

The King of Prussia Gazette

Preserving Upper Merion's Past to Enliven its Future

Volume VI, Number Two

Summer 2017

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Michael Morrison

Mid-Year Update

It has been a busy year so far for your King of Prussia Historical Society. David Montalvo has created a stunning series of panoramic views looking at King of Prussia from high atop 251 DeKalb. The goal is to capture the view of our town as it changes with each season. These images are available for purchase from the Society and make excellent gifts.

We are in the process of opening a dialogue with the Valley Forge Park Alliance, and will be partnering with them as events unfold in 2018. Don Namoli, president of the Alliance recently reached out to me to discuss this, and we will soon be planning for a vibrant future together.

We continue to receive valuable artifacts, manuscripts, and photographs, donated by local residents, both past and present, who see the value in the work we do to preserve the past for future generations to enjoy. We thank those who have sought us out and have trusted us to keep their treasures safe, and to share them with those interested in their historical value.

I had just penned an interesting article about the changing architecture in our town when an email arrived outlining the mission of the newly created "Historical Commission" in Upper Merion. Here is what it said:

"The Historical Commission shall record the history of Upper Merion Township and its significant architectural and historic sites. Among other duties the commission will advise the Board of Supervisors on matters of historical preservation and planning in relation to the Township's Comprehensive Plan. The commission will also develop ideas for historical education programs within the Township".

At first, glance members of our society may look upon this as an insult, as there seems to be a redundancy in their mission statement, and it may look as if they are ignoring what we do. However, I encourage you to look deeper.

The communication issues with the township of late is well documented, but I remind everyone that we have always stood ready to help; and I invite the members of the new commission to join us in the fine work we do for the residents of our community. We are there to guide you as necessary, and to help strengthen the line of communication, because at the end of the day, we are all here for the same purpose:

IN THIS ISSUE

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE.....	1
THE TOWN CRIER.....	2
THE DEMISE OF REBEL HILL.....	3
A MODEL RESOLUTION.....	4
HUNTERS' FINAL MEET OF SEASON.....	5
THESE OLD HOUSES	6

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, and I know the new commission will share this goal, as well.

The Town Crier—

updates from the Society...

OUR 2017 CHARTER MEMBERS

We acknowledge our Charter Members for 2016 and thank them for their support: Emma Carson, Dave and Marianne Furman, John and Shirley Funkhouser, Michael Morrison, Frank Luther.



The Society is also pleased to honor Ed Dybicz (1923-2015) as an honorary member for his many contributions to the Society and for his untiring efforts to preserve the history of Upper Merion.

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 upcoming meeting dates and our special 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.

Check out the King of Prussia Historical Society website at www.kophistory.org. And find us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/kophistory.

MEMBERSHIP

Our membership campaign for 2017 is underway! New memberships and renewals will be accepted at this time. Looking for a unique gift? Why not present a family member or friend with an annual membership for the King of Prussia Historical Society! We supply a gift card for you to present to the recipient.

Student/Senior (65+): \$35.00	Individual: \$40.00
Family Household \$50.00	Patron: \$125.00
Charter: \$250.00	

The Society accepts PayPal for dues and donations.

**Support
King of Prussia
Historical Society.**

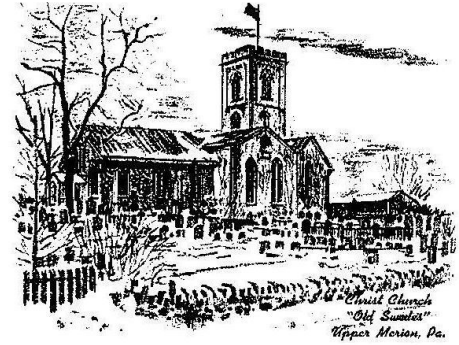
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OUR ADDRESS

Please note that our mailing address is King of Prussia Historical Society, PO Box 60716, King of Prussia, PA 19406-0716.

MAILING

Need a hall for a party, reception, event, etc.?
We have one that seats up to 90 at tables.
Air-conditioned, public address system, ample parking.
Christ Church (Old Swedes)
740 River Road Bridgeport, PA 19405.
For reservation: Contact Donna at 610-283-5769.
oldswedes@gmail.com

ANNUAL FIELD TRIP AND ANNUAL MEETING

This year's field trip and annual meeting for the King of Prussia Historical Society was held at Christ Church (Old Swedes) Church and Parish Hall on Saturday, June 10. We met in the church at 2:00 PM with Rev. Richard Baumann, Pastor, and learned about the rich history of this church and the settlement in Upper Merion by the Swedes. Preceding the lecture and tour of the church, we met in the Church Hall for our annual meeting. Light refreshments were served.

JULY FIELD TRIP

Tredyffrin-Eastown will be holding their annual field trip at the Washington Memorial Chapel in Valley Forge National Park on Saturday, July 8 at 2:00 PM. The Rev. Roy Almquist, pastor, will serve as host and guide. King of Prussia Historical Society Members and friends are invited to join the group. Go to tehistory.org for more information.

A THANK YOU FROM THE SOCIETY

Our thanks to Alisa McCann who was thoughtful enough to remember the Society when she had found news articles and photos that her mother had saved. We learned a bit more about the beginning of Candlebrook and about the tornado that swept through Upper Merion in November 1989.

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



(On December 19, 1777, at 10 a.m., George Washington and his Continental Army marched out of Rebel Hill and Gulph Mills, past the Hanging Rock, and on to Valley Forge. Photo courtesy of the Lower Merion Historical Society.)

THE DEMISE OF REBEL HILL

by John J. Hagan and reprinted with his permission

(This is part two of a series.)

MECHANICSVILLE

Occasionally one of the older residents might be heard to mention that in the not so distant past the neighborhood was called Mechanicsville. There seemed to be no evidence to substantiate such a claim. No one had ever seen a road sign pointing the way to Mechanicsville, nor did that name appear on any current maps. There was no Mechanicsville Post Office, no Mechanicsville store, or any other building, church, tavern or establishment of any kind that had Mechanicsville in its name or above its doors. Perhaps one could be forgiven for thinking that the older generation's collective memory was showing the effects of advanced age. Yet, if one were to research historical maps from the 1850s through the mid 1900s, it would become apparent that the older generation was correct. The name Mechanicsville appears on many of the oldest maps of the township, occupying the space between Lower Merion Township, West Conshohocken Borough and Gulph Mills. At one point it may have also included that part of Upper Merion Township that seceded in 1874 to become part of West Conshohocken Borough.

The name Mechanicsville does not appear on a 1857 map of Upper Merion Township drawn by the Philadelphia Survey Company, but it does show up on an 1868 map of the township prepared by the same company. Thus it seems that the name Mechanicsville was of Civil War-era origin. Perhaps the connotation of the word "rebel" was deemed to be objectionable since it was also the pejorative term for Confederate soldiers in the conflict. Subsequent maps drawn in 1877, 1886, 1893 and 1912 all identify the area as Mechanicsville. The primary road through Mechanicsville, and the only road in the earliest years, was Rebel Hill Road, an artery that originally began at Matsonsford Road, went up and over the hill, and de-

scended diagonally down the western slope before connecting with Balligomingo Road. Although that road was unlabeled on the 1857 map, that map did identify the geographic feature that the road traversed as Rebel Hill. On the 1868 map, with the area now labeled as Mechanicsville, Rebel Hill Road was still the only road.

When and why this area became identified as Mechanicsville on local maps is a mystery. An article entitled *Gulph Mills and Rebel Hill*, written by M. Regina Stiteler Supplee, appeared in the Historical Society of Montgomery County Bulletin in 1947, and the author, who was identified as a current resident of Rebel Hill, stated that there were once large iron ore quarries located at the point where Rebel Hill Road intersected with Matsonford Road, and that the iron was hauled from there to the furnaces in West Conshohocken. Mrs. Supplee also recalled that at one time there was a shirt factory in Rebel Hill owned by John DeHaven, "where cloth was woven and made into shirts." More to the point of our story, she asserted that, "an effort was made to change the name to Mechanicsville, but it is still Rebel Hill." Interestingly, Henry Woodman, in an article published in the *Bucks County Intelligencer* in 1858, also stated that an effort was being made to change the name of Rebel Hill to Mechanicsville. He personally deplored the idea, "as villages of that name were numerous" and because he felt that the name Rebel Hill harkened to a proud time in the village's history when it was known for the patriotism of its residents during the Revolutionary War. Neither Mrs. Supplee nor Mr. Woodman identified exactly who it was that was pushing the effort to adopt the change, but it appears that perhaps the name Mechanicsville, while appearing on maps of the time, was never really embraced by the actual citizens who lived there.

Regardless of the popularity, or lack of popularity, of the name, Mechanicsville continued to appear on maps of the area into the 20th century. An 1877 map identified the area as Mechanicsville, and as clearly separate from either Gulph Mills or West Conshohocken. In addition to Matsonford and Rebel Hill Roads there were two new, unimproved roads that branched off from Rebel Hill Road, one toward the northeast and the other toward the southwest. There was only one residence on the former, that of a Mrs. D. (almost certainly Mrs. DeHaven), located at the terminus of the very short road. Thus this road, which had no name and disappeared in later maps, was basically a long driveway. The latter road was several times longer and included six houses on its downhill side, one on its uphill side, and two at its terminus. The owners of only six of these houses were identified, and all of them only by initials. One of these owners was a Mrs. H, which was probably Mrs. Henderson, while the houses at the end of the street were identified as properties of J.W. and R.D. Later maps show that these families were, respectively, Wolfhorn (actually a misspelling of Wilfong) and Doherty. This street was eventually named Belfont Avenue.

(Part 3 will appear in the Fall issue of THE GAZETTE.)

Editor's note: On Wednesday, March 1, 2017, Jack Hagan met with the Executive Officers of the Society and shared stories and memories of his growing up in Rebel Hill. Jack also shared some childhood photos with us.

GROWING UP IN REBEL HILL

Photos courtesy of Jack Hagan, author of **THE DEMISE OF REBEL HILL**.



Jack Hagan in his yard on DeHaven Street, Rebel Hill. Standing in front of apple tree with the backside of the garage in the background. Circa 1953 or 1954.



"Strongest Guy in Mexico---The Cisco Kid" Jack Hagan in his yard on DeHaven Street, Rebel Hill, in Cisco Kid outfit brought from Mexico. Circa 1950.



Joanne Wack, David Wack, and Jack Hagan behind the Wack's house on DeHaven Street, Rebel Hill, Circa 1954.



A MODEL RESOLUTION

In January and February 2017, the Lower Merion Historical Society published "Our New Year Resolution: Save and Protect Our Heritage" in their newsletter MILESTONES. Our own King of Prussia Historical Society and the supervisors' proposed Upper Merion Historical Commission could learn quite a bit.

Lower Merion has a unique and rich history, and this legacy is worth passing on to future generations. Yet, social and physical change is inevitable, and during the past 300 years we have seen many changes in the Lower Merion community. Our beginnings were that of a farming community, with the building of roads and road-side inns that would facilitate the westward expansion to the frontier. Later came the Railroad Era and the blossoming of our villages into towns. We were transformed into the Main Line: a prosperous suburban community with elegant country houses, and various educational, religious, and cultural institutions. With the introduction of the automobile, our simple country roads evolved into highways. The most noticeable transformation was the construction of the Schuylkill Expressway, which cut through Lower Merion, thus connecting our neighborhoods to the regional highway system.

In 2017, we are about to embark on another set of social and physical changes. We are a suburban township connected to Philadelphia, and therefore, experiencing the pressures of urban sprawl which threatens our quality of life. If this trend continues, it could mean the loss of our neighborhoods due to the blending, infilling and increased density of our various towns. Just pick up your local newspaper and read the headlines to see what is happening here in Lower Merion. We read about multi-modal transportation studies, the need for structured parking, and the service cutbacks to our public transportation systems. We are bewildered by the use of acronyms to identify zoning overlays; for example, MUST (Mixed-Use Special Transportation Overlay District), ROHO (Rock Hill Road Overlap District), BMVD (Bryn Mawr Village District) and CAD (City Avenue District). In addition, the integrity of our historic districts is being challenged, the number of tear-downs are increasing, and there are numerous cases of property owners who are guilty of demolition by neglect of their historic resources.

We can still claim some of the emblems of our rich history, but our heritage is at grave risk. We, as a community, must get involved with the planning and implementation of these proposed changes that will forever re-define our neighborhoods. Good planning will ultimately result in a better community, but if all of these changes move forward without the implementation of the recently adopted Comprehensive Plan and an updated Zoning Code, Lower Merion could become a victim of the fallout of unintended consequences. All of us must strive to retain our communal identity; for what kind of benefits could we reap that would possibly outweigh our losses from the bulldozing of our heritage?

The motto of the Historical Society has always been "Preserving Our Past For The Future." In the last issue of this newsletter, we wrote "Our Heritage is at Risk", where we encouraged everyone to work together toward the goal of preserving our cultural history and our village-like neighborhoods. Again, we feel that we have to get back on our proverbial soapbox and alert you about our concerns regarding the expansion projects that are being planned in our community.

Lower Merion is a desirable place to live, work, and raise a family. It's a living community that will continue to grow with new challenges and opportunities. It's only natural that there will be tensions that will require debate and resolution. Since real estate is a fixed commodity, we can anticipate pressure to increase the density of residential, institutional, and commercial properties. In addition, we will need to rebuild much of our infrastructure and work to understand emerging community-based life styles.

Today's challenge is that there are just too many (re) development projects on the drawing board. In the next 5 to 10 years, we will experience an unprecedented growth spurt and as a result could become victim to the fall-out of unintended consequences of many of these projects. One of the forces driving this stream of expansion is the desire of our local government for more tax rates. Our suburban community will be maxed out; our real estate built out, built up, and infilled with little remaining open space, inadequate water drainage, and the ever-increasing vehicular traffic. We do not fully understand the consequences that today's decisions will have on our quality of life in the future.

You can have an informed opinion by joining your local civic association and talking with your township commissioner. Check out the township's website...to get the date, time, and agenda of the various Commission, Committee, and Board of Supervisors meetings, and sit in on a Zoning Hearing Board meeting. Read your local newspapers and debate these quality of life issues with your neighbors.

Please, get informed and get involved with the challenges that we will face in the coming years. It's that important because this decade will define the legacy that we leave for our children.



HUNTERS' FINAL MEET OF SEASON

(From a Staff Correspondent of the Philadelphia Inquirer, Sunday, March 17, 1907)

HUNTERS' FINAL MEET OF SEASON - Gave Breakfast to Farmers at King of Prussia Before Chasing Reynard Over Spring Ground

KING OF PRUSSIA, PA, March 16 - Superb weather and fresh, springy ground contrived to make the final fox hunt of the season at King of Prussia today the finest and most exhilarating ever given under the auspices of the Chester Valley Hunt Club.



The sheer joy of living seemed to enter into the movements of every man and woman among the several hundred guests.

Even the farmers, to whom the breakfast preceding the hunt is given annually, seemed unusually animated. What the old Roman revels were to Nero, this annual breakfast is to the farmers. They become glad even that their fences were broken by the hunters in the course of the hunting season, for it is as a balm for these broken fences that the Chester Valley Hunt Club gives the breakfast.

Enjoyable as was the breakfast, it was far better to see the wiry, little red fox skimming across the field, getting a good start upon the hounds, already to be heard bay-ing in the shed back of King of Prussia Inn. Still more interesting was the sight of the dogs released, scenting the ground, catching the trail and dashing after the fox. Reynard had been captured two days before and on being released headed for the old farm of the late A. J. Cassatt, from which he had been taken.

But best of all was the picture of the huntsmen, huntswomen, too, mounting their horses, jogging into line, and then starting off in a pounding, furious race after the dogs. Right after the dogs came R. Penn Smith, M. F. H., John R. K. Scott, John M. Patterson, Joseph F. Rogers in a phalanx; Mrs. Walter Walker and Mrs. Clayton Erb closely following, and the score or more of others straggling on behind.

FOX CAUGHT ABOUT DARK

A vigorous ride up hills, down dells and over fences carried the riders five or more miles through the valley. It was growing dark when the fox was finally rounded up. Mrs. Walker and Mrs. Erb were in at the death. During the ride Jack Pechin was thrown and his horse out about the knees.

Seldom before has there been a larger or more congenial gathering at the King of Prussia Inn. A special train took the Philadelphia guests from Reading Terminal at 10.35 o'clock. Among those who came up on the train

were Mrs. Joseph P. Rogers, Mrs. William H. Wilson, Mrs. Louise Irwin, Mrs. John M. Patterson, Mrs. Lawrence McCormick, Mrs. J. Joseph Murphy. Judge Lamorelle and City Solicitor Kinsey came together. John R. K. Scott drove over in a tandem cart from his home at Cynwyd, introducing the old English hunting custom of driving the horse he intended to ride to hounds in from of the regular horse. Upon arriving the leader was saddled, the other horse remaining in the shaft.

The members of the club waited upon the farmers and showed them every courtesy. There was plenty of joviality, plenty of enthusiasm, and Howard Evans, the efficient township officer, said it was the finest crowd that had gathered at King of Prussia since George Washington and his men were quartered there.

Among those present were: William Wilson, Mrs. R. Penn Smith, Mrs. Jack Pechin, Walter Walker, Miss Marion Crawford, Miss Helen Johnson, Miss Kitty Scott, Miss Kitty Smith, J. P. Hale Jenkins, C. O. Brown, I. P. Wanger, Eliza Brook, William Rolis, W. N. Hamilton, Colket Walker, Lewis Scott, Alexander Johnson, Jack Williams, Miss M. Lewis, Mr. and Mrs. John L. Kinsey, Mrs. John Patterson, Edward F. Beale, E. H. Le Boutillier, William Reeves, Jack Mather, Martin Mulhall, Joseph Burke, Eliza Fenton, Dr. H. De Haven, Dr. Edward Miller, Dr. David Evans, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Walker, William Russel, Harry Yarrow, Frank Hews, Frank Walker and over a hundred of the Chester Valley farmers, prominent among whom were "Uncle" Joe Cole, "Uncle" Mat Walker and General Fisher, all three of them 80 and over, and who never miss a meet.

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THESE OLD HOUSES

On Saturday, March 11, 2017, the Society presented its "THESE OLD HOUSES" of Upper Merion. Approximately fifty members and guests attended this meeting, illustrating that a real interest exists in knowing about and preserving what remains of historical value in the township.

The program began with a review of THE KING OF PRUSSIA STORY, a report that was completed by the Society in 1956 and revised in 1959. The report emphasized that Upper Merion was settled in the 1680's and was one of the few areas of the U.S.A. that could trace the evolution of American architecture, industry, and culture by original buildings STILL STANDING.

The report continued that in this area, there were some two hundred fifty-six sites and buildings located as existing before 1850. Of these 256, there were some 180 dwellings still standing of varied character and period. Some were homes of great men; some were homes of unknown men. Some were built in the pre-Revolutionary period. Some were Revolutionary, some post-Revolutionary in date. Some, like the King of Prussia Inn, the Catfish Dam Lock House, and the Roberts School were of varied uses and reflected various cultural aspects of our American heritage. Many were well-preserved as private homes. Others were in imminent danger of being wiped out completely to make way for modern developments.

"And so, for example, a world-famous pre-Revolutionary inn, the King of Prussia Inn (circa 1709), was about to be demolished four years ago to make way for an extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Residents of the area were revolted at the thought and joined together to save this historic treasure. When the Department of Highways refused to reconsider because there was 'no group to take over the 250-year-old Inn,' these neighbors formed the King of Prussia Historical Society to do just that!"

"This led to a scientific study of the entire area and the discovery that certain other significant dwellings were slated for destruction. It was determined that some key buildings must be preserved for use as points of reference on the chart of American progress. For without visible landmarks we don't know where we've been and can't know where we are going! Such a program has been instituted in this area by the King of Prussia Historical Society."

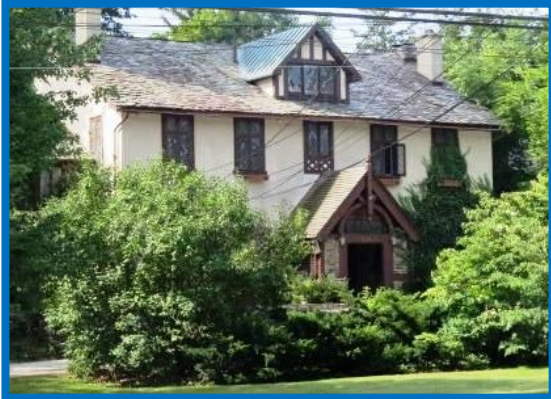
In this issue of THE GAZETTE, we would like to share with our members and readers some of buildings still standing in 2017. Some of the buildings are from our past history, while others reflect our more recent history. We will continue this series in future issues.

We thank Society board member Russell Rubert for the photos that he collected and shared with us.

Below is one of the three Keebler Road homes built by George Allen at the turn of the 20th century by landowner George Allen. It was originally part of a 250-acre farm with the house being used as a summer residence until Allen's death in 1921. One of the three was passed down to Howard David Pancoast and Kathleen Allen



Pancoast Abell around 1930, upon her marriage to husband Charles Maurice Abell, who occupied the home with their children.



Another unique, attractive, and interesting Historic Old Home of Upper Merion/King of Prussia is the Log House of Old Valley Forge Road.

According to the current owner the log house was built about 60 years ago in the 1950's. One resident remembered when they shipped the logs by rail from Canada to Abrams station!

Melinda Mason's grandfather built this home. "Mr. Mason built the house in the 50's and all the logs were brought down from Canada. My parents owned the house for twenty-five years and the original name was Twenty Oaks because it had twenty oak trees on the property. The horse stable next door belonged to the neighbors, and they sold that land to the guy who built the house on Allendale Road behind it. My dad took out the "fallout shelter" which was just a room made out of concrete blocks in the basement so he could have a workshop. The best things about the house were the double Dutch doors, the huge Mercer tile fireplace and the wood floors. Worst things? Leaves, lots of leaves, mice, carpenter bees and woodpeckers.... My father actually passed away there and my siblings sold the home in 2013 right before my mother passed from complications from stroke."



Another Upper Merion gem is the Hansens Cottage located on Gulph Road. Back before King of Prussia became King of Prussia, there were the Hansens, whose nursery was almost as well known locally as the inn that gave the community its name. Their Valley Forge Nurseries was an extensive operation; the property extended all the way from Gulph Road to Henderson Road, a distance of more than a mile.



(The Hansen cottage, the heart of Valley Forge Nurseries, in 1940. Image: Postcard from the collection of the King of Prussia Historical Society.)

Like any good farmers, the Hansens lived on their property. They were also good stewards of a legacy: they bought the nursery from its founder, Henry Frorer, who established it on the eve of the Great Depression. The cottage he built in 1929 at its entrance served as the nursery office and became a local landmark. Over the years, the Hansens expanded it and turned it into their home. The nursery has long since been subdivided, but the home remains intact, and now it can be yours for just a little bit of green.

The home retains the features that made it so picturesque on the outside, including mature trees, original stonework, stained glass and a clay tile roof.

On the inside, it's been brought up to date in a historically sensitive fashion. Highlights include a stylish kitchen that's open to the living room outfitted with all the latest in appliances and trim; a glass-enclosed sun room off the kitchen with a great view of the landscaped backyard, and a master bedroom with a soaring vaulted timbered ceiling.

The original pine floors throughout the home have been refinished, and there's also a charming side porch and outdoor deck for you, your family and your guests to enjoy.

Plus, there's a bonus. The original 1929 cottage, pictured in the 1940 postcard above, now forms one side of the current home, and its rear wing (on the left in the postcard) contains its own separate, wheelchair-accessible entrance that leads to a rustic family room and roll-in shower. The rear wing has its own separate zoned heat pump as well.

Hansen Cottage was on the market recently for \$299,000.

The Society thanks Russell Rubert, board member, for his collection of unique houses in Upper Merion. We will continue to share Russell's work with our readers. Presently, Russell is working on a series of photos of Upper Merion businesses.

2017 Program Calendar

Subject to change; check the society's website or Facebook page for the most up to date information:
www.kophistory.org ~ www.facebook.com/kophistory or contact info@kophistory.org

June 10 ~ 12:00 pm	Annual Field Trip/Picnic Historic Tour of Christ Church (Old Swedes Church)
	NO MEETINGS IN JULY AND AUGUST
September 9 ~ 2:00 PM	History of Upper Merion Schools
October 14 ~ 2:00 PM	Young Historians
November 11 ~ 2:00 PM	A Salute to Upper Merion Veterans
December 13 ~ 7:30 PM	Santa Lucia Feast Holiday Celebration for the Society in Christ Church (Old Swedes)

Unless noted otherwise, meetings are held on Saturday at Christ Church (Old Swedes) Hall, 740 River Road, Swedesburg PA 19405 ~ GPS coordinates [40.103498](#), [-75.327288](#)



PO BOX 60716
KING OF PRUSSIA PA 19406-0716

A Commitment to Preservation