



# Downingtown Area Historical Society *History Notes*

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

March 8, 2018

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## 1930 - The Miniature Golf Craze Comes to Downingtown

Miniature golf was one of a number of American fads to pop up in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In August 1930 it was estimated that there were 25,000 mini golf courses in America, 15,000 of which had been constructed since January of that year! Downingtown certainly saw its share. There were at least four miniature golf courses that we know of in the Downingtown area that opened in 1930 alone. But as quickly as the craze started it ended. As a result of the Great Depression and from an oversaturation of courses, none of the Downingtown courses likely lasted more than a few years. Following are descriptions of the four Downingtown courses. All are showing advertisements placed in the Downingtown Archive in 1930, and three have a current picture of the site.

### MINIATURE GOLF TOURNAMENT STARTS TOMORROW ON THE BEAUTIFUL "LITTLE BILL" GOLF COURSE FRANK McGRAW, Prop. CHURCH STREET DOWNINGTOWN, PENNA.



ENTER THIS TOURNAMENT NOW!  
QUALIFYING ROUND STARTS TOMORROW  
**October 4th**  
MEN'S AND LADIES' DIVISIONS  
BEAUTIFUL PRIZES FOR WINNERS

The "Little Bill" miniature golf course was located on a vacant lot on Church Street in the Johnstown section of Downingtown. Frank McGraw, who lived in a large house nearby, was the proprietor. McGraw also owned a coal yard near the train station. Seen below is 237 Church Street where the course was located. In the image on the left you can barely see two homes on the south side of Church Street which still stand today. It is unclear where the name "Little Bill" came from.





One of the four Downingtown courses was built in a heated auto repair garage on Washington Avenue in the center of Downingtown. It is unknown if the garage was vacant at the time if it was converted to a course, or if the owner thought mini-golf was more profitable than fixing cars. Either way, the garage had the advantage of offering play year round. It was converted back to an auto repair facility after the golf course craze ended and is still in that use today.



**MINIATURE**

**GOLF**

Downingtown's  
**FIRST INDOOR**  
Miniature Golf  
**COURSE**

*for all the*  
**FAMILY**

***HAS OPENED***

***18 Holes of Pleasure***

***VISIT THIS COURSE NOW!***

*Located in*  
***W. N. HOWE Garage***

**Washington Ave,      Downingtown, Pa.**

**This garage is heated so that players may  
be comfortable during cold weather**

**TOM THUMB**  
**MINIATURE GOLF TOURNAMENT**  
WILL BE STAGED ON  
**THE DOWNINGTOWN**  
**TOM THUMB GOLF COURSE**  
LOCATED ON BRANDYWINE AVENUE



QUALIFYING ROUND STARTS  
**Monday, October 6th**

One of the Downingtown courses was a patented design under the "Tom Thumb Golf" trade name (the first Tom Thumb course was built by Garnet Carter in Lookout Mountain, TN in 1927). It was located on Brandywine Avenue behind the old Swan Hotel, and just a (literal) stone's throw from the course located in the Howe garage on Washington Avenue. In the photograph on the left, the Downingtown National Bank building is partly visible in the upper right.



The Bo-Green miniature golf course was located on the Lincoln Highway at Bell Tavern Road, about where WaWa is now located. The course was about a mile west of the center of Downingtown and probably catered to travelers on the Lincoln Highway.

**PLAY GOLF**  
at  
**BO-GREEN**  
**MINIATURE GOLF COURSE**  
at  
**BELL TAVERN**  
ON LINCOLN HIGHWAY ONE MILE EAST OF  
**DOWNINGTOWN**  
**18-HOLE COURSE**  
Real Grass Fairways      Natural Bunkers  
25c in Daytime      35c at Night

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

**1860** – A meteorite was seen in Downingtown at 6:30 PM on December 11<sup>th</sup>. According to one newspaper it was described as “a large ball of fire” and “was particularly brilliant while it lasted.” It broke up into many smaller balls and eventually disappeared from sight.

**1872** – According to the Reading Times, “a white squirrel, a very rare animal in this section, was captured in West Bradford, Chester County, last week and was sold for \$5, the purchaser also rejoicing in the possession of a red skunk.”

**1880** – James Hamilton, who was described as an “old gentleman” at age 65, brought much amusement to the residents of Downingtown as they watched him that summer during his “plucky attempt to master the bicycle.” Hamilton kept at it and eventually became a good rider.

**1888** – A “Potato War” occurred in Downingtown when one merchant in Centre Square significantly marked down the price of his potatoes followed by a merchant next store lowering his even further. It got to the point where potatoes in Downingtown were selling for thirty cents a bushel, less than half the normal price. It was stated that the “warring merchants do not speak as they pass by.”

**1896** – Downingtown’s Horace Trego was walking across the railroad bridge during a heavy rainstorm on January 24<sup>th</sup>. He was unable to see clearly and accidentally stepped off the bridge and fell to the rocks below. He was taken to Chester County Hospital in West Chester with two broken legs. It was said that it could have been much worse as his umbrella acted as a parachute which slowed his fall.

**1913** – After opening a bag of mail on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, Postmaster Josiah Phillips discovered that a can of sauerkraut sent parcel post had accidentally opened, spilling the contents “through the mass of mail matter.” According to the Philadelphia Inquirer, “there was no scramble on the part of the office force for the privilege of sorting the mail in this particular pouch.”



# Downingtown 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](mailto:dahs19335@gmail.com). Unfortunately we get so many responses we aren't able to respond to each one individually. Sorry!



## Last Issue's Mystery Pic

**Rahn Brackin** is truly a perceptive scholar because he was the first person to identify the location of the photograph on the left. It shows the building at 506 East Lancaster Avenue in Downingtown, next to the Shell station. The covered porches on the sides of the building are now bricked-in. Rahn also told us that there is a twin to this building in New Holland, PA. The building was originally the headquarters for Chemical Leaman Tank Lines before becoming apartments. It now houses several businesses.



## Downingtown Vintage Ad

The Modern Tailor opened in 1947 at 115 West Lancaster Avenue (it's name eventually changed to Modern Cleaners and Launderama). It was the first of several businesses at this location. The Farmhouse Coffee and Espresso Bar now occupies the building.

**Modern Tailor**



Our New Plant at 115 W. Lancaster Ave.

**DRY CLEANING**  
All Dry Cleaning Is Done in Our Plant

**MOTH-PROOFING**  
Every Garment Cleaned by us will be Moth-Proofed **FREE OF CHARGE** by the new Scientific Fumol OS-40 Process

By doing all the work in our own plant we can again give our customers the service and quality that was not possible during the war years and up to the present time.

**Free Pick-up and Delivery**  
**Phone 654**

## Downingtown Date Stone

One of our members came upon this date stone in the ground in Kerr Park just a few yards from the Brandywine River while walking his dog. After a little bit of research, we confirmed that the stone was originally placed on a double oven fireplace constructed in 1952 in the park (see photograph below right) in honor of Frank G. Swarner.



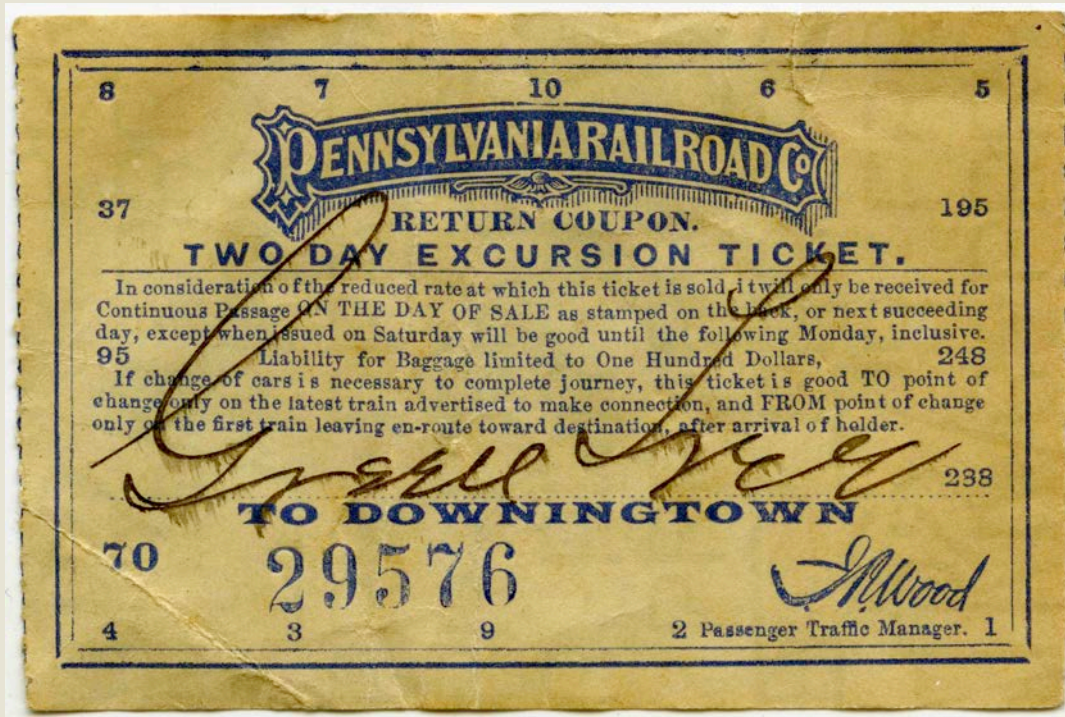
The fireplace was made possible by contributions from the Patriotic Order of the Sons of America for which Swarner had been a member for over 50 years. At 71 years old, Swarner was still very active with the Order, including being the "chief cook and bottle washer" for their annual picnic at Kerr Park. In fact, after the dedication of the fireplace, Swarner used it for the first time and prepared 75 meals for the picnic. He lived in Downingtown most of his life, but moved to Guthriesville, East Brandywine Township after retiring from the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1940. Swarner died in 1955. We are not sure the year when the fireplace was taken down and the date stone left in the ground. Does anyone remember?





# Ashbridge Artifact

We have artifacts large and small at the Ashbridge House. One of the smaller items is a Pennsylvania Railroad ticket that was bought at Downingtown on August 10, 1906 for travel between Downingtown and Green Tree. Haven't heard of Green Tree? Well, it was a station on the Main Line between Paoli and Malvern named after a local tavern. It was originally known as "Duffryn" and after a station building was constructed there in the late 1800s, the station sign continued with that name. However, the PRR's board of directors decided on a new name, so the sign had to be taken down and repainted with "Green Tree".



## Downingtown Group Photo

On the right is a group of women employed as railroad track workers in 1942. As with many industries during World War II, women were hired by the railroad to take jobs traditionally held by men due to the labor shortage.

The photograph was taken in Downingtown a short distance west of the station. The old railroad yard is in the background. The image first appeared in the Philadelphia Record newspaper.

Photo courtesy of the Pennsylvania Historical Society.



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# Advertisements for Non-Profits

## ***Marshallton United Methodist Church Italian Dinner***

The Marshallton United Methodist Church is hosting an Italian Dinner Saturday, March 24th, 2018. The menu includes Chicken parmigiana, pasta, salad, garlic bread, desserts and beverages. Hours for the "Eat-in" or "Take-out" option are from 4:30 to 6:30 pm. Cost is \$13/adult and \$5/child (5 to 12 years of age) if ordered before March 17 and \$15/\$5 at the door. The church is located at 1282 West Strasburg Road, West Chester, PA. Contact the church office at (610) 696-5247 or [office@marshalltonchurch.org](mailto:office@marshalltonchurch.org) with any questions.

***Spring 2018 East Brandywine Historical Commission Speakers Series.*** All programs are held at 3:30 p.m. at the East Brandywine Township Building

***Sunday, March 18*** – “Remember Paoli” – Jim Christ, Vice President of Paoli Battlefield Preservation Fund will give a presentation on the nation’s first battle cry on the night of September 20, 1777. Learn how British General Charles “No Flint” Grey lead around 2,000 men at night into the Great Valley to surprise over 2,000 of General Anthony Wayne’s men and 2100 Maryland Militia in one of bloodiest battles of the Revolutionary War. We’ll explore why this battle is called the ‘Paoli Massacre’ and common myths about the battle.

***Sunday, April 15*** – “Historic Preservation” – Students of Dr. Lisa G. Doan-Harley at Coatesville intermediate High School have been studying historical research and preservation and are eager to share their findings at this presentation. As you’re driving or walking in East Brandywine you can become more mindful of the buildings – what to look for that indicates the age and condition and give you insight into as to why it is important to save these parts of our history as seen through the eyes of these young people.

***Sunday, May 20*** – “How Old is That Picture” – Pamela Powell, Photo Archivist at Chester County Historical Society will present a program that will introduce methodology used to assign a date range to historical photograph. Ever wondered how old is that picture in the attic? What date are those family photos? Photographing process and visual clues along with costume and background details will be explained. Time will be allowed for questions and individuals may bring one image with them to be dated.

## ***Farmers Market***

Downingtown Farmer's Market will be located in Kerr Park every Saturday from 9 AM to 1 PM.

## ***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.

## ***Brochure on DARC Classes & Activities***

You can gain access to the latest Downingtown Area Recreational Consortium brochure, listing all classes and activities, at: [www.darc.info/](http://www.darc.info/). For more info, call 610-269-9260, or stop by the DARC office (8:30 AM-4:30 PM, Monday thru Friday), 114 Bell Tavern Road, Downingtown.

## ***Library Newsletter***

You can sign up to get the Downingtown Library’s newsletter via: <http://downingtowntownlibrary.us12.list-manage.com>

## ***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/downingtowntown/>, 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](mailto:cheryl.spaulding@josephspeople.org).



## Clipping Events

Did you know that as part of our archival collection we have nearly 14,000 cards in our files that contain newspaper clippings? During most months there are two opportunities at the Historical Society to help clip and paste newspaper articles for this collection. The sessions are held at the Ashbridge House, our 309-year-old headquarters, next to the Chick-Fil-A restaurant in the Ashbridge Square Shopping Center on Route 30 in East Caln. The two sessions are usually:

- **The first Sunday of the month, 1:00-4:00 PM**  
**Next one May 1<sup>st</sup> @ 1:00 PM (no clipping on April 1<sup>st</sup> due to Easter)**
- **The first Tuesday of the month, 6:30-8:00 PM (with pizza!)**  
**Next one April 3<sup>rd</sup> @ 6:30 PM**

Please check future issues of History Notes or our Facebook page for exact time and dates.

## Historical Society's Wish List

The Downingtown Area Historical Society is a non-profit organization proudly maintaining the 309-year-old Ashbridge House and a large archives. The society can always use gifts in kind with an immediate need for:

- A wide, multi-drawer flat file to store maps, and over-size photographs and prints.
- General household items and office supplies including:
  - Light bulbs
  - Paper towels
  - Large and small trash bags
  - Glue sticks (used for our newspaper clippings)
- 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

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[www.downingtownareahistoricalsociety.org](http://www.downingtownareahistoricalsociety.org)

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



### DAHS Board of Directors

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