



Downingtown Area Historical Society *History Notes*

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

November 22, 2018

Volume 1, Issue 22

The Battle for the Tunnel

On the morning of May 14, 1888, residents in Downingtown's west ward awoke to noise and commotion by the train station on Lancaster Avenue. Workers for the Pennsylvania Railroad got an early start that Monday digging, sawing, and hammering as they went about erecting a fence to block pedestrians from crossing the tracks at what was once the Bradford Avenue grade crossing.

When trains first began to run through Downingtown in 1834 there was little concern for safety at the grade crossing where (what was later named) Bradford Avenue intersected with the Lancaster Turnpike. Wagon and carriage traffic to and from points south of the village was generally light and, at the time, most trains stopped in Downingtown, so that when they had reached this location, they were either stopped or had slowed considerably.



Bradford Avenue once extended over the railroad tracks where it intersected Lancaster Avenue. The crossing was closed in 1873 when Viaduct Avenue was extended and a new stone arch tunnel was built several hundred yards west. However, the crossing was still used extensively by pedestrians.

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But over the next few decades train traffic not only increased considerably through Downingtown but the trains themselves became heavier, faster, and more powerful. Many of the trains, especially fast freight trains, expressed right through the Borough. At the same time, the southwest section of Downingtown was growing, and the only way these residents could get into the main part of town to work, shop, go to school or church, or visit friends was to cross the busy railroad tracks.



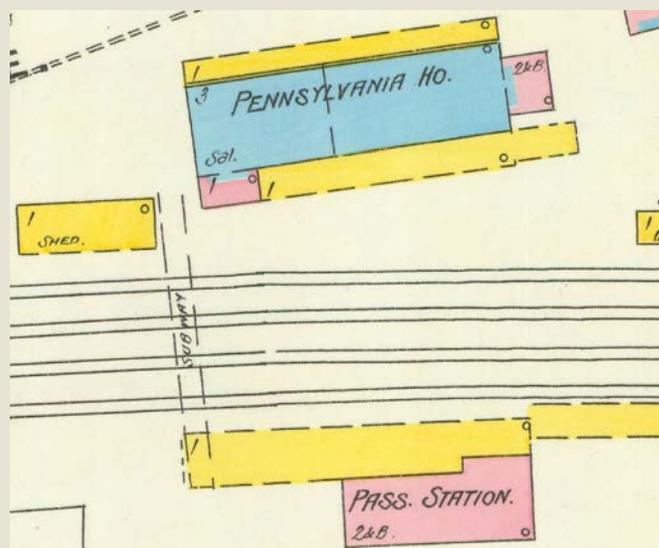
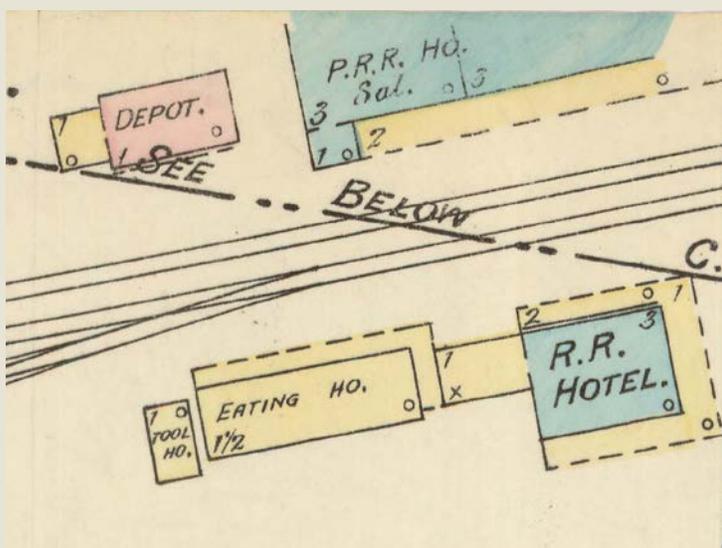
The Viaduct Avenue tunnel, seen here in ca. 1910, was built in 1873 to eliminate the dangerous Bradford Avenue crossing by the train station.

This was a cause of much concern for both the Pennsylvania Railroad and Borough officials. The problem was resolved (at least for vehicles) in 1873 when Viaduct Avenue was extended east to a point where a new stone arch tunnel was built under the tracks. This solution allowed the safe back and forth of traffic between the Johnsontown section of Downingtown with the rest of the Borough.

However, even though this section of Bradford Avenue was abandoned by the Borough, crossing the tracks at this location was still popular with pedestrians. Borough and Railroad officials both recognized that the situation was still very unsafe and that a new tunnel, just for pedestrians, needed to be built here. The Borough wanted it done sooner rather than later, but the Pennsylvania Railroad delayed any action because they wanted to incorporate a pedestrian tunnel into their long-term plans for Downingtown – plans that included the addition of two tracks and building a new passenger station on the south side of the tracks.

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Borough officials were anxious for the tunnel, but they needed to tread lightly with the mighty Pennsylvania Railroad. They wanted more train service to Downingtown and they desperately wanted a new station as well. The current station on the north side of the tracks was in a “tumbledown condition” and was called a “disgrace to the town.” Demanding the tunnel from the railroad, they felt, could jeopardize additional train service and the construction of a new station. But by 1888 local officials had enough and tried to force the hand of the Railroad. In a very raucous town meeting on January 14, councilmen voted to re-ordain the section of Bradford Avenue over the railroad tracks which was abandoned 15 years earlier. Doing so would force the railroad to provide protection for pedestrians crossing the tracks. But as one newspaper declared, the only reason this was done was to “cause the company to construct an underground passage and thus save the lives of people now daily endangered.”



These two maps show the Downingtown station area before and after the pedestrian tunnel was built in 1889. The map on the left is from 1886 and shows the McFadden Hotel (R.R. Hotel) on the south side of two tracks. The train station was on the north side of the tracks next to the Pennsylvania House Hotel. The map on the right is from 1898 and shows the substantial changes made in the station area since the 1886 map was drawn. The Pennsylvania Railroad purchased the land where the McFadden Hotel was located, added two more tracks, and built a new passenger station on the south side of the tracks. The purchase of the land also allowed the Railroad to build a pedestrian tunnel (labeled “subway” on the 1898 map).

In April of that year Councilman Alexander Tutton, at the request of the Pennsylvania Railroad’s general manager, introduced an ordinance that would have repealed the one passed in January which re-ordained Bradford Avenue. It was easily defeated. So as a result, a month later on the morning of May 14, 1888, the Railroad responded to the Borough’s actions by building a fence across the tracks, thereby forcing pedestrians (or at least they thought) to walk through the Viaduct Avenue tunnel. However, despite the fence, residents of the southwest section of the Borough still found ways to cross the tracks and so the problem continued.

But when tensions seemed to have reached a peak, the railroad announced plans to build the much-needed pedestrian tunnel. The Pennsylvania Railroad had finally completed the purchase of land on the south side of the tracks which included the McFadden Hotel. This land which was crucial for a new station and a four-track main line. Work on the tunnel began early the following year (1889) much to the delight of the residents of the southwest section of Downingtown who, according to one newspaper, “have been so many years pent up without other egress and who have been obliged to send their children daily across the tracks to the peril of life and limb.”

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On April 7, 1889 Pennsylvania Railroad president George Brooke Roberts made a special stop in Downingtown, and standing by the almost-completed tunnel, announced that a new station would be built at the location. Workers completed the tunnel's final touches over the next week, and it officially opened the following Sunday, April 14th. The dangerous crossing was now "a thing of the past."

The original tunnel was about 65 feet long. In 1905, 17 feet were added on its south end when the station was moved away from the tracks to make room for an approach track to the railroad yard to the west. It most likely had a brick floor (now concrete) and its brick walls have been re-painted perhaps dozens of times. The tunnel has no official name, but over the years has acquired some descriptive monikers. Hundreds of local residents and train commuters still use the tunnel each day.



The north and south entrances to the pedestrian tunnel are shown above. The tunnel was built in 1889 and expanded 17 feet to the south in 1905 when the station building was moved 17 feet to the south to make room for a track to access the rail yard to the west.

Luminaria Supplies

The holidays are fast approaching, and the Historical Society will again make it possible for people to be part of this Downingtown tradition by selling luminaria candles and bases. Orders can be made individually to the coordinator, Carol Grigson, at 610-269-5413 or via email at dths1709@gmail.com. Prices remain the same: 75 cents for each candle and bag, and 75 cents for each plastic base.

Pickup of orders will be available at the Ashbridge House, our headquarters next to the Chick-Fil-A Restaurant on Route 30 in East Caln, on Sunday, December 9, 1-3 pm or Sunday, December 16, 1-3 pm. Call 610-269-5413 if you have any questions or need different pickup times. It would be helpful to have orders by December 1, but we will try to accommodate later orders.



Oh Well...

Last issue's article on William Baum, who tried to retrieve an ax that fell in a well and ended up getting stuck deep down after the well's walls collapsed, drew quite a bit of interest. First of all, we don't know if he was able to retrieve the ax. It's probably still down there!

Also, **John Miller** who is the Wallace Township Archivist, emailed us and said that Baum was his great grandfather and that his full name is actually David Wilmer Baum. The newspaper article wrongly had his name as William Baum.

Carol Sinex Schmidt contacted us and said the story of the well reminded her of an account of her father. Carol wrote: "Just wanted to pass along a story that the Baum story reminded me of. During the time Marsh Creek Lake was being completed they decided to pave over the pump island in front of the Lyndell Store. At the Y from Creek Road to Lyndell/Eagle Road there was an island that had a hand pump. One Sunday when my mother and I were out my dad (Frank Sinex owner of Lyndell Store) decided that the pump should be rescued before the paving and climbed down into the well to take out the mechanical workings. In the process he dropped a tool he had borrowed from Karl Bauss that owned the greenhouses in Lyndell and went down further to get the tool. He bumped his head with a nasty gash but fortunately didn't pass out and managed to get back out of the well. We didn't know he went down there and wondered what if he had passed out - the area would have been paved over and people would be wondering whatever happened to Frank Sinex!"



The image above (courtesy of the Chester County Historical Society) shows the Lyndell Store before it was purchased by Frank Sinex in 1949. The well in the picture, however, is the one where Frank Sinex went to retrieve the tool he dropped.

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.



Downingtown Vintage Ad

This ad from 1947 shows the Greyhound bus fares between Downingtown and other points in western Pennsylvania. The bus station was located at 66 West Lancaster Avenue, which would be right across the street from where Coppertown Coffee is now located.

For more **CONVENIENCE**

Frequent departures, well-timed connections, downtown terminals.

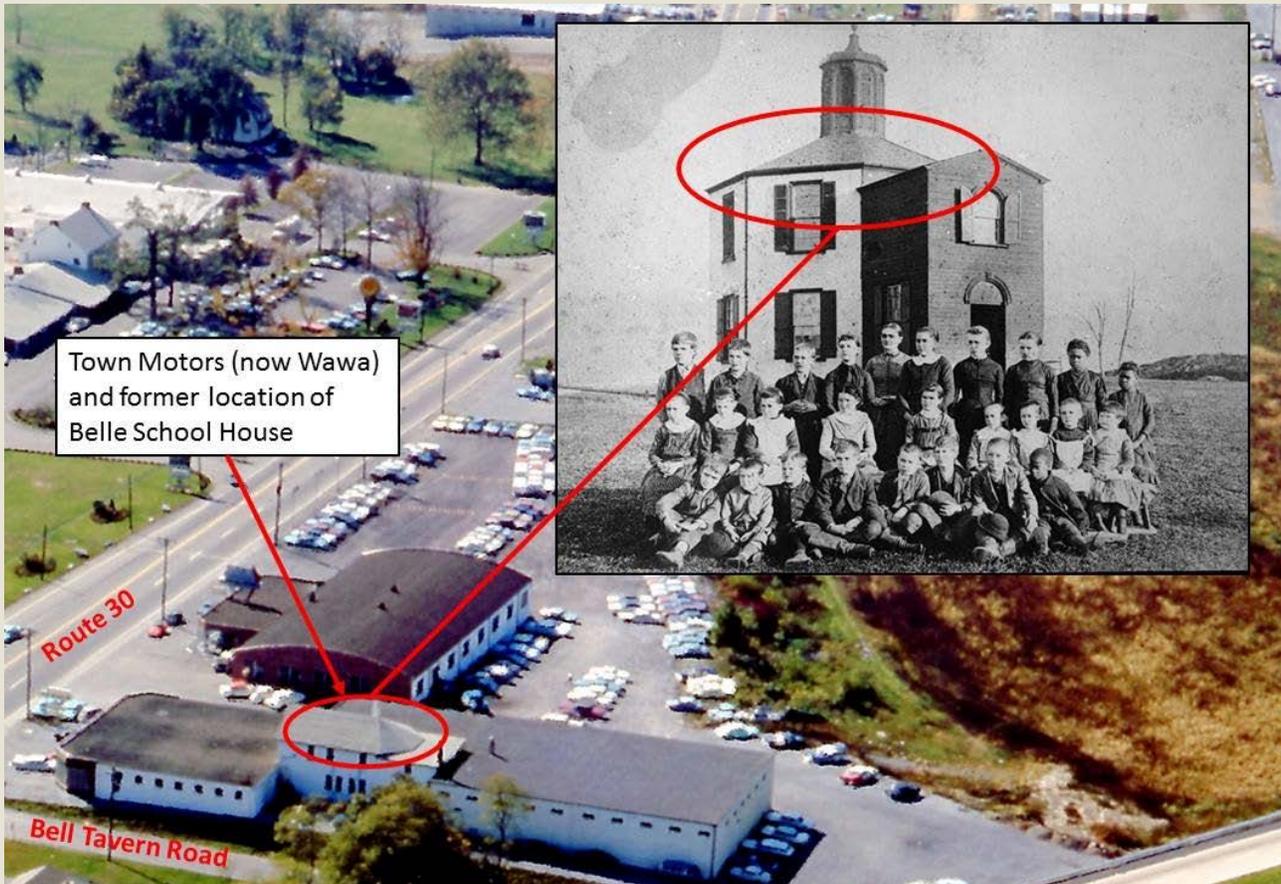
LANCASTER	\$.70
HARRISBURG	\$1.40
STATE COLLEGE	\$3.20
YORK	\$1.20
PITTSBURGH	\$5.60

VOLLRATH'S AGENCY
Greyhound Terminal
66 West Lancaster Ave.
Phone Dtn. 4, Downingtown, Pa.

Go by **GREYHOUND**

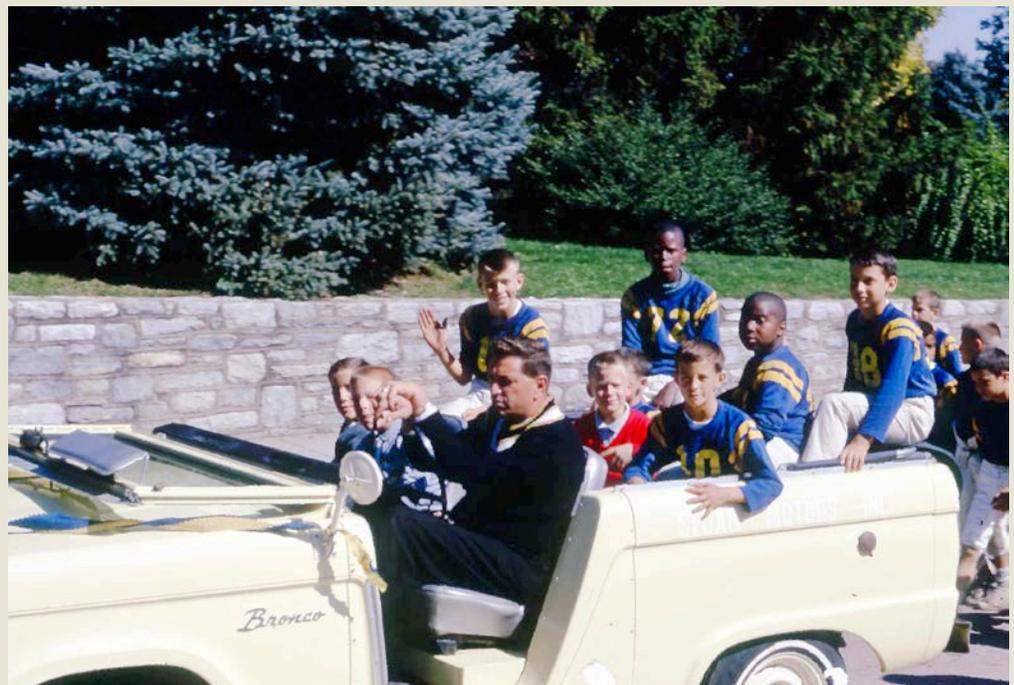
Downingtown Did-You-Know?

Did you know that there was a school house located at what is now the corner of Bell Tavern Road and Route 30, now the location of Wawa? According to the Library of Congress, the octagonal school house was built in 1818 and torn down in 1950. However, there were other sources that said the school house was enveloped in the garage of Town Motors when they moved to this site in the 1960s. A photograph in our archives confirms it was the latter. You can clearly see the octagonal roof of the old school house within Town Motors' garage from the aerial view taken in the late 1960s.



Downingtown Area Group Photo

This picture was taken on Manor Avenue during a parade in the early fall of 1966. These eight lucky young football players got to ride in a new Ford Bronco. Let us know if you recognize any of them.

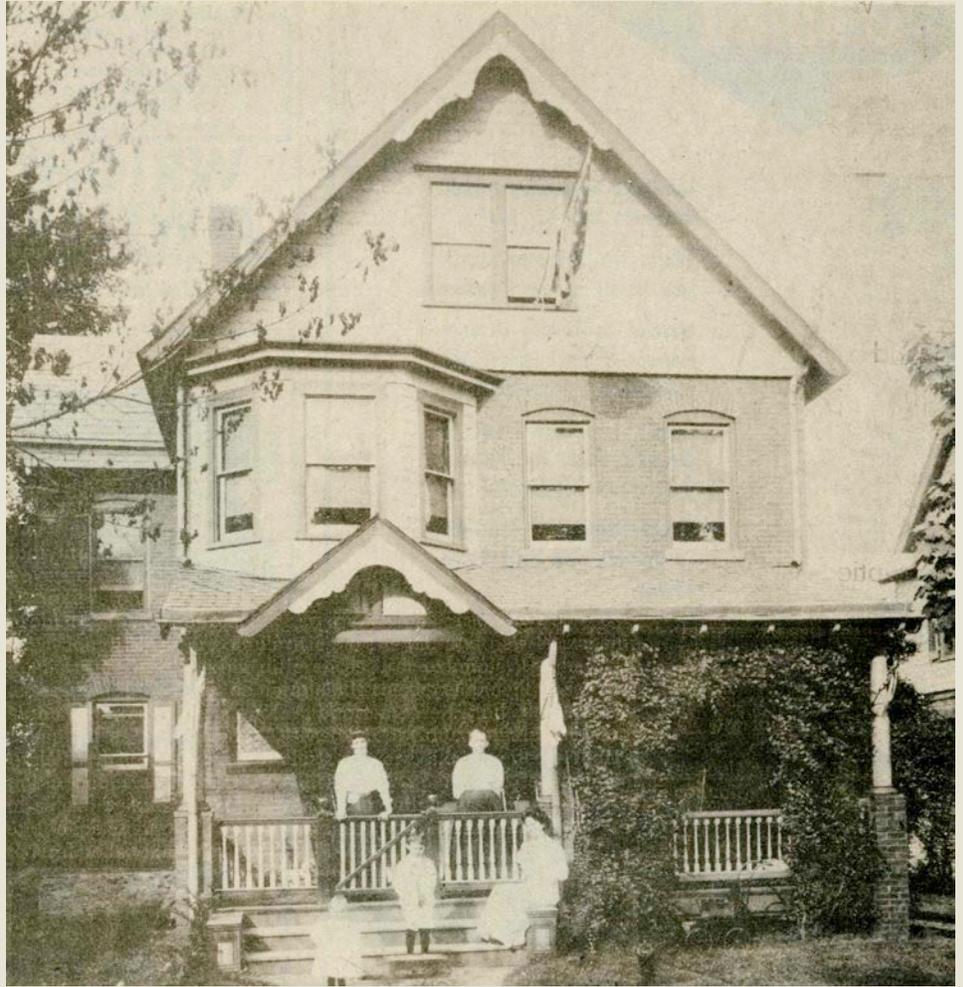


Last Issue's Mystery Pic

Caroline Ash was the only one who identified the location of the Mystery Pic from the last issue. Caroline had no problem identifying the home at 31 Downing Avenue because it was built for her grandparents Herbert and Laura Carpenter Ash in 1902. The photograph was taken about 1911.

The two children are Marian and Herbert Ash (Caroline's father) along with their mother Laura. Caroline wasn't positive, but she believes the other two adults in the photograph are Laura's sisters Mary Carpenter Keim and Florence Carpenter Yax.

The photograph below shows the home as it looks now.



Advertisements for Non-Profits

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.

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, meets quarterly on the 3rd Wednesday of January, April, June, and October at 7PM 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 and programs.

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.

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 December 2nd @ 1:00 PM
- **The first Tuesday of the month, 6:30-8:00 PM (with pizza!)**
Next one January 8th @ 6:30 PM (there will be no Tuesday night clipping in December)

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:

- General household items and office supplies including:
 - Light bulbs
 - Paper towels
 - Large and small trash bags
 - Glue sticks (used for our newspaper clippings)
- 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

P.O. Box 9, Downingtown, PA 19335

610-269-1709

dths1709@gmail.com

www.downingtownareahistoricalsociety.org

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Follow us on Twitter:



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



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