
The Corridor

Volume XXXI, No. 3

Newsletter of the Old York Road Historical Society

Fall 2022

LECTURE SERIES

The Program Committee has arranged for the following presentations to be held on Wednesday evenings at 7:30 p.m. in the John Barnes Room of Abington Friends Meeting. The programs will also be accessible via Zoom. The lecture series is sponsored by a grant from the Jenkinstown Lyceum and all programs are offered free of charge.

October 12 – The Astronomical Achievements of David Rittenhouse. Historical Society of Montgomery County Executive Director Barry Rauhauser will present the fascinating life of David Rittenhouse. Born in 1732, Rittenhouse came of age at a time when the entire world was turning its head towards science. Self-taught, Rittenhouse would become a craftsman, an astronomer, a surveyor, an instrument maker, and a scientist. Rittenhouse served as President of the American Philosophical Society, treasurer of Pennsylvania, and the first director of the U.S. Mint. He observed the transit of Venus and helped to survey Pennsylvania's borders. Join us for this presentation where we will learn about the man whom Thomas Jefferson called an example of "New World genius."

November 9 – The Road to Valley Forge. Historical re-enactor, lecturer and tour guide, Michael Jesberger will present a program on the common soldiers who fought in the American Revolution and the various incidents that took place in Montgomery County and the surrounding Philadelphia region. We may remember the 1776 crossing of the Delaware and the Valley Forge encampment as events that tested the mettle of the patriot forces, but the continental soldiers triumphed over scores of other hardships at places lesser known. In the fall of 1777, the Continental Army fought two key battles and marched hundreds of miles through all types of terrain and in all sorts of weather. Often deprived of food, sleep, and comfort, the soldiers deserve recognition for what they endured for the cause of liberty. The program will include images of Philadelphia and Montgomery County area historic sites, maps, and eyewitness accounts of the participants bringing these seldom-celebrated events to life.

- - FALL OUTINGS - -

Rittenhouse Town

Sunday, October 16, 1:15 p.m.

Rittenhouse Town is one of the earliest industrial communities in America. In 1687 William Rittenhouse moved to the newly formed neighborhood of Germantown and purchased property along a tributary of the Wissahickon Creek and built the first paper mill in British North America. For the next 40 years, the Rittenhouse family were the only papermakers in America. The original mill was destroyed by fire in 1701, but a new mill was quickly built. The homestead, built in 1707, still stands across from the site of the second mill. Other houses and buildings also remain from this once thriving little town.

Our tour will take us into a number of the early houses including the birthplace of David Rittenhouse, astronomer, surveyor and first director of the US Mint. The cost is \$35 for members and \$39 for non-members. Please register for this trip using the enclosed form. The bus will depart from the Jenkintown Library parking lot at 1:15 pm and return around 5:00 pm.

The Bryn Athyn Train Wreck

Saturday, December 3, 1:30 p.m.

Join the Society as it partners with the Pennypack Ecological Restoration Trust for this annual program observing the anniversary of the Bryn Athyn Train wreck, which occurred 101 years ago on December 5, 1921. This head-on collision of two trains along the Newtown railway line resulted in the deaths of 26 persons.

Railroad historian Larry Eastwood will give a presentation on the train wreck with a Q&A period to follow. At 2:45, the assembled will commence a walk to the crash site led by Society President David Rowland. Pre-registration is required by December 2 through the Pennypack Trust web site (www.pennypacktrust.org). Pennypack Trust and Old York Road Historical Society members are free; non-members \$10. This program will be held at the Trust's Visitors' Center (2955 Edge Hill Road, Huntingdon Valley, PA 19006).

A Bit of History – Wanamaker's Country Seat

By Thomas J. Wieckowski, Ph.D.

One of the most prestigious residents of Old York Road's Gilded Age history was department store inventor and magnate John Wanamaker. His opulent estate served as a standard of good living for the era as well as a landmark for travelers in the area. The recent gift of the Zulker-Wanamaker collection (see related article) helps shed new light on the life of Wanamaker and his accomplished family, all of whom also lived as adults along the Old York Road corridor.

As a youth, John received little formal education and after only four years of schooling, he worked as a clerk or office boy in several concerns, including the clothing store of Barclay Lipincott on Chestnut Street. This relationship may have served as John's introduction to the newly popular Old York Road corridor in the northern countryside of the city as Barclay had purchased a farm in Cheltenham Hills along Church Road. (The property would later be purchased by another well-known local figure, Philadelphia banker Abraham Barker.)

Growing tired of the menial job, and armed with a reputation as an enterprising young man, Wanamaker went into business with his wife's brother, Nathan, and together they founded Oak Hall clothing store at 6th and Market Streets in 1861 just as the Civil War broke out.

Despite the challenges posed by the War, the enterprise quickly proved successful and in 1868, John and Mary joined many other successful capitalists of the city in purchasing property in the burgeoning country estate area known as Cheltenham Hills along the Old York Road. He purchased a section of an old farm that was part of the Bosler holdings at the top of Ogontz Hill on the west side of Old York Road about where Meetinghouse Road is today. A colonial era farmhouse on the property served as his country home.



The evolution of Oak Hall into the Grand Depot of Wanamaker's and John's financial successes prompted the purchase of an additional 81 acres of property along the west side of Old York Road in 1880 and the construction of a new mansion in the popular Queen Anne style. Named Lindenhurst, the lavish domicile with three art galleries and skillfully landscaped grounds became the main source of recreation for the Wanamaker family. Completed in 1882, "the country home is particularly dear to Mr. Wanamaker" where he spent the "happiest hours of his busy life among the flowers, trees, and birds."

John's country idyll came to a tragic end on a cold February night in 1907 when Lindenhurst was consumed by fire and most of the furnishings of the building destroyed. John and Mary were devastated by the loss, and John was particularly distraught over the loss of his collection of Martin Luther manuscripts. Likely experiencing lingering depression amidst the challenges of his growing business, John could not face the task of rebuilding and his second son, Rodman, took control of the task. Rodman had previously been dis-

patched by his father to mine Paris of the latest ladies fashions for sale at the store and had become an avid Francophile in the process. It was no surprise then that his recreation of Lindenhurst would be in the style of an opulent French chateau designed by the

prolific architect John T. Windrim.

The new Lindenhurst (see photo) was finally completed in 1911, but the principal residents became Rodman and his family as the aging John and Mary spent much of their time at their Walnut Street townhouse. Mary died in 1920 while on vacation in Atlantic City.

With John's death only two years later, Rodman and his family became the sole occupants of Lindenhurst. But Rodman died shortly after in 1928 and the estate was placed for sale by the executors. Next door neighbor, up-and-coming ice cream manufacturer Henry W. Breyer, purchased the

property as an upgrade to his more modest Haredith, (now the Cheltenham Township Municipal Building) in January of 1929.

However, the outbreak of the Great Depression that September altered his plans, as well as the fortunes of millions of other Americans, and he immediately put the estate up for sale. The Depression afforded no takers for a palatial estate and the property sat abandoned and vandalized for seventeen years, except for its use as the grounds for Abington Hospital's June Fete,

through the remainder of the Depression and World War II.

In a futile attempt to unload the property, Breyer's son had Temple University consider the property in 1940 as one of three locations for a suburban campus for its undergraduate division. Unsuccessful in that effort (Ambler won), he finally offered the property to the Boy Scouts of America for a campground as the War ended. The Scouts were happy to have this little piece of wilderness for their activities but unceremoniously demolished the mansion in 1946,

stating that "a fifty room French Chateau isn't suitable for camping." The glorious old mansion lives on today in the precious photographs of the Zulker-Wanamaker Collection.

Thomas J. Wieckowski, Ph.D., serves as the Society's First Vice President. In addition, he is Chairman of the Cheltenham Township Historical Commission and a local history author having written several works on the Wyncote area and a few of its notable residents.

Society Membership Information

Membership Renewal

Now is the time to renew your membership! At the top of the membership form you will find the dates for the current membership year. The membership year is the same as the school year; the advanced year being used to denote the year on your mailing label. So, for the membership year that runs from the fall of 2022 to the summer of 2023, the date on your label should be "2023". Annual dues have not increased this year. Please contact the Society at 215-886-8590 with any questions. As always, support at the Patron level or higher greatly enhances the work we are able to do.

Matching Gifts

Did you know that the Society is eligible to receive corporate matching gifts? Several members have doubled the impact of their gift by submitting paperwork to their company for this purpose. Check with your employer to see if the Society qualifies.

IRA Donations

For the past several years, many folks have taken the opportunity to donate their required minimum distribution (RMD) to charitable causes. The Society, as a 501(c)(3) organization, qualifies as a worthy cause for your IRA donations.

Making a Bequest

Updating your will? Please consider including a bequest to the Society's general endowment fund in your will or estate plans. Your gift will help ensure a vibrant future for the Society.

OLD YORK ROAD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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215 - 886 - 8590

Archive Research Hours

Wednesdays, 11 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Or by appointment. Please email the Society to make an appointment

Society's Website

www.oyrhs.org

Society's E-mail Address

OldYorkRoadHistory@gmail.com

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The following are the officers and directors for the Society's 2022-2023 program year:

President: David Rowland

First Vice President: Thomas Wieckowski

Second Vice President: James Rubillo

Secretary: Eileen Koolpe

Treasurer: Michael Czerwonka, CPA

Directors: Leslie Bell, Kirsten Gyllenhaal, Bryan Havir, Edward Landau, Betty Smith, Stephanie Walsh and Mary Washington.

Directors Emeriti: Martha McDonough, Joyce Root, Robert Skaler, and Mildred Wintz.

Foust Bequest

The Society is most fortunate to have received a \$25,000 unrestricted bequest from the estate of former Society board member Doreen L. Foust. With her purchase of Wyncote's historic Parry house on Woodland Road in 1981, Doreen began a years-long effort to research the history of her house and the immediate neighborhood. Her resulting thesis for a 1985 Master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania in Historic Preservation was entitled "Wyncote, Pennsylvania: The History, Development, Architecture and Preservation of a Victorian Philadelphia Suburb." Her degree work also included the nomination of the Wyncote Historic District to the National Register, a designation that was bestowed in October 1986.

We are grateful to Doreen for her generosity over the years as a major donor, a faithful board member, and loyal supporter of the Society and its work. Doreen's papers related to her research on historic Wyncote are now in the Society's archives. She had previously donated the papers she had collected on the Parry family. Her bequest will be held until a suitable special project has been identified.

Zulker–Wanamaker Collection

The Rev. Dr. William A. Zulker was a Presbyterian minister who early in his career found himself employed at one of the many churches founded by John Wanamaker. His interest in Wanamaker deepened many years later when the department store closed and the John Wanamaker collection of papers, photographs and other items was transferred to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Zulker volunteered to organize and rehouse the hundreds of boxes of papers in the collection. From his efforts, he was able to write his book, *John Wanamaker: King of Merchants* (1993). Zulker was also a collector of Wanamaker materials and he amassed a sizable collection.

With Zulker's death in 2021, his three daughters set out to find a suitable home for the collection and the Society was their choice. Since receiving and inventorying the collection, the Society has gifted certain items to the Friends of the Wanamaker Organ, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP), the Williamson School, and the Presbyterian Historical Society, among other organizations. The corpus retained by the Society includes all of Zulker's research notes from his work with the HSP collection and from other sources that he used to compile his book. The Zulker-Wanamaker Collection also includes a large number of photographs along with clippings and ephemera related to Wanamaker and his family. We are indebted to the Zulker daughters for selecting the Society and we are honored to be the repository for Bill's work of which he was so passionate.

Donations to the Archives

In addition to the Zulker-Wanamaker Collection, the Society has received a number of significant donations since February including the following:

- Blueprints and other engineering drawings for area businesses and structures relating in particular to Alverthorpe Park, Cheltenham, and Pitcairn Incorporated Properties, from Alex Bartlett of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy.
- Willow Grove Park Memorabilia, including programs, postcards, books, ephemera, and objects, from David Rowland.
- Scrapbook of the Women's Auxiliary of the Old York Road Hills Civic Association (later Women's Club of Jenkintown) 1924-1933, from Lynne Kalish.
- 1934 Ogontz School yearbook and other related ephemera, from William Weihenmayer.
- Small collection of Russell Smith family ephemera, from the late Joseph S. Brackin.
- Ephemera related to the 250th, 280th and 300th anniversaries of Cheltenham Village, from Barbara Kotzin.
- Ephemera from Lower Moreland Township and the Lower Moreland schools, as well as other items from Jenkintown and Philadelphia, from Frank Jarrett.
- Memorabilia from the former Saint Aiden's Episcopal Church in Cheltenham Village, from James McCann.
- Collection of correspondence to Wilbur A. Chapman of Jenkintown from various sources and dating from the 1930s and 1940s, from the Herreid Military Museum, Sioux Falls, SD.