of Cabrini College, the King of Prussia Historical Society, the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society, and the Radnor Historical Society. Look for more information as the program develops.



Melanie Low of Zwahlen's Ice Cream & Chocolate Co. shared the history of chocolate to members of the Society and guests at Christ Church of Swedesburg Saturday, March 8, 2014. The presentation covered chocolate production techniques, the health benefits of chocolate, and different techniques for deciphering the labels of favorite chocolate bars.

Photo, courtesy of the Times Herald

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MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the King of Prussia Historical Society is to preserve and interpret the history of Upper Merion Township as relevant to its various neighborhoods of Gulph Mills, Gypsy Hills, Croton Woods, King of Prussia, Valley Forge, Abrams, Belmont, Town Center, Swedesburg/King Manor, Henderson, and Swedeland, as well as the areas of Rebel Hill, Port Kennedy, and Hughes Park. The Society's goal is to stimulate public interest and to support the township's heritage through educational programs and public events focusing on preserving the past and shaping the future.

VOLUNTEERS

We are always looking for new people to step up and to take on new projects. If interested, please come to a meeting and talk to us or contact us by electronic or conventional mail.



PETER WENTZ FARMSTEAD FIELD TRIP

This year, the Historical Society has planned its April meeting to coincide with Sheep Shearing Day at the Peter Wentz Farmstead in Worcester.

Peter and Rosanna Wentz began farming here in 1744. By 1758, they had completed the large, Georgian style stone house that reflects both their German heritage and their wealth as a success-ful farming family. They sold the property in 1784 to Devault Bieber, a distant relative through marriage. In 1794, Bieber sold it to a minister of the Schwenkfelder faith, Reverend Melchior Schultz, and his wife Salome.

Descendants of the Schultz family continued to farm the land and resided in the house until 1969 when the County of Montgomery purchased the property. The County restored the house to its late 18th century appearance reflecting the Farmstead's history as temporary headquarters of Gen-eral George Washington during October 1777. The house, reconstructed outbuildings, garden, and livestock represent early Pennsylvania German culture and practices of this region.

The Town Crier—

updates from the Society



OUR CHARTER MEMBERS

We acknowledge our Charter Members for 2014 and thank them for their support: Emma Carson, Dave and Marianne Furman, Michael Morrison, Frank Luther, James Pickens.

INTERESTED IN WRITING?

The Society welcomes articles prepared by its members. Contact Frank Luther if you might be interested in writing and sharing an article for our publication.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Check the back page for the listing of our Spring 2013 to September 2014 meetings with dates, times, locations, and programs.

INFO ABOUT UPPER MERION

Is there a question you have about some aspect of the township's history? You can submit your question to us at info@kophistory.org and we will provide an answer in a future issue.

THE GREMLINS

The Grinch may have stolen Christmas, but the gremlins stole a line from our winter 2013 story "The Knickerbocker Ice Company History". The last sentence of the story should have read: One of the stone walls of that building can be seen in the picture above, taken in the spring of 2005. The building measures about 30' x 60'. Thanks to Van Weiss for bringing this to our attention.



FIELD TRIP, cont.

Sheep Shearing Day is scheduled for Saturday, April 12 from 10:00 to 3:00. Our farmers will shear the sheep and other skilled crafters will demonstrate typical spring activities on a colonial farm. Children will enjoy colonial toys and games, scarecrow building, story-telling, and a puppet theatre. Highlights include open-hearth cooking, farm tours, spinning, weaving, colonial music, and many other historical crafts.

The Peter Wentz Farmstead is located on Shearer Road, off Rt. 73 (Skippack Pike) east of the intersection with Rt. 363 (Valley Forge Road), in Worcester, PA.



(Photo, courtesy of Hagley Museum and Library)



(Photo, courtesy of Roger Thorne)

TRANSPORTATION IN UPPER MERION'S HISTORY: THEN AND NOW

The history of Upper Merion reveals that highways and major roadways, canals and railroads, were always critical in the settlement and development of the township. The distinction between the residents of "Merion" and those who were called the "back inhabitants", the dwellers beyond the Gulf Hills, became more marked. In 1714, a petition "of some of the Inhabitants of Upper Merion, and adjacent settlers and some others of the Inhabitants of Chester" (county), asked for the confirmation of a road which ran "near Rees Thomas's house." This road was their outlet to market and, caused much discussion and neighborly hard feelings for many years. In 1725, a petition complained that "the Overseers of Lower Merion...have not Obayed Your Order . . . and we the Inhabitants of Upper Merion have no Road to go to Market". The "backwoods" of Merion petitioned for a highway to carry their goods to Philadelphia. This road eventually evolved as the Gulf Road.

Years later, in December 1777, Washington used the Gulf Road to move his army from the Gulf Hills to Valley Forge. The Gulf Road was shown on Lewis Evans' map of the Middle Colonies, published in 1749, thus clearly indicating that this was an early highway of importance. Along this road could be seen the Penn milestones, as they were called, having on one side the distance to the city of Philadelphia and on the other side the Penn coat-of-arms.

By 1852, five roads converged in King of Prussia, one of which was a three-mile turnpike that went to Bridgeport. Shares for the turnpike sold for ten dollars.

After 1800, canals and then the railroad in the 1880's supplemented the turnpike route. The canals and railroads were significant in the success of Upper Merion's iron, limestone and marble enterprises and enabled them to be the lucrative businesses they had become.

In 1937, the governor signed a bill to create the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission, and the Pennsylvania Turnpike officially entered service October 1, 1940. With the success of the original 160-mile segment, the Turnpike Commission planned to expand the original turnpike to a high-speed cross-state route, connecting Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, and the Philadelphia Extension extended the turnpike east to King of Prussia near Philadelphia and Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The original eastern end of the Philadelphia Extension was at what is now the present-day interchange with Interstate 76 and US 202.

Plans for a limited-access highway along the west bank of the Schuylkill River originated in 1932 with planning for today's expressway beginning in 1947, when the city of Philadelphia approved plans to develop a highway connecting the city with the terminus of the Philadelphia Extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike near Valley Forge.

Today, four major highways meet in or near the center of King of Prussia. The Schuylkill Expressway from Center City, Philadelphia, ends in King of Prussia at the Pennsylvania Turnpike, an east-west toll road across the southern portion of the state. US 422 begins near the center of the township and heads west to Reading, and US 202 runs through this area. Route 23 is another major roadway in Upper Merion.

King of Prussia is also well served by many transit lines including buses, the Norristown High Speed Line operated by SEPTA, and the Rambler operated by the Greater Valley Forge Transportation Management Association.



(Lock House at Catfish Dam, Dam 28 on the Schuylkill Canal; photo, courtesy of King of Prussia Historical Society Archives.)

THE SCHUYLKILL NAVIGATION COMPANY

(During a summer Anthropology course at Upper Merion Area High School in 1974, the history of the Catfish Dam Locks was studied and included an archeological dig at the site. The teacher was James Baxter and the students included Deb Stewart, Roger Martinie and Barbara Roback. Barbara submitted this report to the King of Prussia Historical Society on the work that the students had done.)

On October 23, 1824, one hundred and five "arks" and eight boats filled with forty thousand bushels of coal were waiting above an uncompleted, drained portion of the canal. The porous limestone bottom, within three quarters of a mile of the Reading Railroad tracks, had caused leaks in the canal bed. On November 6, water was reintroduced to the area, but it all leaked out through the limestone in a matter of minutes. The engineers announced a two-week delay and went back to work. The New York Company, which owned the boats, had them hauled two miles across land to outlet locks.

By 1825, most navigation difficulties were overcome and a boat completed the entire voyage. It had been built either at Orwigsburg or Schaefferstown and was escorted to the water by a crowd. The first trips took three to four weeks, but with the addition of horses, the time was reduced to ten or eleven days. From April 16 to 24, 1826, sixty-five boats passed through the Bridgeport locks: sixty-two freight and three passenger. In 1830, eighty-one thousand tons of coal were conveyed by boat in the canal. The Schuylkill Canal's primary function was the transport of anthracite coal from the mines to the growing industries around Philadelphia, Reading, Pottstown, Bridgeport and Conshohocken. The pastoral banks of the lower Schuylkill were greatly changed to a busy, bustling coal market as a result.

The Schuylkill Navigation Company prospered because

of its monopoly and ability to change. The canal was originally three feet deep and accommodated twenty-five tons, but as time went on, it was deepened, allowing for heavier boats. The first considerable enlargement of the canal occurred around 1834, when the depth of the water was increased to five feet. It was forty feet wide at the surface, twenty-five at the bottom. Boats now held one hundred and eighty tons; eventually the weight went as high as two hundred and seventy tons. Newer and higher dams were built and eight locks were doubled to allow boats to pass both ways simultaneously. The dimensions of the locks, originally required to be 20 by 120 feet, were altered by the Act of February 8, 1816 to not less than seventeen by eighty and the number of locks were reduced from one hundred and nine to seventy-two.

Steamboats could not be used on the canal because the churning of the water destroyed the canal walls. However, as early as 1921, a sixty-five foot steamboat, using what locks had been constructed, travelled from Philadelphia to Norristown.

A drought in 1825 ceased navigation for the summer and the Catfish Dam was rebuilt. The canal could not be used in the winter, as the river could, because the still water would freeze. Coaches and wagons were used as alternate transportation. The stagnant water was held responsible for a fever that spread along the canal in the 1820's.

Three miles of the canal bed had to be ripped up (paved) with limestone to lessen the seepage. The stone may have come from nearby Reeseville, now King of Prussia in Upper Merion Township, which had one of the best deposits in the country.

With the opening of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad in 1842, the canal system's previous monopoly on anthracite transport was broken. Still, the canal system was cheaper than the railroads for heavy iron and coal shipments. The toll from Philadelphia was twelve cents per one hundred weight.

Passengers paid an eighty-seven cent fare. There were three round-trips every week between Philadelphia and Norristown. Pulled by horses at five miles per hour, the boats left Norristown at two p.m. and arrived at Philadelphia in the evening. Other passenger boats left Reading at five 5a.m. each Sunday and Wednesday. There was lodging for the night at Pawlings Bridge--- many boatmen tied up at locks overnight -- with arrival in Philadelphia at eleven a.m. The fare was \$12.50, and presumably included room and board.

There were floods on July 19, 1850 and May 21, 1894,

but the biggest flood, on September 2, 1850, did considerable damage to canal banks, locks, and lock houses. Tumbling Run reservoir was destroyed and twenty-three dams were damaged. Two dams, including the Blue Mountain Dam, had to be rebuilt entirely. J.F. Smith became Chief Engineer of the canal that year. He was succeeded in 1876 by his assistant and son, E.P. Smith, who worked until 1912.



(Catfish Dam, Dam 28. Photo, courtesy of Schuylkill Navigation Company.)



(Train on the Chester Valley Rail Line crossing Henderson Road near Hansen Access Road. Photo, courtesy of Rick Bates.)

FROM CANALS TO RAILROADS

(Based on research by Michael Shaw. Michael recently published **THE RAILROADS OF KING OF PRUSSIA, PA: THE PAST LEADS TO THE FUTURE** which looks at the rich 175 year history of the railroads in King of Prussia. In doing so, the author makes the determination that the present day demand for renewed passenger rail service is a microcosm of King of Prussia as it has traveled the path from a rural township to a business dominated suburb of Philadelphia.

King of Prussia Historical Society member Michael Shaw authored this book and he and Alex Tsioulfaidis, also a Society member, photographed the current photos of abandoned tracks and rail beds.

As King of Prussia celebrated its 300th year of existence, there is a strong movement to bring back passenger rail service to King of Prussia to serve the business and residential communities.)

Abrams came about as the 1830's signaled a passing

major means of transportation. The origin of Abrams came about with the establishment of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad (P&R). The P&R, chartered on April 4, 1833, was established for transporting anthracite coal from the mining regions of east central Pennsylvania to Philadelphia.

The P&R was built in sections. The section between Pottstown and Bridgeport opened on July 16, 1838. This was the first time rails appeared in Upper Merion. On December 9, 1839, the section between Bridgeport and Philly was completed.

Coal traffic started on January 13, 1842 with the completion of the final section. The P&R in Upper Merion was built around what was the already established Upper Merion settlement of Abrams off the Schuylkill River. In addition to the farms, this area of the township contained a saw-mill, Union Chapel, schoolhouse, five or six dwellings and a post office called Abrams.

Coal was king, and traffic to Philadelphia increased. On September 17, 1866 the P&R established the Merion Station at 19.1 marker of P&R going north to Reading from

Philadelphia. The stop included facilities for passengers, a telegraph office, and services for milk shipments. The Merion name was a by-product of Upper Merion, which traced its name to a county in Wales called Merioneth. Merion was a steady stop on the P&R throughout the rest of the century. In 1877, the P&R built a 17x25 frame structure at Merion Station as a shelter for passengers.

Most of the tracks in the Abrams area were built between 1893 and 1905 when a coal storage facility was opened. On August 1, 1899, the P&R announced the name change of Merion Station to Abrams, named after the prominent Abraham family of Upper Merion. As early as 1700, a James Abraham resided in the Township. His descendants owned numerous plots of land bordering the Schuylkill River. The name of the Merion Post Office was changed to the Abrams Post Office and Thomas Abrams was the postmaster.

In the early 1900's Abrams expanded its facilities through infrastructure enhancements and by purchasing land from local landowners. Over the next thirty years Abrams gradually shifted from passenger and freight service to virtually all freight service.

Abrams continued to grow when Norristown Junction Interlocking was built in 1903. Norristown Junction connected the eastern end of Abrams Yard with the western end of the Bridgeport Yard, but mainly, it was the junction point for the passenger line crossing the bridge from Norristown. The original manned switch tower and interlocking were replaced with an electronically operated tower on March 12, 1919. The tower was eventually decommissioned.

More tracks were added as Abrams came into the 1920's. Now, southbound and northbound main and slow moving tracks guided trains along the rails. A "seaboard yard" was added. The term "seaboard" was derived from seaboard coal, coal that was taken to a sea level port and dumped into barges or ships for fur-



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ship-



(Abrams Yard in Upper Merion. Photo courtesy of Michael Shaw.)

In 1928, the Abrams passenger stop was phased out when the Reading started implementing a new bus subsidiary. After that, the only trains to make scheduled stops at Abrams were mostly the Perkiomen Branch local which went to and from Allentown. Abrams remained a "flag" stop through the mid 1940's and by June 30, 1946, the Abrams flag stops were no more. Abrams' status as a telegraph station was long gone by then, having ceased operations in late 1919 or early 1920. By 1950, the only passenger stops at Abrams were the unscheduled stops to drop off or pick up railroad workers. This practice continued through the end of passenger service in 1981. The coal storage facility shut down end at the end of the 1950's due to the reduced demand for anthracite coal.

The North Abrams Industrial Track was founded in 1960 to run freight off the main line down to the warehouses along the track. Before the end of the decade, the Abrams Yard and the Bridgeport Yard would be consolidated into the Abrams Yard.

The year 1971 saw the demise of the Reading Company when they filed for bankruptcy protection. Conrail took over in 1976.

Abrams saw the American Freedom Train stop at the yard between September 12 and September 14, 1976.

In the Fall of 1985, a Norfolk and Southern steam locomotive stopped at Abrams to check out Upper Merion, and today, it is a major freight shipyard, but with only a fraction of coal being shipped. Large amounts of steel go through Abrams on the way to Coatesville and Swedeland. Many trains haul stone to Port Richmond. Without a doubt, the Abrams Yard will soon be busy hauling oil trains to the new gas refineries in Philadelphia.



(Wikipedia photo)

THE FREEDOM TRAIN

The United States has seen two national 'Freedom Trains'. The 1947–1949 Freedom Train was a special exhibit train that toured the United States in the latter half of the 1940's. A similar train called the American Freedom Train toured the country for the United States Bicentennial celebration in 1975–1976. Both trains were painted in special red, white and blue paint schemes, and both toured the forty-eight contiguous states with displays of Americana and related historical artifacts. The two trains took different routes around the forty-eight states, but they both stopped for public displays in each of them.

A second freedom train, the *American Freedom Train*, toured the country in 1975–1976 to commemorate the United States Bicentennial. This twenty-six-car train was powered by three newly restored steam locomotives. The first to pull the train was former Reading Company 4-8-4 #2101.

Within the train's ten display cars, converted from New York Central and Penn Central baggage cars, were over five hundred precious treasures of Americana. Included in these diverse artifacts were George Washington's copy of the Constitution, the original Louisiana Purchase, Judy Garland's dress from *The Wizard of Oz*, Joe Frazier's boxing trunks, Martin Luther King's pulpit and robes, and even a rock from the moon.

Over a twenty-one-month period from April 1, 1975 to December 31, 1976 more than seven million Americans visited the train during its tour of all forty-eight contiguous states. Millions more stood trackside to see it go by.

The train's tour began April 1, 1975, in Wilmington, Delaware. The train then traveled northeast to New England, west through Pennsylvania, Ohio to Michigan, then around Lake Michigan to Illinois and Wisconsin. From the Midwest, the tour continued westward. For 1976, the tour continued from southern California eastward then turned north to visit Kansas and Missouri before traveling through the Gulf Coast states

and then north again to Pennsylvania, through the Abrams Yard.

The tour continued southeast to New Jersey then south along the Atlantic coast before finally ending December 26, 1976 in Miami, Florida. The last visitor went through the train December 31, 1976.



PICTURE THIS!



(Image courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.)

The corner of DeKalb Pike (202) and Henderson Rd. in 1926—where today there is the Sunoco station and three banks (TD, PNC & Wells Fargo). In the photo, there are only two lanes, a couple of vehicles in sight, and no stop light, just a "Slow" sign painted on the road.

Today, Upper Merion Township owns and maintains seventy-one Traffic Signals, five School Zone Flashers and four Flashing Warning Devices. The average daily traffic volume for DeKalb Pike is close to 75,000 vehicles (over 100,000 during the holidays) along DeKalb Pike (Rt. 202) near the King of Prussia Mall.

On October 16, 2012, Marianne Hooper, Michael Morrison, and Frank Luther met with Ruth Loudon to interview her about her memories of Upper Merion---before the Turnpike, shopping centers, and other changes to the township since the 1950's. Ruth came to live in Upper Merion in 1927 when she was ten years old. Ruth stated that today, people in Upper Merion couldn't tell you where Hampton's Corner or Malloy's corner were located. Areas were named for the families that lived in the area. Of course, the Hampton Farm was at Valley Forge Road and Henderson Road, so that area was referred to as Hampton's Corner. The Malloy Family lived a short distance south of Henderson Road on De Kalb Pike; that area was referred to as Malloy's Corner.



The King of Prussia Historical Society
Meeting Schedule for April-September 2014.

- Saturday, April 12 at 10:00 AM: Field Trip: Sheep Shearing Day at the Peter Wentz Farmstead
Watch the farmers shear the sheep, then stay to learn more about typical spring activities on a colonial farm. For the children there will be colonial toys and games, scarecrow building, puppet shows, and a craft area. Highlights also include open-hearth cooking, farm tours, spinning, colonial music, weaving, and many other historical craft activities.
All ages; \$2 per person suggested donation
Location: Worcester, PA
- Saturday, May 10 at 2:00 PM: Business Meeting
Speaker: Kate Hammond from Valley Forge Park
Location: Christ Church Old Swedes Church Hall
- Saturday, June 14 at 2:00 PM: Business Meeting
Program: Digging into the Upper Merion Archives followed by the Society Picnic
Location: Christ Church Old Swedes Church Hall
- Saturday, September 13 from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM: Knapp Family Farm
Graham Dellinger: Beer Making in Colonial Times
as part of the King of Prussia Historical Society Exhibit
Location: Montgomery Township



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