

Downingtown Area Historical Society *History Notes*

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

March 28, 2019

Volume 2, Issue 6

The Strange Case of Dr. Benjamin Holbrook

This is a strange local story that was pieced together through numerous newspaper articles, vital records, census files, and other sources. It would certainly make a great movie!

Wealthy Philadelphia physician Dr. Charles N. Holbrook and his wife Margaret separated in 1869. At the time of their separation they had been married 25 years and had one son together. Though still married to Margaret, Dr. Holbrook lived with Elizabeth Bradford from that year until his death in 1885. She bore him six children – all sons. The second oldest was Benjamin who was born in August 1874. When the boys were old enough, they were sent to a boarding school near Ercildoun in East Fallowfield Township, Chester County.

When Dr. Holbrook died he left a sizeable estate, most of which was bequeathed to his sons. Margaret Holbrook, with whom the decedent was still legally married, challenged the will and the court awarded her a nearly \$70,000 lump sum (about \$2.0 million today) along with \$3,100 in yearly income. Elizabeth Bradford, with whom Dr. Holbrook had been living for 16 years was bequeathed \$1,500 in yearly income, and the remaining amount was split between the Holbrook boys. Second-son Benjamin's share was a "snug little fortune" of about \$20,000 (about \$550,000 today). But the eleven-year-old had to wait ten years until he was 21 to see any of his money.

Five of the Holbrook brothers are seen in this 1890 photograph. From left to right: Albert, Benjamin, George, William, and Walter. The oldest son Charles is not pictured. The image is courtesy of Ron Brinton. It was passed down to the descendants of Evelyn Holbrook Gilbert, daughter of George Holbrook.



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In 1895, Benjamin Holbrook turned 21 and received his father's inheritance. He used some of the proceeds to attend medical college in Philadelphia where he became what was then known as an "oculist", which is similar to an ophthalmologist or optometrist today. Two years later Benjamin married Martie Collins, daughter of East Fallowfield farmer Owen Collins. Using more of his inheritance, he purchased a farm in East Brandywine Township. Unfortunately, Martie died in 1901 at age 22. Before and after his wife's death Benjamin lived lavishly. But he seemed to do very little doctoring, or even farming for that matter, and with little money coming in, his once large inheritance dwindled to almost nothing. He eventually sold the farm in East Brandywine.

It was at this point that Holbrook began a dual life. Wanting to live a life of wealth and maintain a high standing in the community, he needed cash – a lot of it. But cash was hard to come by with his depleted inheritance, and for the fact that he only occasionally practiced his profession as an oculist. As a result, he entered a life of crime. Holbrook started small, often stealing from homes where he was a guest, or where he treated patients through his infrequently-practiced profession. But as the years went on his crimes not only grew more in number but his targets became more prominent. During the daytime he was a "suave, well-bred practitioner" but became "industrious at night" when he would drive his horse and buggy for miles over dark roads to targets he scouted during the daytime. Tying his horse out of sight along a road, he would rob homes, stores, businesses, train stations, and even school houses throughout the Coatesville and Downingtown areas.

Dr. Holbrook would often pawn the stolen items in Philadelphia, but not wanting to use his precious cash to purchase train tickets, he ended up stealing railroad mileage books. Mileage books contained hundreds, if not thousands of coupons, each representing a mile of rail travel. When using a mileage book in lieu of tickets, a traveler would board a train, tell the conductor his destination, and present him the mileage book. The conductor would then detach the number of coupons equal to the number of miles traveled. For example, 33 coupons would be removed from a mileage book for the 33-mile trip from Downingtown to Broad Street Station in Philadelphia.

In April 1907, Holbrook broke into the passenger station at Wyebrook in West Nantmeal Township on the Pennsylvania Railroad's New Holland Branch and stole two 4,000-mile books along with some jewelry and silverware. But the thief forgot an important item. Mileage books needed to have a ticket agent's stamp. So, a few nights later Holbrook broke into the Glenmoore station three miles south of Wyebrook and stamped the stolen books with that agent's stamp. While he was at it, he stole the Glenmoore agent's silver watch and razor, along with several pairs of new shoes he found in the station's freight room. He also tried his luck at Buck Run Station south of Ercildoun in East Fallowfield on the Railroad's Pomeroy and Newark Branch, but unable to secure any mileage books, he stole a typewriter instead. After that, Holbrook broke into the station at Thorndale and secured at least two more mileage books.

That spring, Holbrook used one stolen mileage book to travel regularly between Chester County and Philadelphia and did so without being detected. When this book ran out, he started to travel with a second one, but a suspicious conductor confiscated it and sent the book to the Pennsylvania Railroad offices in Philadelphia. Railroad detective Aaron Gilbert was given the case and he questioned Holbrook about the book. Holbrook told Gilbert that he bought two mileage books from a man named George Smith who he met at a hotel in Downingtown. Railroad detectives, of course, found no trace of a George Smith in Downingtown. With little evidence, and because of Dr. Holbrook's standing in the community, the case was dropped.



The Warren (PA) Times Mirror newspaper included a drawing (above) to add to the intrigue of the Holbrook case when they published the story.

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Dr. Benjamin Holbrook's narrow escape from the law should have made him pause and re-think his "second profession", but he decided to try his luck one more time in an especially brash incident. In early July 1907, Holbrook took his remaining stolen railroad mileage books to the Pennsylvania Railroad's general manager in Philadelphia, claiming he found them lying on the ground in Coatesville. He sought a reward for turning them in. Holbrook was told an investigation would have to be made first. Several of the railroad's best detectives were assigned to the case and after putting Holbrook "through a searching examination" discovered he had stolen them. He had no explanation for stealing the books other than "he was out of his mind" at the time. Holbrook was then arrested. After his arrest police and detectives searched the West Brandywine Township home of farmer John Clift where Holbrook had been boarding and found a treasure trove of stolen items. Railroad detective Harry F. Dague, who arrested Holbrook, was heard saying, "the case is the strangest I have ever come across."



Dr. Benjamin Holbrook broke into the Pennsylvania Railroad's Wye Brook Station seen here and stole valuable railroad mileage books. Holbrook forgot to stamp the books with the agent's stamp so a few nights later he broke into the Glenmoore Station a few miles to the south and stamped the stolen books with that agent's stamp.

When confronted with the evidence Holbrook broke down and confessed to eight burglaries, listing the places he had broken into. But police believe he committed many more than just eight. Dozens of other unsolved break-ins in the area bore the earmarks of a Holbrook burglary, including several in Coatesville. In one case, Holbrook was in a Coatesville store when he spied the owner hiding the day's receipts in a sack of coffee. The following day the bag of money was missing. Another time the electric supply store of Edward Thomas on Third Avenue was broken into and a typewriter, tools, and revolver were stolen. After that, the thief entered the office of Coatesville liveryman David Mariner and stole a gun and stop watch. Police were convinced that Holbrook made regular trips into Philadelphia to pawn the stolen items.

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**OCULIST BY DAY,
BURGLAR BY NIGHT,
BOLD THIEF CAUGHT**

In 1907, the arrest of Dr. Benjamin Holbrook made headlines all across the United States. The headline above, or something similar, was typical of many newspapers.

Holbrook was given a hearing in Downingtown before Justice of the Peace Joseph H. Johnson and bail was set at \$2,000. Not even his “wealthy and highly respected” brothers would bail him out fearing additional charges were imminent. “We will let him go before the court and receive his sentence,” they said. In addition, his brothers had little sympathy for him. Before he was caught, Benjamin Holbrook told his younger brother Walter, a prosperous East Fallowfield farmer, that “he had but 50 cents to his name.” When Walter suggested working to earn a living, Benjamin replied that he would rather go to the poorhouse first. Holbrook was sent to prison at West Chester to await trial.

The arrest came as a shock to those who knew Holbrook. Because he lived two different lives, he was quickly dubbed a “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” in newspapers all across the United States, and even Hawaii. He also took on the moniker “Raffles,” a fictional gentleman-thief character created by E.W. Hornung, brother-in-law to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. And to add more flavor to their story, some newspapers described Holbrook as the “area’s most prominent physician” though that was hardly the case.

Mullen Lebia	—	Pa	W 39	7m 8	Pennsylvania	United States	United States		English	Barber
Rickel Fredrick	—	Pa	W 56	7m 18	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania		English	Runner
Green Hiram	—	Pa	W 62	7m 1	Massachusetts	New York	Wisconsin	1872 Pa	English	None
Rose Michael	—	Pa	W 46	7m 19	Ger (German)	Ger (German)	Ger (German)	1887 Pa	English	Bag Seiver
Haw Sidney	—	Pa	W 43	5	Eng (English)	Eng (English)	Eng (English)	1887 Pa	English	Machinist
Moskalek Charles	—	Pa	W 78	7m 8	Aust (German)	Aust (German)	Aust (German)	1900 Pa	English	None
Mattison Glenn	—	Pa	W 27	5	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania		English	Carpenter
Hyttinger Peter	—	Pa	W 33	7m 2	Pennsylvania	Ger (German)	Ger (German)		English	None
Levan William J	—	Pa	W 61	7m 2	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania		English	Bag Seiver
Garver Benjamin	—	Pa	W 36	7m 9	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania		English	Shiner
Eds George	—	Pa	W 64	7m 1	Pennsylvania	United States	Eng (English)		English	Labourer
Foreman Charles	—	Pa	W 32	7m 7	Pennsylvania	United States	Pennsylvania		English	Bag Seiver
Holden Richard	—	Pa	W 48	7m 16	Connecticut	Eng (English)	Vermont		English	Plumber
Holbrook Benjamin	—	Pa	W 35	7m 1	Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania	Eng (English)		English	Runner
Parker Bartlett	—	Pa	W 46	7m 2	Pennsylvania	Ohio	Pennsylvania		English	Bag Seiver
Heywood Charles	—	Pa	W 34	5	Massachusetts	New Hampshire	New Hampshire		English	Bag Seiver

Benjamin Holbrook was one of about 1,500 inmates enumerated in the 1910 Census at Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary. His listed occupation was a “runner” which might have been an inmate who made deliveries within the prison.

Police also discovered that at the time of Dr. Holbrook’s arrest he was engaged to two different women, one in Coatesville and “one very charming Philadelphian.” Had he not been caught, Holbrook wasn’t sure who he would have married. But Holbrook did confess that the prospect of marrying was part of the reason he began his crime spree because he would have been unable to support a wife being on the brink of bankruptcy.

In late August 1907, Holbrook was convicted of his crimes and received a five-year sentence. He most likely served most or all of his sentence so that by 1912 he was a free man. It appears that the now 38-year-old Holbrook remained in Philadelphia, managed to stay out of trouble, and got a full-time job – probably his first one ever. His World War 1 draft registration card filled out in September 1918 shows he is living in the City and working as an “operator” for a manufacturing company. On the form, he identifies his nearest relative as his younger brother George in Coatesville. In the 1920 Census he is a clerk in one of Philadelphia’s industrial shops. Holbrook died in Philadelphia on March 8, 1930. The cause of death on his death certificate was pulmonary tuberculosis. He was 55.

Last Issue's Mystery Pic

Michael DiBerardinis is a truly perceptive scholar because he was the first person to identify the image below as the farm on the west side of Creek Road (Route 282) in East Brandywine Township a short distance north of Downingtown. When the photograph was taken in 1938, the farm was owned by Charles and Zoe Perrin and was appropriately named Charzoe Farm. The farm was last known as White Acres Farm and was owned for many years by the Whittaker Family. **Caroline Ash**, who also guessed the correct location, provided us a history of the farm. We will include that history, as well as additional pictures, in an upcoming issue of *History Notes*.



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

1879 – Mrs. Ella Pawling of Downingtown died on March 25th and her case “baffled all medical skill.” According to the *Philadelphia Times*, a post mortem was made and “it was found that her bladder contained 418 stones, the largest of which measured 2¼ inches in circumference.” The twenty-six year-old was the wife of John Pawling and mother of three children.

1882 – According to the July 23rd issue of the *Philadelphia Times*, “the membership fee in the Downingtown Association for Protection against Thieves and Recovery of Stolen Property is one dollar annually.”

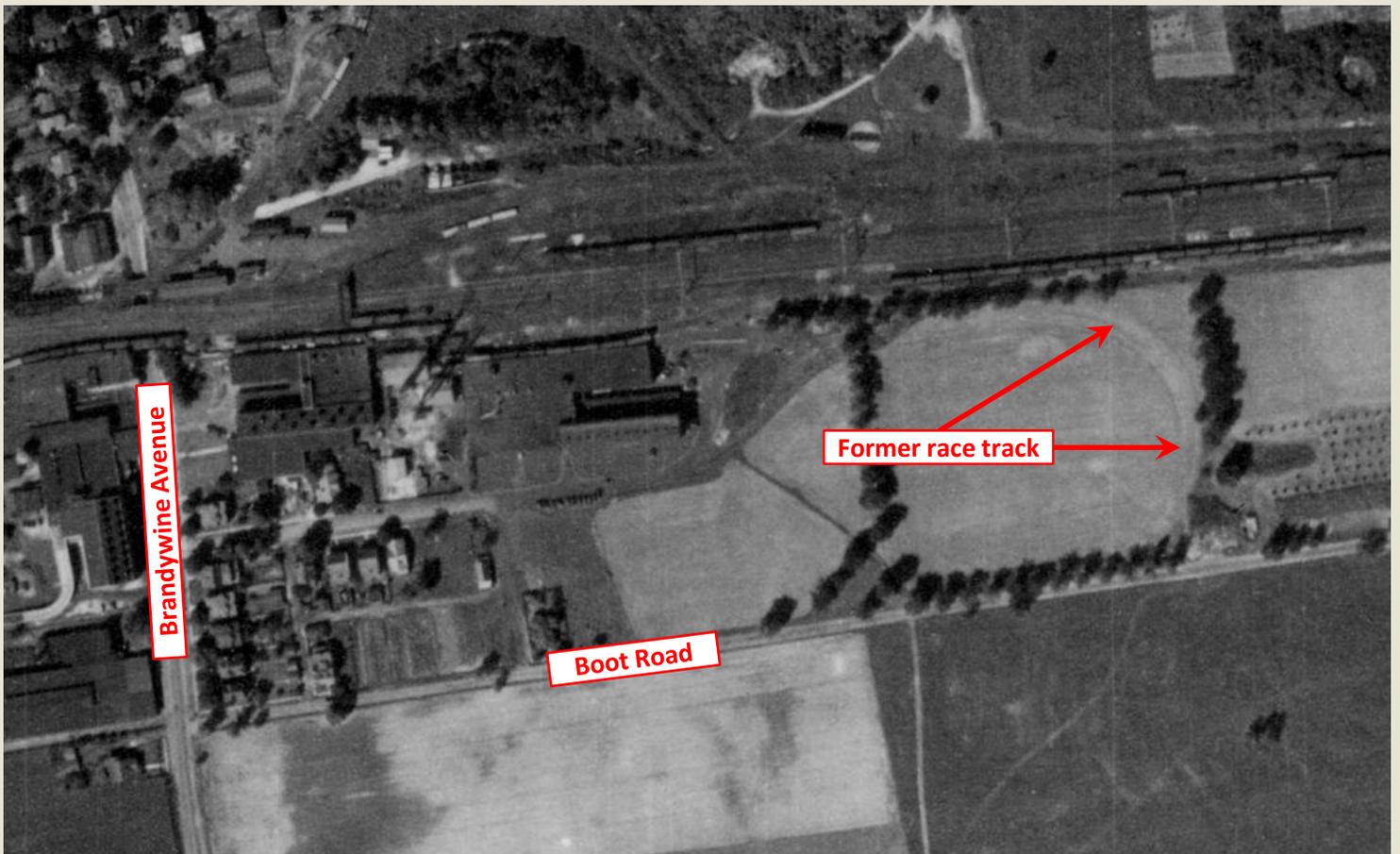
1894 – In order to raise funds to beautify Downingtown, boxes were placed in business establishments to receive spare change from Borough residents. The proceeds would be used to purchase trees to plant along Downingtown’s streets.

1898 – Jesse Quay, an Upper Uwchlan farmer, was arrested in August for assault and battery and “malicious mischief” when he was involved in a hit-and-run accident. Quay allegedly ran down E. Herbert Dutton, a young theology student, with his horse and wagon while Dutton was riding his bicycle to Chester Springs. Dutton declared that he got out of Quay’s way, but the farmer purposely ran down the bicyclist and left him in a semi-conscious condition in a gutter on the side of the road.

1919 – Downingtown’s Peter Micholvitch was in critical condition in Chester County Hospital with a fractured skull and other injuries, and Nicholas Polson was locked up for inflicting the injuries after the two were involved in a “free-for-all fight” on April 22nd. The two were employees of a brickyard and got into a fight at Polson’s home “when a phonograph was started and rendered a tune not to the liking of Micholvitch” who started the brawl. Furniture, windows, doors, and dishes were smashed in the melee and one man nearly drowned after being chased into the Brandywine.

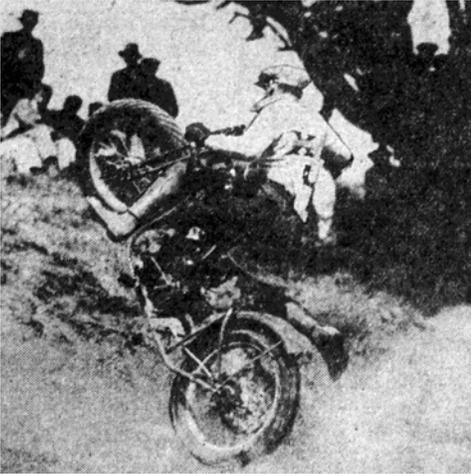
Downingtown Did-You-Know?

Did you know there was horse racing track in Downingtown located between the Main Line railroad tracks and Boot Road? A thousand people were present when the half-mile track formally opened on September 20, 1903. The outline of the track can be seen in the 1904 USGS topographic map (top image below). Most of the events held at the track were harness races. The facility was called 'Kerr Track' and races were put on by the Downingtown Driving Association. We're not sure when it closed but the track is absent from a 1912 map of Downingtown. However, a portion of the former track can still be seen in a 1937 aerial photograph (bottom).



Downingtown Vintage Ad

The Coatesville Motorcycle Club placed an ad in the Downingtown Archive in June 1926 for a motorcycle hill climb. Motorcycle hill climb racing began around 1910 and is still popular today, but was especially popular in the 1920s. Many events like this one were held all across the country. Howard Mattson's farm, where the race was held, was located on Embreeville Road in Newlin Township.



GOOD ROADS ————— STAR RIDERS

Motorcycle Contest

Hill Climb

A. M. A. SANCTION No. 30

SUNDAY, JUNE 27

1.30 P. M. RAIN DATE, JULY 4

HOWARD MATSON FARM—Above Embreeville Ball Park. Take the New Coatesville-Unionville Road—Turn North at Unionville.

5 BIG EVENTS 5

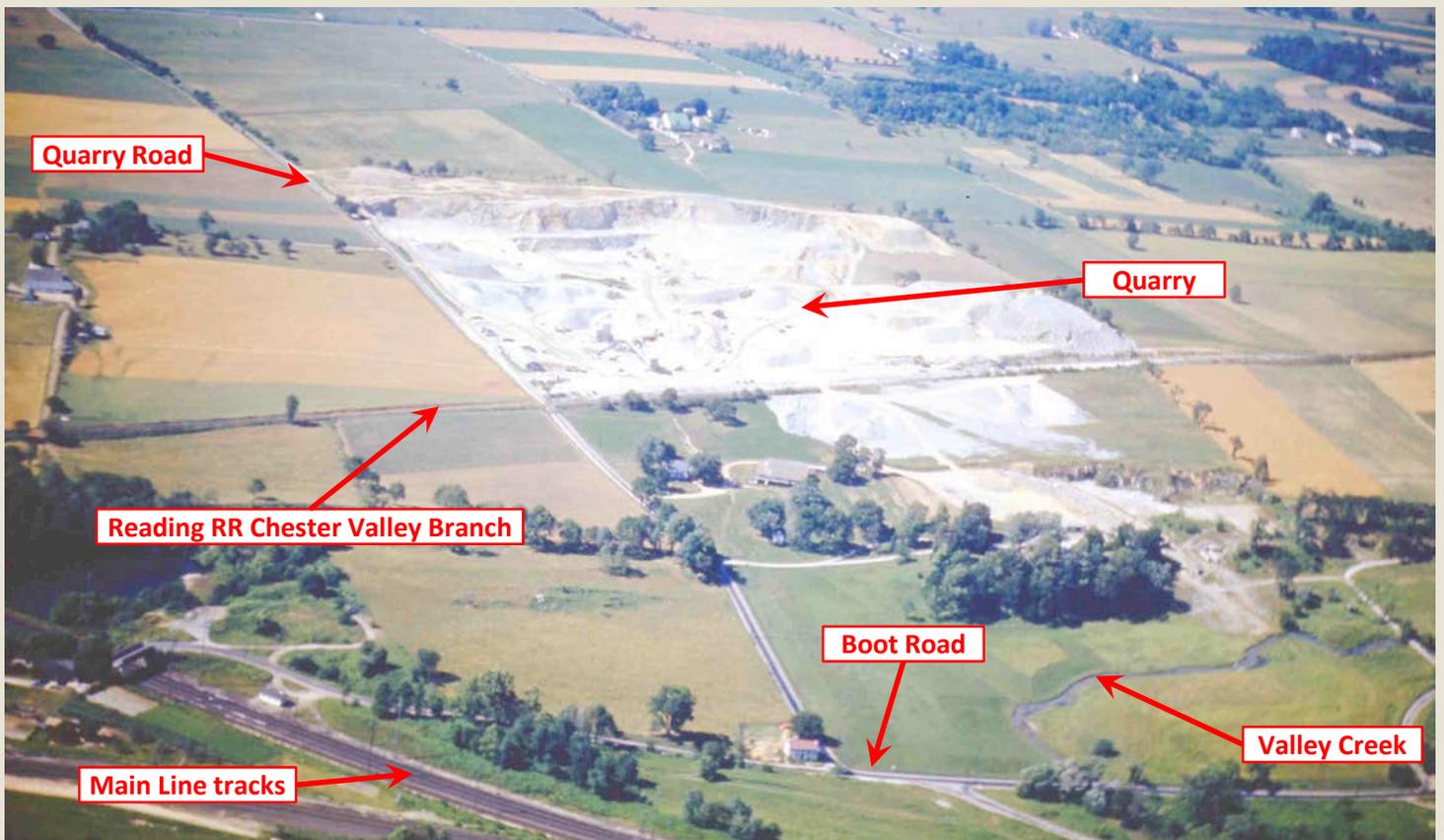
SEE' EM BUCK

Coatesville Motorcycle Club

FRFE PARKING ————— REFRESHMENTS

Downingtown Area From Above

This photograph faces north and was taken in July 1950 over East Caln Township around Quarry Road



Do You Have...?

Do you have a dolly/hand truck that you would like to donate to the Historical Society? We could certainly use one at the Ashbridge House. Email us and let us know at dths1709@gmail.com. Thank You!!!



Downingtown Area Mystery Pic

Can you identify the location in the photograph below? 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

West Caln Historical Society

The West Caln Historical Society will hold a meeting on Tuesday, April 16, 2019 at 7 P.M. in the West Caln Municipal Building, 721 West Kings Highway, Wagontown, PA on the subject of: **Gettysburg/Antietam Collection (American Civil War)**. The speaker will be Faye and Ed Max, historians, collectors, re-enactors. Faye and Ed have been collecting American Civil War artifacts for some time, and will share their collection with us in this meeting.

East Brandywine Historical Commission Spring 2019 Speakers Series (all programs presented at East Brandywine Township Building at 3:30 PM)

- **April 28, 2019 – Follow the Brandywine for the Geology, Ecology and Architectural Features of the Border of East Brandywine.** Come and learn about the unique geology, ecology, and history of our area. We'll hear about the East Brandywine Trail that borders the Brandywine Creek (and East Brandywine Township) and how geology matched with man's ingenuity dictated the path. We will also discuss the importance of building, maintaining and expanding suburban green spaces that ensures the health of both humans and animals. Christine Coccozza is a Science teacher at Methacton School District where she teaches Biology and Environmental Science. An avid world traveler, long distance hiker, climber and scuba diver she will present this program that will open your eyes to what's around you that you may never have noticed!
- **May 19, 2019 – The Special Barns of Chester County.** Our speaker specializes in pre-civil war era house and barn architecture of Holland Dutch and Swiss-German areas. He has documented more than 8,000 vernacular buildings that include more than 5,000 homestead barns. Our Chester County barns have long been recognized by barn observers for their forms and styles and their diverse building materials. We'll look at records of barns built 1750 to 1900. Greg Huber is an independent scholar, consultant and principal owner of Past Perspectives and Eastern Barn Consultants and will hold a book signing following his talk. He is the author of 265 articles on barn and house architecture and has led more the 110 house and barn tours.

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, April through November. Hours for both are 2PM-4PM.

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 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.

Community Luncheon

Central Presbyterian Church, 100 W Uwchlan Ave, Downingtown, holds a monthly Community Luncheon from 11 AM until 1 PM on the first Thursday of each month, October through May. Their popular chili, chicken corn noodle, vegetable beef, and cream of potato soups are sold, along with sandwiches, salad platters, homemade desserts and beverages. 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.

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 Mary Coyne for your reservation for dinner at 610-380-8869. 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

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<https://www.downingtownhistory.org>

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