
The Corridor

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Newsletter of the Old York Road Historical Society

Spring 2022

Lecture Series Continues In Person

The Society will continue hosting lectures in-person in the John Barnes Room of Abington Friends Meeting. Masks are required to attend and there will be NO refreshments following the lectures. The Program Committee is working to have simulcast presentations on Zoom, but such capabilities have not been perfected. E-mail notifications will bring further updates and a link, if applicable.

LECTURE SERIES

The Program Committee has arranged for the following presentations to be held on Wednesday evenings at 7:30 p.m. The lecture series is sponsored by a grant from the Jenkintown Lyceum and is offered free of charge.

March 9 – Ropsley: A Country Estate – Local historian Edward Zwicker III will guide us through the Wyndmoor estate Ropsley, also known as the Poe House. Built in 1916, it was the home of Philadelphia attorney Francis McIlhenny. The presentation will show how the land developed through previous owners before the McIlhennys, and take us on a virtual tour using photos and architectural plans.

April 13 – The Sinking of the Titanic – Presenter Robert Hamilton will review the tragic tale of the Titanic from the origin of its drawings by the builder to its demise at the bottom of the Atlantic in April of 1912. It is a story of a disaster with multiple causes and numerous explanations. The presentation will also examine the core elements of the different reasons for the collision with an iceberg on a cold, clear night in the Atlantic Ocean. Hamilton is a Professor Emeritus of Strategic Management at Temple University and the grandson of a Titanic survivor.

May 11 – Philadelphia: City of Homes – Architect, photographer and author David Traub will talk about his latest photo book of Philadelphia's houses. Spanning from the 17th thru the 21st centuries, the homes of Philadelphia range from modest row houses to distinctive mansions, from historically significant to eccentrically expressive.

Recent Archival Donations

The Society is pleased to have received a number of gifts over the past several months, the following being the most significant:

- Jenkintown Elementary School Scrapbooks compiled by 4th grade teacher, Mrs. Margaret Baker, from Jane Bales.
- Memorabilia received from Jean Fesmire Doan including photographs, ephemera and clippings related to sites in Huntingdon Valley and the Fesmire family as well as three oil paintings of historic sites painted by Sylvia M. Fesmire, from Lucy Strackhouse.
- Records of the Eastern Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce and its predecessor organization, Greater Jenkintown Chamber of Commerce, from Wendy Klinghoffer of the EMCCC. The records to be added to the existing manuscript collection.
- Memorabilia of the Conard, Knight and Valentine families including scrapbooks of letters, photographs and genealogical research, from Janice Beechwood Sharrett.
- The police whistle of John Saddington, the first police chief of Cheltenham Township, from his grandson, John T. Whitefield.
- Records of the Fan-back Questers, from Barbara Rodgers. The records to be added to the existing manuscript collection.
- Personal papers of Charles F. Puff including an account book, promotional materials for the Laverock (Hillcrest) Development, and information about the Puff residence on Newbold Road, from Virginia Graves.
- Ephemera from the Abington Music Theater and the Cheltenham Township Historical Commission, from Diane Foster. The materials will be added to the existing manuscript collections.
- Ephemera, clippings, yearbooks, scrapbooks, and photographs of Abington High School and the Abington Memorial Hospital Training School for Nurses, from Brenda Krzaczek.

A Bit of History – Homes By Holmes

By Thomas J. Wiecekowsky, Ph.D.

Do you remember the neighborhood once known as Holmecrest?

It is a curiosity of our local history how the names of some newly-created neighborhoods endure, but others are quickly forgotten. Elkins Park, Willow Grove, and Custis Woods are still readily identifiable, but what happened to the likes of their contemporaries Dumont, Glenside Farms, or Holmecrest?

Holmecrest was the creation of builder Joshua Miskey Holmes. Holmes purchased the remaining part of the old Joshua Fisher farm near Jenkintown. The tract is across Jenkintown Road from Alverthorpe and extends all the way to Township Line Road, bordered on the east and west by Forest Avenue and Meetinghouse Road respectively. It was the largest project of Holmes' prolific career – and it would be the last.

Young Holmes moved with his family from central Ohio to Philadelphia shortly after the 1870 census, settling in a rented home on Spring Garden Street. He took up carpentry in downtown Philadelphia, and, by his late 20s, his skills and industrious manner enabled him to buy homes, fix them up, and “flip” them for a handsome profit. An inheritance from an aunt in 1890 allowed him to marry and purchase a parcel in the rapidly developing Strawberry Mansion section of the city, where he embarked on an “operation” of 18 small working class row homes.

The next two decades saw expansion outward with ever larger and marginally upscale developments in Germantown, Wayne Junction, Logan, and Mt. Airy. In the early years of the 20th century, the now-affluent

Elizabeth Vashti, and six-year-old son Joshua, Jr.

Holmes was all work and no play, with no apparent pastimes or outside interests. He kept no office and advertised that he could

be contacted on-site at each of his projects. His papers in the archives of the Society include his financial ledgers which tell of his careful management and hearty work ethic. His 1915 ledger shows expenditures that cause us to marvel today at the change in the value of money: \$1,094 for the electrical work on a row of 60 houses on Judson Street; \$3,496 for the plastering; and \$747 for paperhanging. The ledger also reveals that \$500 each month went to his son, then a student at Amherst College, as well as payment of \$700 to his wife. Perhaps by that time Sallie had taken over the clerical duties of the operation and kept the books. The ledgers also show a value of \$360,000 in cash at the end of the year.

When Joshua, Jr., returned from Amherst in 1920, he joined his father's

business, coinciding with a decline in the senior Holmes' interest in the industry. Perhaps experiencing the heart disease that would eventually kill him, his attention turned to the less physically demanding business of banking. In late 1922, he was a co-founder of a new bank in the rapidly developing northern reaches of the city, the Oak Lane

	July 1926	August
Brought forward	658,192.36 953,001.28 662,366.83 949,729.25	
m 262 R Deck	1974.05	2022.25
263 Fredk V. Rode	5200.00	5200.00
m 263 " " "	3500.00	3500.00
m 265 Fredk Schimpf	461.17	453.67
m 268 M. H. Yerkes	700.00	675.00
269 J. Schugart	1275.00	1075.00
m 270 Emily Brick	2113.5	222.35
m 277 Paul Heidt Jr	5811.23	5811.23
m 278 Chas. DeLeon	1600.00	1600.00
m 279 Paul Heidt Jr	3848.98	3848.98
m 274 John S. Enley	300.00	275.00
m 275 Capital High Dev. Corp.	7000.00	7000.00
m 276 Michael J. Goss	12203.57	12203.57
277 Arthur J. Baerman	88.8	
m 279 Leola Kinross	800.00	775.00
m 279 Paul Heidt Jr	5811.23	5811.23
m 281 Valentine Pudew	1762.50	1762.50
281 Jas. Clark Est	750.00	750.00
m 282 Alfred Rushton	2000.00	1000.00
m 282 Jos A. Keary	900.00	900.00
m 282 Valentine Pudew	1500.00	1500.00
m 283 Abram F. Stallings	1450.00	1425.00
m 284 John J. Curleys	900.00	900.00
m 284 Rob. Durst	2000.00	2000.00
m 285 Wilmer J. Hollings	350.00	350.00
m 286 Shoe W. Noble	637.50	637.50
m 286 Herman J. Ballison	775.00	775.00
m 289 Geo. Morton	352.68	375.18
m 289 Edwin C. Haug	271.83	271.83
m 290 Otto Schellberg	68.32	141.70
m 291 Helen C. West Smith - Mortimer	1935.00	1935.00
m 291 Robt. W. Cotman	500.00	500.00
m 291 Raymond Cahiero	800.00	800.00
m 291 Chas. Lichtenberger	1250.00	1250.00
	917,306.77 953,001.28 920,618.82 949,729.25	

Homes joined other Philadelphia industrialists in the move to Cheltenham Hills, leaving his long-standing family home at 12th and Girard (now a parking lot.). In October of 1905, he constructed a stately home just over the city line on Valley and Sharpless Roads in Cheltenham Township that had been part of Edward M. Davis' Oak Farm. His household included his wife Sallie, daughter

Trust Company. Holmes served as the first president.

In 1923, the bank constructed a headquarters building on Broad Street at Sixty-seventh Avenue where the Old York Road peels off from the new city grid to the previously remote country-side now poised for suburban development. The wedge shaped structure on the triangular plot seems to serve as the entry gate to the green Cheltenham Hills beyond. The stately building survives today as a medical clinic and towers above an otherwise undistinguished urban landscape.

The year 1923 also saw Holmes' first foray into life outside of work. As many good Philadelphians did – and still do – he spent the summers at the shore, Cape May to be specific, renting #38 Jackson Street in the middle of the downtown.

In June of 1925, further changes in Holmes' life were evident as he sold his house on Valley Road (“surrounded by many forest trees and ornamental shrubbery and two acres of lawn”, according to a description of the day). It is not clear where he lived immediately thereafter, but Joshua senior, wife Sallie, son Joshua and his wife Elizabeth embarked on a Mediterranean cruise in January of 1926, indicating that the building business either was in a lull or in other hands, possibly the lawyer to whom Holmes turned over his power of attorney.

The purchase of the Fisher tract upon their return late in the year heralded a new style of construction for Holmes. Holmes started subdividing the property into relatively large lots, reflecting the upscale community he

intended to create, putting in roads, and eponymously naming his creation Holmecrest. By 1930, Joshua Jr. lived with his wife and two children in the new development at #4 Holmecrest Avenue (the houses have since been renumbered) and Joshua Sr. had moved into a smaller home at 8141 High School Road in Elkins Park. The new houses in

Air Conditioned Homes

HOLMECREST at Jenkintown

A DEVELOPMENT BY JOSHUA M. HOLMES, JR.

Three beautiful new homes of early American architecture are available at prices based on last year's cost. 201 Cypress Avenue (illustrated), a corner house of five large bedrooms and four baths, \$18,900. Two houses on new Holmecrest Road each with four bedrooms and three baths being completed to sell for \$15,200 and \$15,750. Other large houses now under construction. Drive east on Township Line or Jenkintown Road from York Road to Holmecrest. Due to rapidly rising costs, we suggest you make an early selection.

JOSHUA M. HOLMES, JR.
TOWNSHIP LINE & FISHERS ROAD
JENKINTOWN 11 Opentz 2675

Holmecrest, far more opulent than anything he had built before, were clad in stone and included the latest necessity for upscale suburban living, a novelty for its time, an attached garage.

Following college, young Joshua certainly participated in his father's endeavors but clearly did not share the same work ethic of total dedication to the business. He became involved in alumni affairs of Amherst and emerged as a local and national figure in the games of bridge and whist, competing with the American Bridge League and the Philadelphia Whist Association. He organized bridge tournaments

at his “home court,” The Old York Road Country Club, just a short walk away from his home.

On September 9, 1933, Joshua Sr. succumbed to his heart problems and died of a heart attack at his Elkins Park home. A reception was held at his home after which he was interred at Trinity Oxford Episcopal Church. Young Joshua took over the Holmecrest development and added an attractive new feature to the construction: air conditioning. However, throughout the Depression progress on construction and sales lagged the pace set by the senior Holmes. Meanwhile, young Holmes continued to play bridge and whist.

Apparently tiring of the business, Joshua Jr. took on a partnership with another builder, Conrad Gettler, and eventually withdrew from the enterprise all together and retired to Florida. Gettler took over the projects previously supervised by Holmes, including Custis Woods in Cheltenham Township, trading as “Conrad J.

Gettler, Inc.” Gettler went on to a major development of 500 homes around Paper Mill Road in Oreland in 1946, and a development, possibly his last, of 93 homes in Horsham in 1959, as the metropolitan area continued its inexorable march outward into the previously open countryside.

Thomas J. Wieckowski, Ph.D., is vice president of the Society and Chairman of the Cheltenham Township Historical Commission. He is a resident of Wyncote and his most recent book is Hitherto Invincible: How Three Generations of Barkers Helped Build America.

THANKS TO OUR MAJOR MEMBERSHIP DONORS

The Society gratefully recognizes those who have so far supported our work for the 2022 program year through membership at the Patron level and above.

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Membership Reminder

We are mid-way through our 2021-22 membership year. If the mailing label on your envelope does not read "2022" or if you are receiving a membership form with this newsletter, you are either not currently a member or current in your membership.

The Annual Meeting of the Society will precede the May lecture. Officer and Committee reports will be given and the Nominating Committee will present a slate of Officers and Directors to be elected for the 2022-2023 program year. We invite you to hear how the Society has been faring since COVID began.