

Downingtown Area Historical Society *History Notes*

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

October 10, 2019

Volume 2, Issue 19

West Pikeland Graphite Industry Began with a Woodchuck

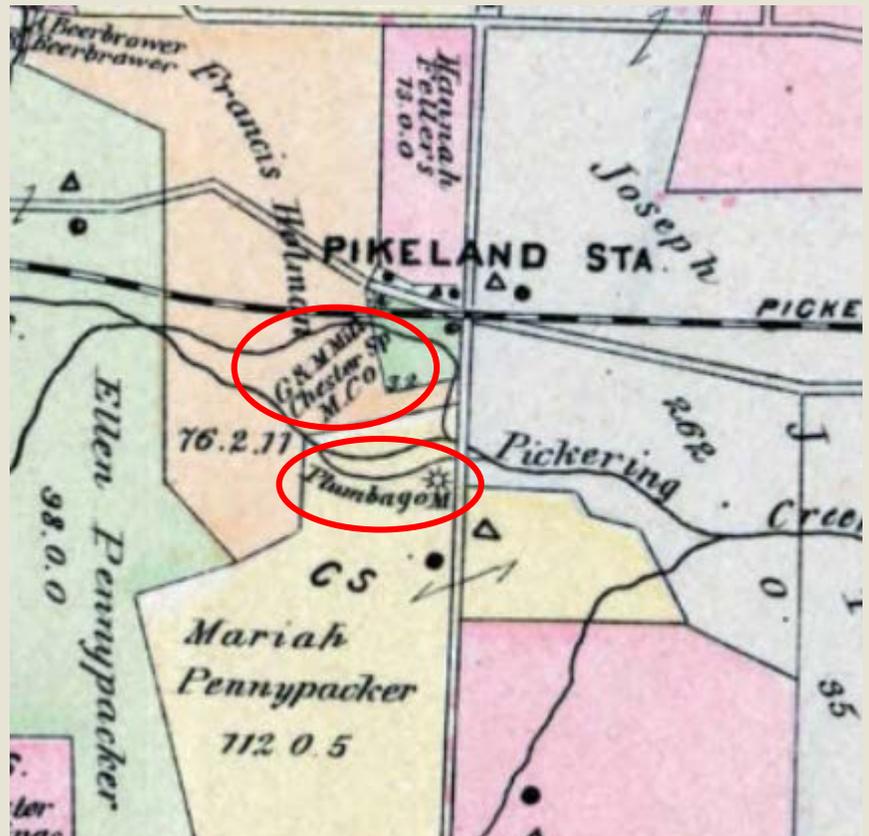
*This story came about from last issue's Mystery Pic. As we usually do, we were going to name the person who identified the location and add a few more facts. But **Bob Good**, who was the only person who identified the location which was the **Benjamin Franklin Graphite Mine** in West Pikeland Township, added some additional information. Along with more research of our own, we were able to piece together an interesting story.*

In 1873, Joseph Hartman purchased 14 acres of woodland from Thomas Pugh in West Pikeland Township near Chester Springs. Neither individual knew the true value of the property until five years later when a woodchuck "whose industrious search for an abiding place far out of reach of dogs brought to the surface pure specimens of graphite." The mineral that was unknowingly dug out by the mining marmot was sent to a laboratory in Philadelphia where chemists concluded it was "above the usual grade."

Consequently, a shaft was sunk down 15 feet on Hartman's land and a large vein of graphite was discovered. The owners of the Eagle Plumbago Works (plumbago is an old term for graphite) in nearby Upper Uwchlan Township petitioned Hartman to develop the mine and the two parties reached an agreement. The company would pay Hartman \$500 annually for leasing the mine and 50 cents for every ton "in the rough." A

preliminary analysis by the company determined that the mine, which was near the Pikeland Station on the Pickering Valley Railroad, would extend about 12 acres, not only on Hartman's land, but onto adjoining property owned by Benjamin Pennypacker. Pennypacker ended up leasing his property to Hugh Burgess of Spring City who erected a large mill in 1880. Other West Pikeland graphite mines opened over the next decade, including what would become the **Benjamin Franklin Graphite Company** between what is now Route 401 and Horseshoe Trail Road.

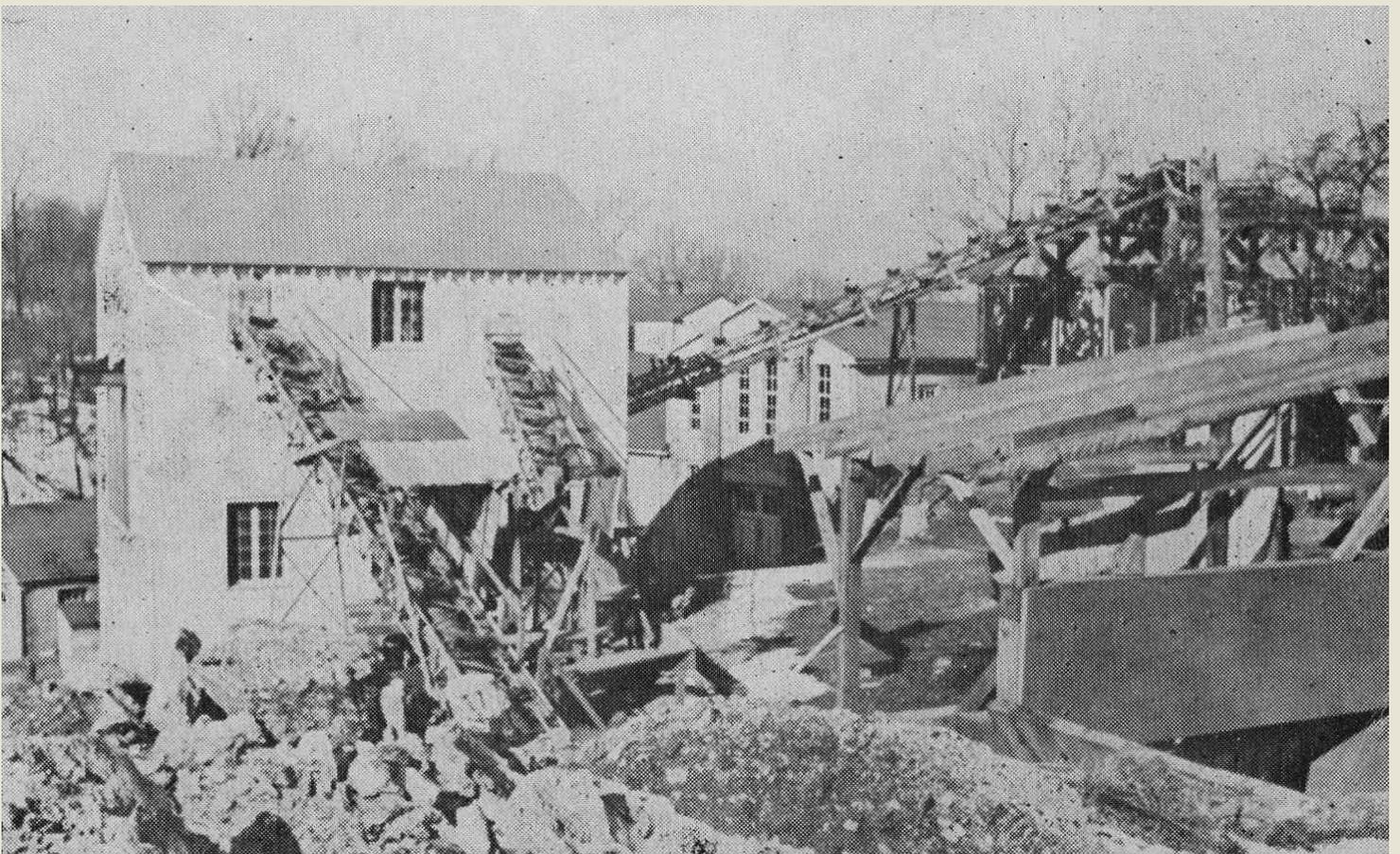
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The 1883 map above shows two mines in West Pikeland.



Last issue's Mystery Pic (above) which was identified by **Bob Good** faces north and shows several of the buildings of Benjamin Franklin Graphite Company in West Pikeland Township near Chester Springs. The building on the left is a garage, center is the mill, and right is the "roll house." Below, conveyors brought raw graphite ore to the roll house.



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Throughout history graphite has had many uses. Besides being used the “lead” in pencils, it was used as a “dry” lubricant, and its high heat resistance made it especially useful in steel making.

The mills in West Pikeland operated on and off until around 1910. However, despite the high quality of the graphite (the best graphite in the United States was said to come from Chester County) it was cheaper to import the product from overseas than it was to mine it in the United States. When graphite demand skyrocketed during the First World War most graphite to the United States came from Ceylon (Sri Lanka). After the war it was mainly imported from Madagascar. Imports then ceased entirely when the Second World War started.



Above is the “tailings launderer” for the Benjamin Franklin Graphite Mine. Right, the mine advertised for jobs in local papers when it re-opened in 1943.



With no imports available and demand for graphite rising, the Defense Plant Corporation (a subsidiary of the U.S Government’s Reconstruction Finance Corporation which sought to increase industrial capacity to meet military needs) re-started the mine in the south-central portion of West Pikeland as the Benjamin Franklin Graphite Company. It re-opened in early 1943. The mine, however, suspended operations in November of that year. Though the graphite was of the highest grade, it was still very expensive to mine. In addition, with the British occupation of Madagascar, and allied victories in north Africa, overseas shipments of graphite were resuming to the United States. Other American graphite mines were also doing well resulting in an oversupply of the mineral. After the war the mine was re-opened but could not operate profitably. It closed in 1954. The government auctioned off the property and mining equipment in 1957.

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According to Bob Good, a company called AeroProjects, Inc. of West Chester, which did research for the military on weaponry and rocket fuels, operated at the site during the 1960s. After they closed, Downingtown resident Barry Rothman operated a fireworks factory on the former mine property. In 1972, an explosion at the factory destroyed a building and injured several workers. After Rothman left the remaining buildings fell into disrepair and were razed in the 1990s. Today, very little remains of the former mine. It is on private property and is heavily wooded, and, being undeveloped, is now home to deer and perhaps a woodchuck or two.

This advertisement for a public auction of the former Benjamin Franklin Graphite Mine's land and equipment appeared in the Pottstown Mercury in 1957.

BY ORDER OF THE U. S. GOVERNMENT
GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
REAL ESTATE, MACHINERY & EQUIPMENT OF
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN GRAPHITE PLANT
SITUATED IN CHESTER SPRINGS, PA.
TO BE SOLD AS AN ENTIRETY "WHERE IS, AS IS."
AT PUBLIC AUCTION

On the Premises — Rain or Shine
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 31, AT 2 P. M.
INSPECTION—Daily, Monday thru Friday, 11 A. M.—3 P. M.
REAL ESTATE—Land consists of approx. 70 acres with graphite bearing ore deposits.

BUILDINGS—Mill Building Situated on Hillside with several different floor levels and total floor area of approx. 8,000 sq. ft. of concrete and concrete Block construction. Boiler with 4860 sq. ft. capacity furnishes heat distributed by unit heaters. **GARAGE** of concrete and concrete Block construction containing approx. 3,730 sq. ft.. Floor space. Boiler with 2,860 sq. ft. capacity furnishes heat distributed by unit heaters.

ROLLS BUILDING of all wood frame construction with an area of 900 sq. ft. approx.

MACHINERY & EQUIPMENT— Including Crushing Equipment, Screens, Ball Mill, Cyclone Collector, Conveyors, Rotary Dryer, Dust Collecting System, etc.

PLANT CAPACITY—project was designed for the mining and milling of graphite. Capacity of plant is 300 tons of graphite bearing ore per 24 hours and depending on percent of graphite recoverable from ore would produce between 5 to 8 tons of graphite per 24 hours.

TERMS—Sale Subject to Approval of the General Services Administration. 10% Deposit at sale by Certified check, Cashier's check or Postal Money Order, payable to General Services Administration. 80% Mortgage can remain for 10 years at 5% Interest. Possession at Settlement. Broker Participation Invited.

EDWARD JAFFE AUCTION CO.
WESTERN SAVING FUND BLDG., PHILA. 7, PA. PE 5-9761

In The (Old) News – Items that Made Headlines Back in the Day

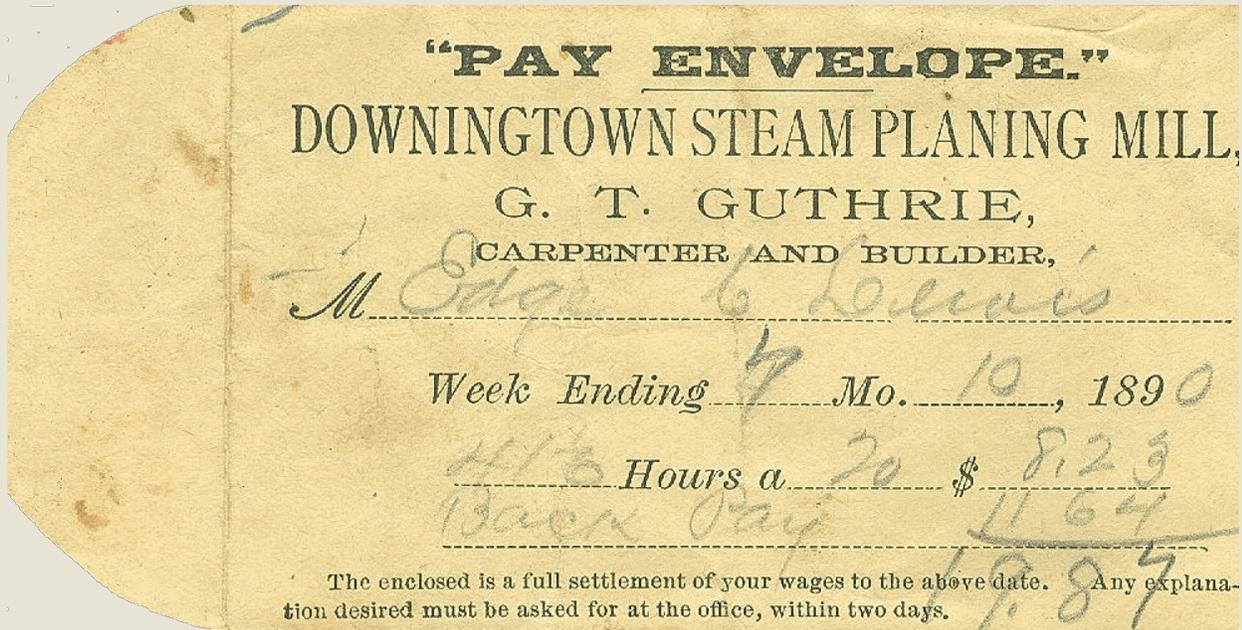
1888 – According to the *Philadelphia Times*, one blessing that resulted in the extreme heat during August of this year “has been the fact that political office-seekers have been frightened off.” The article continued, “It is not because the heat has any perceptible effect on them personally, but these gentlemen are, true to their calling, very politic; hence they know that the ordinary human being is so excited in his efforts to keep cool when the mercury is boiling at ninety-six degrees that to approach him on matters political would be like flaunting the red rag in the face of his bovine majesty. Therefore these patriotic individuals are not on their rounds just now, but are waiting to make things politically hot when the weather gets a little cooler.”

1891 – On March 19, the locomotive of a westbound Pennsylvania Railroad freight train became detached from the cars it was pulling near Valley Creek east of Downingtown. The engineer quickly realized what had happened and brought the engine to a stop in order to back up to reattach the cars. But the rest of the train never stopped and came crashing into the parked locomotive. One freight car ended up on top of the locomotive and three others derailed. Fortunately, the engineer and fireman saw the train coming down on them and they were able to jump out of the way.

1917 – In July, a Buick automobile was stolen from the garage of Dr. Joseph Huggins on East Lancaster Avenue. Detectives for the insurance company were able to locate the car in Watervliet, New York north of Albany. Except for the tires, the car was not damaged. The insurance company believed local Downingtowners stole the auto and claimed to know who they were.

Ashbridge Artifact

Grier T. Guthrie was a Downingtown contractor. Among his projects was the Malvern Train Station and the homes on East Church Street. He also owned a planing mill on Jefferson Avenue which took seasoned lumber and turned it into finished dimensional lumber. This envelope contained the pay for one of his employees, Edge Lewis, for one week in October 1890. Lewis was paid twenty cents an hour for "41 1/6" hours of work which totaled \$8.23. Along with back pay of \$11.64, the total in the envelope of \$19.87.



Downingtown Vintage Ad

This advertisement below for **Modern Cleaner** appeared in the May 10, 1962 issue of the *Downingtown Archive*. Modern Cleaner was located at 115 West Lancaster Avenue which is the same building as **The Farmhouse Coffee & Espresso Bar**. The image at right shows an awning that collapsed at Modern Cleaner after an early spring snowstorm in 1958.

**"Say, have you
Tried Self-Service
Dry Cleaning?"**

You can mix all colors and all materials, clothes come out dry and ready to wear!

This a real money saving service. Clean 9 lbs for only \$2.00.



— Stop In To-day —

MODERN CLEANER
COIN OPERATED LAUNDRY
AND COIN DRY CLEANING

115 W. Lancaster Ave. Downingtown



Downingtown Area Group Photo

The image below shows (l to r) Dennis Luminella, Andy Mento, and Tom Talucci fishing in Valley Creek east of Downingtown on the opening day of trout season in April 1958.



Better Late Than Never!

When sorting through the mail on April 2, 1958, Downingtown Acting Postmaster Jack Welsh was surprised to find a returned postcard that had been mailed from the Borough. The surprise wasn't the fact that the postcard was returned, which was not uncommon, but that it was sent from Downingtown 35 years earlier!

The postcard was mailed from Downingtown on December 22, 1923 and ended up in Buffalo, New York where it was lost or mislaid. After 35 years it was found and returned. Welsh was able to determine that the original recipient was Hazel Yetter who was living in West Bradford Township at the time. It was sent to her from Downingtown by Melvin Fenimore, who lived near Yetter in West Bradford, but who was probably working in Downingtown and perhaps wanted to send her a quick note wishing her a merry Christmas. But the postcard never arrived.

Welsh found that Hazel was living in Havre, Montana and sent her the postcard. She said it brought back many personal memories. She and Melvin Fenimore were married in 1924, but he died in 1928. Hazel eventually moved out of the area and later married Charles Seng. He died in 1958. Hazel died in 1988 in Tacoma, Washington at age 82.

Downingtown Area Mystery Pic

Can you identify the location in the photograph below. Specifically, where was the home in this photograph located? The first person to correctly identify the location of this photo will be recognized as a truly perceptive scholar. Please send your response to: dahs19335@gmail.com.



Advertisements for Non-Profits

Marshallton United Methodist Church

The Marshallton United Methodist Church is hosting a Roast Beef Dinner on Saturday, October 19, 2019. The menu includes Roast Beef, Mushroom & Brown Gravy, Mashed Potatoes, Green Beans, Cole Slaw, Applesauce, Rolls & Butter, Dessert, and Beverage. Hours for the "Eat-in" or "Take-out" option are from 4:30 to 6:30 pm. Ticket prices: If ordered before 10/15/2019: \$13/adult and \$5/child (ages 5~12) At the door: \$15/adult and \$5/child (ages 5~12). Please contact the church by phone or email to order your tickets on or before 10/15/2019. The church is located at 1282 West Strasburg Road, West Chester, PA. Contact the church office at (610) 696-5247 or office@marshalltonchurch.org with any questions.

West Caln Historical Society

The West Caln Historical Society will hold a meeting on Tuesday, October 15, 2019 at 7 P.M. in the West Caln Municipal Building, 721 West Kings Highway, Wagontown, PA on the subject of: **Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania**. The speaker will be Troy Grubb, historian and train enthusiast.

Fall 2019 East Brandywine Historical Commission Speakers Series. All programs are held at 3:30 p.m. at the East Brandywine Township Building

Sunday, October 20th - "Penn and the Lenape." The speaker is Doug Miller, Director of Pennsbury Manor – William and Hannah Penn's home.

Sunday, November 17th - "History of the American Flag." The speaker is Michael Rapp. Michael and his wife Jeanne owned Brandywine Flags from 1995.

Uwchlan Township Historical Commission

The Uwchlan Township Historical Commission will open the Edith P. Moore Schoolhouse (9 North Village Avenue, Lionville) and the John Cadwalader House (21 North Village Avenue, Lionville) on the first Sunday of each month, 2-4pm, April through November.

Central Presbyterian Church Community Luncheon

Central Presbyterian Church, 100 W Uwchlan Ave, Downingtown, PA 19335, holds a monthly Community Luncheon on the first Thursday of each month, October through May from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Their ever-popular chili, chicken corn noodle, vegetable beef, and cream of potato soups are sold along with sandwiches, salad platters, homemade desserts and beverages. Gluten free options are available. For take out service, call 610-269-1576 and ask for the kitchen. Bring a friend, meet a neighbor, or come alone and enjoy good food and fellowship.

Lyme Disease Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania

The Lyme Disease Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania, an education and support group for patients and caregivers who have been affected by Lyme Disease, will meet Wednesday, October 16, 2019 at 7PM at the Kennett Friends Meeting House on PA Rt 82 (125 W. Sickel St., Kennett Square, PA 19348). This will be a special support meeting to answer your questions, share your experiences, and meet others who are battling Lyme Disease. Meetings are free and all are welcome. Check www.lymepa.org for directions.

Chester County Marine Corps League Detachment

BINGO on the first and third Saturday of every month, 420 Chestnut Street. Public welcome. Kitchen opens at 5:30, Bingo Cards on sale at 6:00, Early Bird Special 6:30. Food is available for purchase. Funds used by the Marine Corps League and Marine Corps League Ladies Auxiliary to help veterans from all branches of the service as well as others in the community.

Greater Downingtown Business and Professional Women (BPW)

Meets monthly on the 2nd Wednesday evening, at 6 pm, in the Thorndale Inn for a dinner, networking, program and meeting. All area women are welcome. Most nights there is a program such as a speaker. Call Cindy Markley for your reservation for dinner at 610-363-1404. We meet each month from September to June.

Joseph's People, Downingtown chapter

An ecumenical support mission to help unemployed or underemployed people. The group is entirely conducted by volunteers and has been at St. Joseph's since 1995. Meets at 7:30 PM on the 2nd & 4th Tuesdays of the month. All are welcome. Visit web page, <http://josephspeople.org/our-chapters/downingtown/>, or just come to a meeting at St. Joseph's Parish Meeting Room behind the school, 460 Manor Ave., Downingtown. Call 610-873-7117. Leave Message. Leader: Cheryl Spaulding, Email: cheryl.spaulding@josephspeople.org.

Historical Society's Wish List

The Downingtown Area Historical Society is a non-profit organization proudly maintaining the 310-year-old Ashbridge House and a large archives. The society can always use gifts in kind with an immediate need for:

- General household items and office supplies including:
 - Pens and pencils
 - Scotch tape and masking tape
 - Copier paper (both color and white)
 - Light bulbs
 - Paper towels
 - Large and small trash bags
- Amazon gift cards or gift cards to Home Depot or Lowes. Sometimes we need to make quick purchases so gift cards would come in very handy.

To make a tax-deductible cash donation, use this link or send a check to the address below. Thank you!



Downingtown Area Historical Society

P.O. Box 9, Downingtown, PA 19335

610-269-1709

dths1709@gmail.com

<https://www.downingtownhistory.org>

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Follow us on Twitter:



Check out our *Then & Now* series on YouTube:



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