



Downingtown Area Historical Society *History Notes*

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

January 23, 2020

Volume 3, Issue 2

West Ward School

We posted the image below on our Facebook page recently and it drew quite a bit of attention. The 1954 photograph was taken from Pennsylvania Avenue facing south and shows St. Joseph School under construction in the foreground (the former St. Joseph School building is now Brandywine Grace Church). In the background on the south side of Lancaster Avenue is (L to R) Romig Electronic Service Co., Messiah Lutheran Church, and West Ward School. The white building on the north side of West Lancaster Avenue in the center of the photograph is Lambert's Mobil Service. It sat where the now-closed Coppertown Coffee is located. These four buildings are long gone. We received some questions about the old West Ward School, so we decided to provide a brief history of the building as well as some additional images from our archives.



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West Ward School was built in 1909 on the site of the old Central School. The Central School building (formerly known as the Institute Building) was purchased by Downingtown in 1872. The purchase price of the Institute Building was \$7,000 and “was considered to be one of the most substantial buildings in the town, and at the price paid was acknowledged on all sides to have been a great bargain.”

The Central School served the needs of Downingtown for many years, but with growing enrollment, a new school was needed. The Central School was torn down and a substantially larger West Ward School was built in its place. West Ward was used as the high school until 1932 when a new high school (the current STEM Academy building) was constructed. After this, elementary grades were taught at West Ward. Two elementary schools now served Downingtown (East Ward School was built in 1922).



The above image, which was taken about 1905, shows Downingtown's Central School on West Lancaster Avenue. It was torn down in 1909 and replaced by West Ward School (below right).

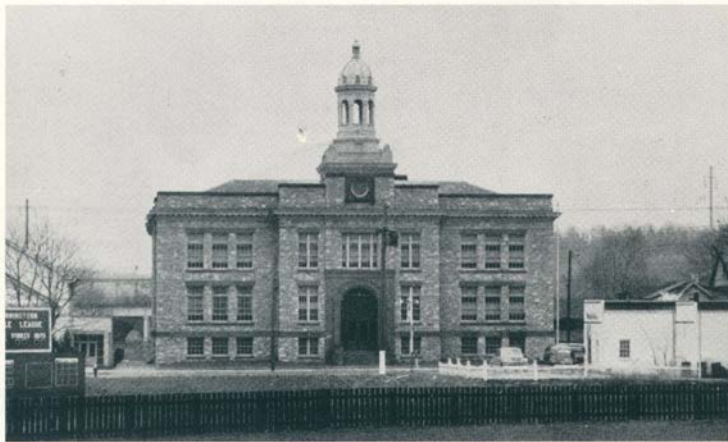
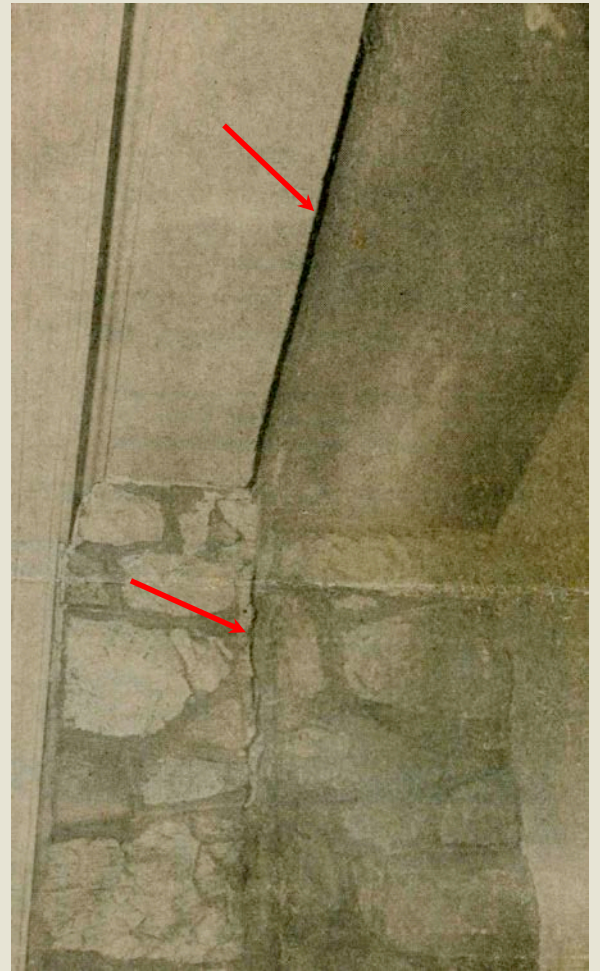
In 1952 problems with West Ward began to be noticed. In particular, the east wall of the school building started to bulge. Over the next six years, cracks developed in the walls, and the problem became so serious that in May 1957 the School Board decided to close West Ward as a safety precaution. West Ward students in grades 1-6 were sent to East Ward School for the remainder of the school year where they would attend classes in the afternoon. East Ward students' schedules were adjusted so they would attend classes in the mornings.



In late 1957, the School Board made the decision to tear down West Ward School. The decision was very controversial at the time. Some believed the building could be repaired, but the Board felt demolition was the best option due to the cost of the repairs and for the fact that any repairs that would be made were not guaranteed.

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The image at the right was printed in the Downingtown Archive in May 1957 and shows a crack above one of the doors on the east side of the building. The crack extends down the wall. Below is another image of West Ward School which was mislabeled as the Borough Hall. The image at the bottom was taken in the spring of 1958 and shows the demolition of the school nearing completion. Sadly, it stood at the location for less than 50 years.



Borough Hall, Downingtown, Pa.



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

1885 – On April 28, during a storm with heavy winds, the roof of a car on a westbound freight train east of Downingtown was ripped off by the gusts and landed on the adjacent tracks. The timing was fortunate as a westbound passenger train had just passed the freight moments before.

1904 – On April 20, a westbound Pennsylvania Railroad train came to a stop on the stone arch bridge over the Brandywine River in Downingtown. Brakeman Daniel Bentzel stepped off the train, slipped, and fell 40 feet. Fortunately Bentzel was “not much injured” as he escaped with a cut on his head and a sprained ankle. He got back on the train and went to his home in Harrisburg to mend.

1915 – In August, James Walker of Downingtown got a room at the Franklin House, a hotel in Lancaster. He fell asleep in bed with a cigarette in his mouth and woke soon after when the mattress caught on fire. He jumped from the bed, ran out of his room, through the lobby, and out the back door of the hotel. The fire was discovered by another hotel patron and quickly extinguished with buckets of water. Walker was soon caught and taken to jail to await a hearing before a Lancaster alderman. A. E. Rothermel, the proprietor of the hotel, claimed Walker was drunk at the time he fell asleep. Fortunately only the mattress and some sheets and blankets were destroyed in the fire.

Downingtown Area Group Photo

The photograph below was taken in August 1958 during a wiffle ball game behind the old East Ward School as part of Downingtown’s summer recreation program. The batter is Michael Myers. Catching is Stephen Meacham. Standing awaiting their turn at bat are (L to R): Billy Kline, Joe Travaglini, and Jimmy Klunk.



Downingtown Vintage Ad

This advertisement for local appliance dealer AVCO Inc., appeared in the March 19, 1959 issue of the Downingtown Archive. The company was run by John "Topy" Mascherino, Anthony "Keene" Viscichini, and Victor "Popeye" Taraschi.

Announcing !! Our New Downingtown Location



FREE GIFTS

AVCO INC.

FREE GIFTS

—Formerly AVONDALE APPLIANCE—

136 W. Lancaster Ave. ----- An 9 - 1672

Your Local Westinghouse Dealer

OPEN

Mon. Thru Thurs. 9 to 5
Fri. & Sat. 9 to 9

“ We Service What We Sell ”

**OFFERING EVERY ELECTRICAL
PLUMBING & HEATING SERVICE**



**Plumbing
&
Heating**

John (Topy) Mascherino



**Electrical
&
Management**

Anthony (Keene) Viscichini



**Sales
&
Service**

A. Victor (Popeye) Taraschi



**New Westinghouse
8 Program Laundromat
and Matching Dryer**

All you do is set 1 dial—that's all. Computer thinks out and carries out exactly the right program for the fabric you want to wash.



**Never Again A
Ruined Roast**

New cooking miracle from Westinghouse keeps meat hot, juicy, exactly to taste.



**See The New 1959
WESTINGHOUSE
REFRIGERATOR**

Keeps Meat Fresh 7 Days

You Can be Sure --- If It's Westinghouse

The Wonders of New Technology!

The following short article appeared in the March 4, 1894 issue of the *Downingtown Archive*. It seems strange to us today, but what technology do we get excited about today, that those years from now will shake their head's at?

Although the weather last Monday evening was anything but propitious there was a large assembly at the [Downingtown] Methodist Church to see and hear the phonograph. A number had expressed themselves as doubtful of the ability of the 'machine' to do all that all had been claimed for it, but long before the evening was spent, the doubts all but vanished. Everybody was more than pleased with the hour spent with the Phone. The exhibition of the little instrument's ability to record and repeat the human voice as well as other sounds was at once amusing, interesting and introspective. The repeating of songs by the church choir gave much amusement and real pleasure to all, particularly to the members of the choir.



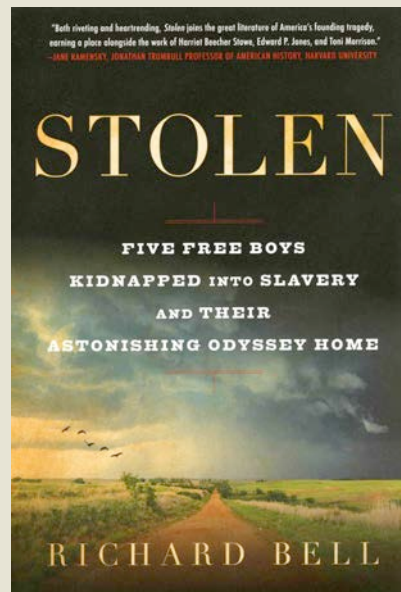
Last Issue's Mystery Pic

Last week's Mystery Pic (below) is 336 East Lancaster Avenue in Downingtown. It was originally the home of Albert H. Standley who was Vice President of the Downingtown Manufacturing Company and later became the home of American Legion Post No. 475. The bottom image shows what the location looks like now – the Milltown Apartments.



Stolen

If you are looking for a good book to read, we would recommend the recently published *Stolen* (right). It describes the 1825 kidnappings of five young, free African-American boys in Philadelphia and the harrowing journey they took to the deep South as their captors attempted to sell them into slavery. As the book cover says, their return home was an astonishing odyssey.



These kidnappings were examples of what has been called the Reverse Underground Railroad (which the book describes in detail), which was the pre-Civil War practice of kidnapping not only fugitive slaves who escaped from the south, but also free blacks living in northern states.

Being on the Mason Dixon Line, Chester County was a hotbed of Underground Railroad activity, including its reverse practice. On this page are two kidnapping articles (re-printed as they appeared) that occurred near Downingtown in 1849 (below) and 1855 (right).

A Kidnapping Case—The Offenders Convicted.—The Westchester Village Record publishes a sketch of the trial and conviction of Amos McFarlan and Solomon Staites, on the charge of kidnapping a colored boy. The outrage was committed in the vicinity of Downingtown. The principal witness in the case was the boy who was kidnapped—a stout, hearty looking fellow, apparently about fifteen years old. The boy was an apprentice of Wm. Evans, of that village, and had been coaxed off by the defendants, on pretence of getting him a better place in Philadelphia or Baltimore. He was taken to the former city in the cars; kept there several days, and from thence he was sent, as he supposed, to Wilmington; but on his arrival he was taken to a gloomy building, and fastened up; this building proved to be a slave establishment in Baltimore. The story of the boy led to the restoration of his liberty, and to the punishment of the parties implicated in the abstraction. McFarlan, one of the parties convicted, is a young man, who had had some advantages; he has only been a few years married, and within a year or two kept one of the principal hotels at Downingtown. His coadjutor was a colored man of 25 or 30 years of age. Both were convicted, and the former was sentenced to six years, and the latter to five years in the penitentiary, and \$500 fine.

Kidnapping a White Girl.

On Friday last, at an early hour in the morning, a white girl, 14 years of age, the daughter of Mr. Samuel Goodshall, residing within three miles of Downingtown, Chester County, was carried away by two men in a close carriage, a distance of twelve miles from her home, toward the Maryland line. The girl had been with a neighbor for the past two or three weeks, taking care of a sick child, and on the morning of Friday, while going along the road to drive a cow from the pasture-field, she was accosted by two strange men, very genteelly dressed, who were standing near a carriage, attached to which were two horses.

They asked her name, and where she lived, to which inquiries she gave answers without hesitation, supposing that they were friends or acquaintances of a gentleman residing in the neighborhood. Without any further conversation one of them opened a tin box, and took therefrom what appeared to be a pitch plaster, which he instantly clapped over her mouth, when both of them dragged her into the carriage and drove off.

They passed, by an indirect route from the place, through Coatesville, some three miles beyond the latter place, and about twelve miles from her home. Here they let her out upon the road, in a secluded and wooded portion of the country, threatening to kill her if she made any alarm, when they drove away as fast as they could.

The poor girl, faint and sick from mental excitement and terror, scarcely knew where she was or what to do, when she was met by two colored persons, who assisted her in taking the plaster from her mouth, and advised her as to her course homeward.—The girl succeeded in getting to her home a little before sunset, having been all day absent. She states the fellows offered her no insult or personal violence, except that occasionally when her sobs and efforts to cry prevailed, they threatened to knock her brains out with the whip.

The solution to this outrage is that the men mistook her for a mulatto, and designed taking her into the State of Maryland. Ascertaining, however, while on the route, that they had made prisoner of a sun-burnt white girl, they concluded to make the best of an error by giving her leave to find her way home, and they to get out of Chester County as quickly as possible.—*Philadelphia Ledger, July 9.*

Downingtown Then & Now

A recent Downingtown Then & Now, which we posted on Facebook and YouTube, compares an image taken on West Lancaster Avenue around 1915 with one taken recently from the same location. We are not exactly sure what the event is in the top image with the children's parade, but it shows the old West Ward School and Messiah Lutheran Church next to it. Our "Then & Now" videos can be seen on [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#).



Downingtown Area Mystery Pic

Can you identify the location in this photograph? 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

Wallace Township Historical Commission Seminar

The Wallace Township Historical Commission will have a free seminar called "Why Call it Indiantown." It will be held on February 1, 2020 at 2:00 p.m. at the Wallace Township Building on Creek Road. Please call the township at 610-942-2880 if you plan to attend with your name and phone number.

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 on the following dates in 2020: January 15, April 15, June 17, and October 21. Meetings are at the Kennett Friends Meeting House on PA Rt 82 (125 W. Sickel St., Kennett Square, PA 19348). 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:
 - 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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dths1709@gmail.com

<https://www.downingtownhistory.org>

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



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