

Downingtown Area Historical Society History Notes

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

August 22, 2019

Volume 2, Issue 16

Ten Facts About Johnsontown

The Johnsontown neighborhood in Downingtown is in the southwest section of the Borough and for many years was a "town within a town." Except for going to school and a trip to the doctor, residents had much of what they needed right here. It was geographically isolated from the rest of Downingtown, being hemmed in by hills to the south and west, the Brandywine River to the east, and the railroad tracks to the north. Following are ten facts about the neighborhood.

- 1. **It was named after John Johnson**, an entrepreneur and real estate developer. Taking advantage of the strong national economy in the years following the Civil War, coupled with burgeoning growth along the Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line, Johnson bought an 18-acre tract in southwest Downingtown in 1871 and subdivided the land into 102 building lots. He built his own grand home at 249 Church Street in the center of the development, where the parking lot in front of St. Anthony's Pool is now.
- 2. Johnson's development was an initial failure. Though Johnson sold some lots quickly, most did not sell due in part to a major recession in the early 1870s, and for the fact that there simply wasn't a market for middle class homes like the ones Johnson wanted built in his community. Johnson eventually sold the remaining parcels in bulk and moved to Philadelphia. However, by that time his development and the rest of southwest Downingtown took on the informal name Johnsontown. Over the next half century, the remaining lots began to be built on.
- 3. It was home to one of the first color photo companies in the United States. The Solgram Color Photo Company on St. Joseph Lane was begun by William South in the early 1900s. South was a pioneer in the color photograph process, but the company didn't last long due in part to competition from another color photo company called Eastman Kodak. South also operated the Keystone School of Photography out of the building.



John Johnson built his own home at 249 Church Street to be the centerpiece his development. It is seen here sometime in the 1950s or early 1960s.

(continued on next page)

4. One of the shortest streets in Downingtown is
East Church Street which is off St. Joseph Lane
behind the old St. Joseph Church. The 20 homes on
East Church Street were built by local contractor G.T.
Guthrie, who was also the builder of the Malvern
Train Station. Guthrie built the homes in 1904 to
meet the demand for smaller homes in
Downingtown which were more affordable to
purchase and rent by those working in the Borough's
mills and factories.

Right, the Malone children are seen by the stoop of their home at 164 East Church Street, circa 1940 (courtesy of Karen Anderson).

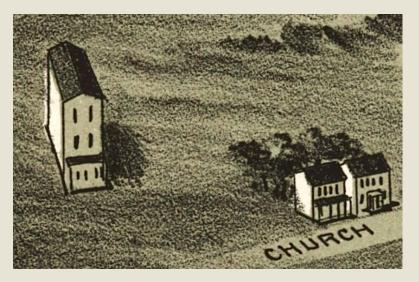


5. There was a cemetery on Bradford Avenue on the north side of the St. Joseph Church. However, when Downingtown passed an ordinance in the late 1800s that forbade any new burials inside the Borough limits, the church purchased a tract of land as a cemetery at the top of Glenside Avenue in West Bradford Township. Eventually all the graves in Johnsontown were moved to the new cemetery.



Above is a map of Johnsontown from 1883 more than ten years after construction began. Only about twenty-five homes were built by this time, and the tract would remain mostly undeveloped well into the twentieth century.

- 6. There was a miniature golf course at 237 Church Street. The nationwide miniature golf craze came to Downingtown in the late 1920s and early 1930s. During that time at least four courses were built in the Downingtown area including the one in Johnsontown. You can read about it in an issue of History Notes from last year: Volume 1, Issue 5.
- 7. There was a shoe factory at the top of Church Street owned by Dr. John P. Edge. Unfortunately, we do not know when the factory was torn down, which sat at the top of the hill in Johnsontown approximately where St. Anthony's Lane is now located.



A three-story shoe factory, which preceded the development of Johnstown was at the top of Church Street.

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

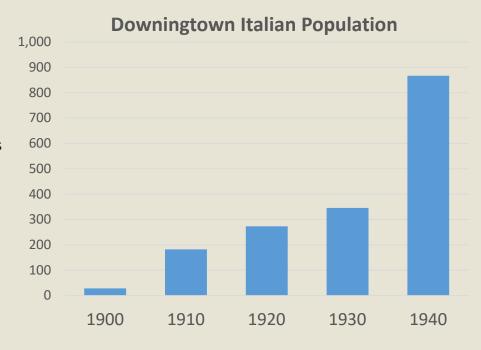
MEN'S AND LADIES' DIVISIONS

BEAUTIFUL PRIZES FOR WINNERS

The 'Little Bill' miniature golf course was located at 237 Church Street.

- 8. "Stepping stones" were put in the Brandywine Creek by Johnsontown workers to give them a shorter walk to their jobs at two of Downingtown's paper companies. The stepping stones were actually 55-gallon drums filled with rubble and concrete and placed standing up in the creek. The top of the drums were connected to each with wooden planks which formed a makeshift bridge. Workers would walk to the base of East Church Street, follow a path to the Creek, and cross the "stepping stones" to the other side where the path diverged. One path turned north to Downingtown Paper Company. The other path turned south to the Davey Paper Company. Remnants of one of the "stones" is still in the Brandywine. Our first issue of History Notes covered this topic: Volume 1, Issue 1.
- 9. A Johnsontowner didn't need to leave the neighborhood to shop because of all the stores in the neighborhood. As early as the 1880s there was a grocery store on the corner of Bradford and Viaduct, and another at Bradford and Church. Other businesses including butchers and bakers later operated in Johnsontown. Johnsontown store names from the past include Herbies, Petrellas, Sbei's, The Food Center, Ciarlone's, Canestra's, Cozzone's, Madrigale's, Filoromo's, and Capriotti's. Lou Beverage also got its start in Johnsontown. There was also a pool hall, cigar store, shoe repair business, icehouse, beauty shop, Little Midge's Place, the Bradford Grill, and of course St. Anthony's Lodge.

10. Johnsontown was a culturally and demographically diverse neighborhood throughout its existence. From the 1870s through the turn of the twentieth century, the residents were mostly of Irish descent. Starting in the early 1900s Italians began to move in. In 1900 there were just 28 Italians living in Downingtown, or just .01% of Downingtown's population. By 1940, there were nearly 900 Downingtown residents who were of Italian descent, or about onefifth of the Borough's population. Most of them lived in Johnsontown. Most of Downingtown's African American residents going back to the nineteenth century also called Johnsontown home.



Thrown Off A Circus Train

Our last issue of History Notes featured a prisoner who jumped off a train in Downingtown in 1883 as he was being taken to the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia after being convicted of a robbery in Snyder County. On April 28, 1900, Isaac King, age 49, of West Chester didn't jump, but was literally thrown off a train as it passed by the Gallagherville Station in Caln Township, about a mile west of Downingtown.

King, who was described, as "leading the existence of a nomad," was in central Pennsylvania when he hopped aboard a train of the Forepaugh Circus. The circus was heading east to its next scheduled performance, and King thought this would be a good opportunity to steal a ride to the West Chester area. King hid himself among the circus equipment for most of the trip but was discovered by a circus employee as the train rolled through Chester County. No pleading on King's behalf could assuage the angry man, and "after a lively struggle," King was thrown off the train as it passed by Gallagherville.

King happened to land on the station's platform which resulted in a "mass of bruises" and his legs "full splinters from the planking." He also suffered internal injuries and was taken to Chester County Hospital in serious condition. King survived his injuries and lived in the West Chester area for the remainder of his life. He died in 1929.

Adam Forepaugh owned and operated one of the largest circus' in the nation in the late 1800s. Like other large circus', Forepaugh's had its own train to travel between cities where they were performing.



Downingtown Area From Above

This photograph was taken facing south and shows the quarry in East Caln Township in 1968.



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

1899 - During a February 27 blizzard, a Pennsylvania Railroad train ended up getting stuck in huge snow drifts near Thorndale. Railroad officials telegraphed Downingtown requesting volunteers to bring provisions to the stranded passengers and crew. Seven railroad employees responded and started off toward Thorndale with a horse and sleigh carrying "twenty quart cans of coffee and a barrel of sandwiches." When they reached an open bridge the horse had to be unhitched and as a result the seven men pushed and pulled the sleigh with the relief supplies the rest of the way. Thomas Glucker, Division Superintendent of the Railroad, sent each man a check for \$25 along with a letter of appreciation from the officers of the company.

1914 – William Irwin of Highland Avenue discovered two burglars in his home early in the morning on a June day. Irwin in his bare feet gave chase to the burglars after they jumped through an open window but proceeded no further after two shots were fired at him.

1936 – In June, the Chester County Rod and Gun Club in Thorndale had to postpone a banquet where the main course was crow. The postponement was due to recent warm weather which had caused the crows to become thin, tough, and tasteless. The banquet was re-scheduled for the fall when the birds were expected to be "fat and sassy."

1939 – Railroad detective and Downingtown resident Palmer Raysor received a request from a shoe company in August to investigate a shipment of shoes that went missing from a boxcar. With apologies, the company said the shoes were stolen a year earlier, so Raysor was following quite a cold trail.

Downingtown Vintage Ad

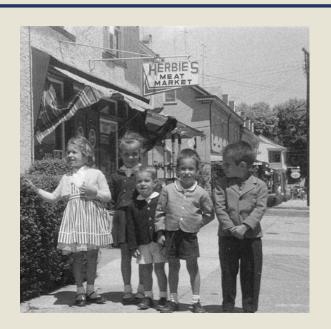
At the rate of inflation, a \$200 TV in 1954 would cost about \$1,900 today! But a TV of similar size can now be bought for less than \$100. When this ad was featured in the Downingtown Archive in November 1954, a TV in the home was still a luxury item, and perhaps (if Downingtown followed national averages) only half of the area's homes had one.

Theodore M. Griffith and Sons at 123-125 East Lancaster Avenue in Downingtown sold hardware, appliances, and other household items. Devitt's Hardware later occupied the buildings.



Chester County's *Town Tours & Village Walks* Coming to Downingtown!

Every summer Chester County sponsors a *Town Tours & Village Walks* program which is a series free tours through old neighborhoods, villages, and other historic sites in the County. One of the tours this summer will be through the Johnsontown neighborhood of Downingtown on August 22 starting at 5 PM. This tour of a 'town within a town' is sponsored by the Downingtown Area Historical Society, Downingtown Historic Commission, and St. Anthony's Lodge. The 11 stops on this tour will include old stores, churches, and homes in Johnsontown, with five-minute presentations given at each one, some by individuals who grew up in the neighborhood. For more information on this tour click on the following link and scroll down a bit: Town Tours



Downingtown Area Group Photo

Downingtown High School teacher Harold Klinger is seen here teaching an agriculture course in 1949.



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.



No one was able to identify Pennsylvania Hall on the campus of the Downingtown Industrial and Agricultural School in East Brandywine Township which was the subject of last issue's Mystery Pic. But after doing some more research we realized there may have been two buildings by this name at the school. The first Pennsylvania Hall was built in 1908 and burned down in 1916. Newspaper articles from the time indicate the building was going to be re-built, but we aren't sure. The school was started in 1905 and was geared toward African-American youth, with the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama serving as a model. It closed in 1993. Delaware County Community College's Downingtown Campus is now located on the site.

Last Issue's Mystery Pic



Advertisements for Non-Profits

West Caln Historical Society

The West Caln Historical Society will hold a meeting on Tuesday, September 17, 2019 at 7 P.M. in the West Caln Municipal Building, 721 West Kings Highway, Wagontown, PA on the subject of: **History of September Farm (A Cheesy Success Story).** The speaker will be David Rotelle, co-founder of September Farm. David was honored by Chester County Commissioners as the Chester County Farmer of the Year in 2013. David and Roberta Rotelle say the business began in their Kitchen, and now they produce many cheeses and yogurt, which are the cornerstones of their business.

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

Sunday, September 15th - "Property Research in East Brandywine Township." The speaker is John E. Smith III, Assistant Archivist for Chester County Archives. Chester County Archives.

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

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. Sickle 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!



P.O. Box 9, Downingtown, PA 19335 610-269-1709

dths1709@gmail.com

https://www.downingtownhistory.org

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