

The King of Prussia Gazette

Preserving Upper Merion's Past to Enliven its Future

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VICE-PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

"HOME IS WHERE THE HEART LIES"

by Dave Montalvo

I'll be blunt. We need a home. A historical society has many tasks, but the most basic things we must accomplish in order to actually be a historical society are preservation and education. These two tasks are deeply intertwined and, as I shall argue shortly, they both require a home.

Proper archiving for preservation means more than just space. Items composed mainly of paper, wood and cloth must have a controlled environment. Temperature extremes, humidity, dust and exposure to sunlight should all be minimized when choosing one central location for everything. Also required are furnishings capable of safely storing delicate, fragile and easily torn items. But right now, the archive of the King of Prussia Historical Society is in the garages and basements of various members, in the basement of the old Roberts School on Croton Road, and in a storage unit graciously donated by Wayne Moving and Storage. This is a stop-gap measure. Better in those places than in uncontrolled environments exposed to nature's harms. Yet having our archive scattered in such a manner is not ideal, and it also foils our second task: education.

Education really boils down to access. Over the course of this summer, we have made the Society more accessible to the public by having a stand at the Upper Merion Farmer's Market, and by offering Historical Tours of Upper Merion. Both endeavors have been wonderfully successful, and I now know from direct experience that there are many people out there interested in Upper Merion's history. But where it really counts, we are still lacking. It is good to have a "road show," but we need a home base.

To illustrate why, consider a regular occurrence on our Facebook page: someone asking for more information about something that interests them. As a teacher, I can tell you that when a student asks a question, it is a moment to be celebrated: the student is actually asking you to teach him or her something. Facebook, as handy as it is for quick communication, is not a particularly effective medium for deeper learning. How powerful it is for me to be able to, in response to a question in my own classroom, simply walk over to my cabinets containing thirty years of carefully accumulated items, each specifically chosen for easing the learning of some science lesson, and pull out just the right thing. That's access!

The ideal answer to someone who wants to learn more would be, "Please stop by our museum where we have a display on that topic and volunteers eager to answer questions." Centralized archiving and preservation enable access, so that public interest in our shared history can be rewarded with more than just a comment on Facebook. Questions should lead to deeper discussions and possibly research, which could take place at an Upper Merion History Museum. At the moment, for anyone to peruse our collection, or to do effective research, or for us to begin the arduous task of digitizing collections for display on our website, or for anyone seeking to learn more deeply about our history, the current situation is untenable. I repeat: we need a home.

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In the next issue, I'd like to discuss options. In the meantime, if you have an idea, please go to our Facebook page and post it. Let's use Facebook as it should be used: as a forum for the quick exchange of ideas, so that we can create what Facebook will never be: an Upper Merion History Museum.

