



# Downingtown Area Historical Society *History Notes*

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

March 22, 2018

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## Downingtown's "Suburb"

Probably the single greatest influence of growth along the early Main Line was the building of Philadelphia's Broad Street Station and its elevated access line in 1881. For the first time since trains started running along the Main Line 50 years before, one could take a train from the western suburbs directly into Center City, avoiding a lengthy transfer to streetcars from West Philadelphia. Previously, workers in Center City had been "debarred from the pleasure of suburban homes" (according to one newspaper) because of the lengthy commute time. After Broad Street Station opened, the one-seat-ride now available to workers contributed to the growth in housing demand in places like Overbrook, Merion, Ardmore, Wayne, and Paoli. More hotels along the Main Line also resulted from easier access to Philadelphia.

In 1888, Philadelphia engineer George N. Bell saw this increased demand as a business opportunity and formed a real estate company. The company purchased nearly 400 acres of land east of Downingtown with plans to build a hotel and residential community called Bradford Hills. It was called the "new and charming suburb" of Downingtown and was described as follows:

*"The elevation is high; the air dry; the water is from slate rock springs and of extraordinary purity and abundance and delivered to residences by steam water works; the houses are lighted by electricity; the scenery is grand...with features of hill, ravine, stream and grove in surprising variety; the roads and drives the finest in Chester County; the access to Philadelphia is by the main line of the Pennsylvania R.R., whose station is within walking distance of the whole tract..."*

**OUT-OF-TOWN HOMES.**

**BRADFORD HILLS**

On the Main Line of the Pennsylvania R. R.,  
is the

**MOST BEAUTIFUL SUBURB FOR SUMMER  
RESIDENCE.**

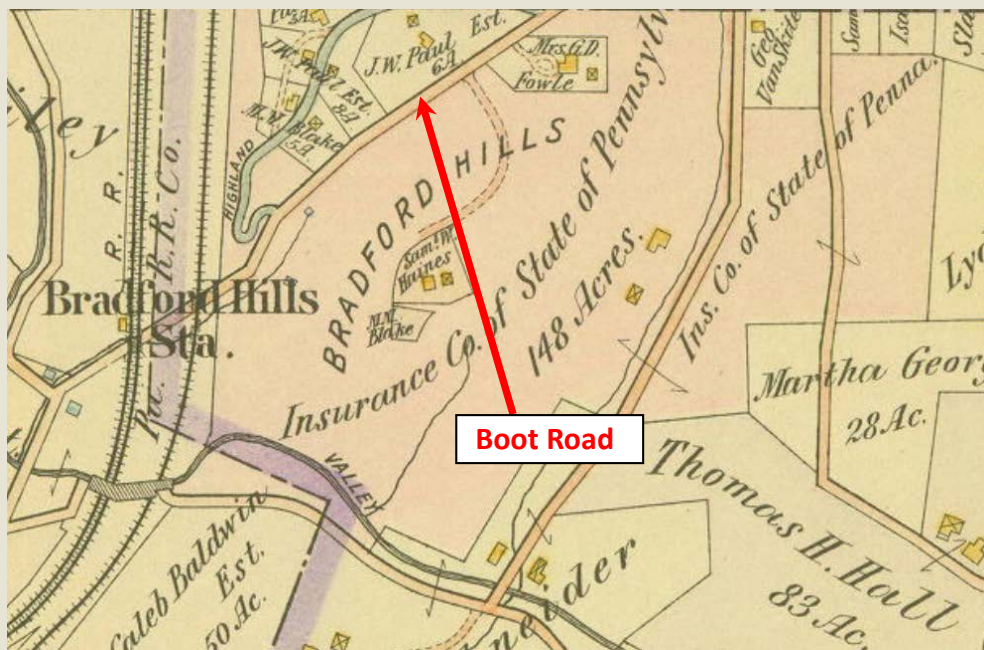
**Elevation 100 Feet Higher than Chestnut Hill. Dry Air, Magnificent Views, Unsurpassed Water Supply, Electric Light, Admirable Express Train Service. Residence Sites 2 to 10 acres for sale.**

For Descriptive Pamphlet and Map apply to  
**BRADFORD HILLS COMPANY.**  
**804 Drexel Building, Phila.**

There was a lot of interest, but lookers didn't turn into buyers. Only eight of the 105 building sites were purchased for homes, and the planned hotel was never built. In 1893 the real estate company put the unsold building sites up for sale (which was the bulk of the original tract). The site would never be developed like Bell had originally envisioned. (continued on next page)

Seen on the right is a 1912 map showing the Bradford Hills area. Boot Road went through the site. The land owner is the Insurance Company of Pennsylvania, but it is unclear how they ended up acquiring the site after the original development company sold it.

Prior to the planned development, the station at this location was named “Valley Creek” but changed to Bradford Hills when the site was planned. It remained in service (though with less daily trains than Downingtown) until about 1960.



It would be interesting to know if any of the original homes built on the Bradford Hills site still stand today. The platforms of the old Bradford Hills train station can still be seen today but only from the train (the access to the old station site off Boot Road is gated with a large “No Trespassing” sign). If anyone has more information on Bradford Hills please let us know.

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

**1869** – According to the Reading Times, “James Christman, of East Brandywine, Chester County, in his 94th year voted at the Guthrieville school house on last election day. Mr. Chrisman has been a voter for 70 years. The first vote was for Thomas Jefferson for President.”

**1885** – And speaking of Guthrieville, a pig in Guthrieville was noted as “being in a partially petrified condition, and yet it moves, eats and appears to be a pretty comfortable being.” The article further states that “it appears as if it were frozen stiff and were it not for its moving around would be regarded as thoroughly petrified, so hard is it in all its parts.”

**1895** – and speaking of Guthrieville and pigs, Robert Montgomery of Guthrieville had two pigs without ears. According to the newspapers, they “never had any, not even had holes in their heads where ears should have been.” Offers were made to buy the pigs from Montgomery but he declined to sell.

**1905** – As the Pennsylvania Railroad’s *Philadelphia Express* passed through Downingtown on March 16th, a pigeon flew into an open window on the train, startling everyone in the train car but especially Miss Fannie Myers of Harrisburg. According to one newspaper “efforts of neighboring passengers failed to quiet her and her nervous system was not soothed until she was taken to the University hospital” in Philadelphia.

**1924** – And continuing with the subject of train windows, convict Robert Henry, age 21, was being transferred by train from the reformatory near Huntingdon to the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia on August 19 when he asked to use the washroom as the train left Downingtown. Still handcuffed, Henry kicked out the washroom window and leaped from the train as it was moving at 50 miles per hour. Footprints along the tracks near Whiteland (Exton) indicated Henry landed on his feet uninjured. There is no indication on whether he was recaptured.



## 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

**Tom Lee** is truly a perceptive scholar because he was the first person to identify the location of the photograph on the left which is the Pennypacker Country Club in Uwchlan Township. It was taken from Pennypacker Road but we are not sure of the date, though we think it is the late 1960s.



## Downingtown Vintage Ad

There were several coal yards in Downingtown that sold coal to local homes and businesses. These were located near the railroad tracks for easy off-loading from the coal cars. John McGraw owned a coal business on the west end of town where the old rail yard was located.

We're not sure what this advertisement from 1897 is supposed to convey but both husband and wife appear very happy that he's bringing home a bag of coal!



**Buying Coal**

in small quantities, in the expectation of a drop in price, is penny wise and pound foolish.

"July prices" have proven a myth in other years and this year will be no exception. Coal will not be cheaper than it is to-day. A few months from now you will appreciate the force of our saying that this is the time to lay in your supply.

Estimates given for any quantity.

**John McGraw & Sons**  
**DOWNINGTOWN, PA.**

COPYRIGHT - 1897.

## Downingtown Date Stone

This date of 1934 is obscured by trees most of the year but is located on the eastern abutment of the stone railroad viaduct over the Brandywine River. The viaduct was built in 1892, so this date is probably from additional work done on the structure that year. The Pennsylvania Railroad was pretty good at dating most of their stone and concrete structures.

Below the date stone is the milepost marker for the bridge (32.10 miles from Suburban Station in Philadelphia).





## Ashbridge Artifact



On the left is an original poster in the Historical Society's archives from the 1958 film "The Blob" which was shot in both Downingtown and Phoenixville. The old Downingtown Diner that was shown in the film is seen below a few years later during a July 4<sup>th</sup> parade.



## Downingtown Group Photo

On the right is the ribbon cutting for the opening of a section of Mary Street during the 1960s. The photograph was taken at the intersection of Mary Street and Hunt Avenue. Do you recognize anyone?



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# Advertisements for Non-Profits

## ***Uwchlan Township Historical Commission***

The Uwchlan Township Historical Commission will re-open the Edith P. Moore schoolhouse on Sunday, April 8<sup>th</sup> (not April 2<sup>nd</sup> due to Easter), and will be open the first Sunday of the month from May to November. The hours are 2pm-4pm. The schoolhouse is located on North Village Avenue in Lionville.

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

The Marshallton United Methodist Church is hosting an Italian Dinner Saturday, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 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, 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://downingtownlibrary.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/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](mailto:cheryl.spaulding@josephspeople.org).

## Clipping Events

Did you know that as part of our archival collection we have about 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.downingtownareahistoricalociety.org](http://www.downingtownareahistoricalociety.org)

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