



# Haverford Township Historical Society



## HAVERFORD TOWNSHIP - A BRIEF HISTORY

*(This history is based on one written for the Delaware County Bicentennial in 1989 by Margaret "Peg" Johnston. Peg was a dedicated leader in the Haverford Township Historical Society and architect of the Township's Historic Preservation ordinance. It has been edited and updated by Kathy Case and Richard Kerr of the Historical Society and the Haverford Township Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee.)*

The area that is now Haverford Township was the territory of the native Lenape people when European settlers arrived in the 17th century. Early maps show our area first as part of New Sweden and then New Amsterdam; it was not until the land passed to English control that extensive settlement began. Each wave of settlers made treaties with the indigenous population, often for the same land as those before them, but by about 1750 most of the Lenape had left land they were told was no longer theirs.

In 1681 King Charles I of England established a new colony and appointed his friend William Penn as its Proprietor. Charles named it Pennsylvania, in honor of Penn's father, an admiral to whom a Royal debt was owed. Penn made plans to use the colony as a "holy experiment" that would separate Church and State, and would welcome all comers, particularly those who, like his fellow Quakers, were suffering under religious persecution in Europe. Groups of Welsh Quakers arranged to buy 40,000 contiguous acres, hoping to establish a Welsh "barony" within Penn's larger colony. This "Welsh Tract" comprised all of what is now Haverford, Radnor, and most of Lower Merion townships. Penn had to fund his colony from land sales. In 1682 he established three counties (Bucks, Philadelphia and Chester) and the first townships, among them Haverford in Chester County. He asked parties to form "Companies of Adventurers" with the most prominent person in each "company" taking out a patent for typically 5,000 acres of land as trustee; the parties would then split up the acreage among their participants. The first Pennsylvania settlers arrived by sailing ships in 1682-1683. These first families included names prominent in the early history of the colony: Bevan, David, Davis, Ellis, Lewis, Hayes, Howell, Humphrey, Lawrence, Llewellyn, Richard, Sharpus, Rees, Wharton, and Williams.

### Farms and Mills

Haverford Township was primarily agricultural until the 20th century, with numerous streams and runs. The farms were mostly small and self-sustaining. Some farms gradually gave way to homes, which required domestic help. Between 1698 and 1798 some township farms and homes used enslaved workers brought from Africa as part of the "Slave Trade," despite growing Quaker unhappiness with the practice, and its eventual gradual curtailment by Pennsylvania legislation.

Until about 1810 the only businesses were those that supported local farm life, like mills, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, coopers (barrel makers) and other crafts. The two most prominent watersheds, Darby Creek and Cobb's Creek, provided excellent mill-seats for the early settlers. Mills were especially important in these early years and varied in kind: grist, saw, lumber, fulling, tannery, wool, and cotton.

The earliest recorded mill was on the eastern boundary of the Township along Cobb's Creek where William Howell established a gristmill, the Haverford Mill, in about 1685. This site was purchased by

Daniel Humphrey in 1703. He added a sawmill, and later a fulling and dyeing mill. The site is just north of today's Eagle Road, on the west bank of Cobb's Creek. About 1800, Peter Brown erected grist and sawmills on the headwaters of Cobb's Creek. Jonathan Miller built grist and sawmills in 1810 at what would become the juncture of Mill Road and Karakung Drive.

On Darby Creek, the western boundary of the Township, Richard Hayes, Jr., David Morris, and Samuel Lewis erected a gristmill known as Haverford New Mill in 1707. A sawmill was added to the operation, which continued in use until 1904. On Darby Creek near the Marple Township border, Humphrey Ellis operated an early fulling mill. In 1807, Henry Lawrence built a sawmill, on the south side of today's Old West Chester Pike. His son, William Lawrence, constructed a gristmill close by in 1832. The Lawrence sawmill remained in the family and continually operated as a sawmill for over 125 years. It was the oldest extant industry in the Township when it was demolished in 1989.

The American Revolution demonstrated a need for black powder produced in this country. In addition to military usage, there was a growing need for powder in mining and engineering. To fill this need, Israel Whelen and William Rogers partnered to construct and operate the Nitre Hall Powder Works on Cobb's Creek, beginning operation in about 1810. In the period of the War of 1812, Nitre Hall, with a total production in 1812 of 800,000 pounds, was second only to the du Pont powder mill in Delaware. Nitre Hall mills ceased operation in about 1840. Dennis Kelly bought the property and converted it to cotton and woolen mills, adding it to his growing textile empire. Kelly also bought the Howell and Humphrey mill holdings, and ended up operating almost all of the mills along Cobb's Creek in Haverford Township. The Kelly textile mills provided material to the U.S. government from 1817 to 1860.

## **Roads and Rails**

Early roads linked the Quaker meeting houses of the first settlers, also serving farms, mills and inns. A north-south "Haverford Road," bisecting the Township, is indicated on the first map of the township, but its place was largely taken by today's Darby Road, laid out in 1687. In 1792, the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike (now U.S. Route 30) was begun, passing nearby the Township. Other roads were built radiating from the turnpike.

In the 19th century, rail transportation became viable, furthering land development and trade. The early Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad began operations in 1833, connecting those cities as part of a larger multi-mode "Main Line of Public Works" built by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to span the state, eventually reaching Pittsburgh by 1835. As railway technology matured, the growing Pennsylvania Railroad bought the operation from the state in 1857 and started to upgrade it. In 1871 it relocated part of the "Main Line" from what is now Railroad Avenue in Haverford Township to across Lancaster Avenue in Lower Merion. Because of the Lancaster road and later turnpike, as well as the railroad, this corner of Haverford Township was the earliest to develop.

The Philadelphia and West Chester Turnpike Company built a toll road, now known as West Chester Pike, between 1848 and 1853. In the 1890s electric railway (trolley and interurban railway) technology matured, and in 1895 the Turnpike then formed the companion Philadelphia and West Chester Traction Company, laying a track along the south side of the turnpike. At the same time, the Pennsylvania Railroad was building a steam railroad branch line to Newtown Square, and these two lines intersected in today's Llanerch. A fierce legal and physical stand-off ensued, but eventually a rail crossing was put in place so both lines could operate. In 1902 the trolley company added a new branch from Llanerch to Ardmore, running along Darby Road and then overland to just short of Lancaster Avenue in Ardmore. In 1907 the Philadelphia and Western Railway opened a high-speed electric line from Upper Darby to

Stafford along the Cobb's Creek valley (later adding a branch north to Norristown in 1912). The opening of the P&W and upgrades to the trolley lines happened just in time to benefit from the 1907 opening of the Market Street Elevated line in Philadelphia and completion of a joint transfer terminal at 69th Street and Market Street in Upper Darby. These resulting multiple quick travel ways to Philadelphia fueled a burst of suburban development in the township and the surrounding area.

The closely-following maturation of automobile, bus and truck technology, coupled with a "Good Roads" movement, fostered continued rapid suburban development, but spelled the beginning of the end for most of the railways. The West Chester trolley line was cut back to Westgate Hills in 1954. The Ardmore trolley line was abandoned at the end of 1966, with the part north of Eagle Road being paved to become the first dedicated private "busway" in the United States. In 1970 the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) took over the operation of the remaining suburban trolley and bus lines, including the electric railway line to Norristown. The little-used Newtown Square railroad branch line, already cut back to Oakmont in 1963, was abandoned in 1981. Meanwhile, West Chester Pike and Township Line Road gradually expanded to four lanes, while the abandoned trolley line on Darby Road enabled reconfiguring of that road into four lanes as far north as Oakmont. Haverford Road was also widened to four lanes in the Township's eastern section. Later, Interstate 476, a circumferential major highway around Philadelphia, opened fully in 1991 after decades of delay, creating a busy interchange at its intersection with West Chester Pike just to the west of the Township.

### **Neighborhood Expansion**

The population of Haverford Township almost tripled from 1900 to 1920 as a result of improved transportation. Workers wanted moderately priced homes, and could now commute to their jobs from outside of the city. In 1877, Haydock Garrigues had laid out the Township's first subdivision, Millbrook, in its northeastern sector. By 1881, the Garrigues name had vanished from this tract, and a new subdivision called Preston (just above Millbrook) had been established. By 1900, the first roads and houses were built in the area that would become Llanerch. The subdivisions of Llanerch Manor, Brookline, South Ardmore, Grassland, Penfield, Beechwood, Ardmore Park, and Hillcrest Lawns were plotted in 1909 atlas maps. Hillcrest Lawns would become Oakmont by 1925. Upland Park, Oakmont Park, Chatham Village, South Ardmore, and Merwood Park were created by 1946. Although many of these subdivision names are still used to identify neighborhoods, discernible boundaries no longer exist.

At the same time during the early 20th century, wealthy families were building large country estates on former farmland, especially in the northern part of the Township. The new owners had farmhouses and outbuildings torn down or remodeled as new mansions and gardens. The Grange and Millbrook Farm are examples of conversions of early farmhouses into new estates. Examples of new estates built during the 20th century are Clarence Warden's Far-Away, Horatio G. Lloyd's Allgates, J. H. Carstair's Spring Hill Farm, J. Stanley Reeve's Brookthorpe, and Atwater Kent's West Hills. Only the first three of these latter five estate houses are still standing.

The building boom led the Township to adopt a zoning code in 1925, one of the earliest codes in the Philadelphia suburbs.

### **Municipal Government and Services**

In its early rural agricultural period, Haverford Township had no services or utilities. Its government consisted of little more than one or two supervisors (whose main duty was establishing basic roads and

ensuring that landowners properly maintained the road sections on their properties), a township clerk, a constable and a tax collector.

With the growth of population from roughly 1900, along with evolving state laws controlling municipal governance, Haverford Township was incorporated in 1912 into a “Township of the First Class,” a population-based designation, with a ward-based elected Board of Commissioners (5 members growing to 9 as the population grew), served by a township secretary. With suburban development, township business quickly expanded to include approval of new neighborhoods and accepting ownership of their roads, streetlights, fire hydrants, sanitary sewers and sewage treatment, storm sewers, parks, dealing with all the new utility providers, and so on. The township created a police department in 1916, and in the same timeframe five volunteer fire companies formed, overseen through a township bureau of fire. As the administrative staff grew, the job of township secretary evolved into an administrative township manager to manage all of the departments for the board. Haverford Township passed a Home Rule charter in 1977, allowing it to go from following state law except where the state has expressly given it jurisdiction, to governing itself except where expressly forbidden by state law.

## **Schools**

Education has always been an important aspect of life in the Township. The first building erected for educational purposes was the Federal School in 1797, today a preserved one-room schoolhouse. Additional one-room subscription schools were built in following years around the Township. The era of public education began in Pennsylvania in 1834, and there followed a succession of ever-larger school buildings under the administration of first a supervisor, then a school board and finally today’s school district, with state-granted separate taxing authority. Substantial institutional-style public schools appeared after 1900, as the population continued to grow. With the post-World War II “baby boom” additions were made to existing schools, and a new high school and three one-story elementary schools were built.

The private Friends School Haverford dates back to 1885. In subsequent years, two other private schools have come and gone. Catholic parochial schools first started in 1924 with St. Denis School, now consolidated with Annunciation School (1927) into the Cardinal Foley School (2012). Sacred Heart School began in Manoa in 1928. The SS. Colman-Neumann School facility dates back to 1967.

The 21st century has continued to witness school changes, renovations and replacements. Today, there are a senior high school, a middle school, five elementary schools, three parochial schools, and one private school in the Township. The only post-secondary school is Haverford College (1833), the first college founded by the Society of Friends. The campus has several historic structures on its 225-acre property, and the college has opened its nature trail to the community.

## **Places of Worship**

The Township is home to the oldest Quaker meeting house in Delaware County, Haverford Friends Meeting on Eagle Road, initially started in 1684 and expanded in 1700. A second Quaker meeting house was erected on Buck Lane in 1833, making Haverford one of the few townships in the Philadelphia area with two active Quaker meeting houses.

Haverford Township has been known as welcoming immigrants of all religions, but Catholics were especially active, establishing St. Denis, the first Catholic church in Delaware County, in 1825. Now

almost every religion has representation, either through its own church or joint arrangements with other churches. The township had a synagogue, but it has moved out as part of a consolidation merger.

## **Recreation**

Population growth led to a demand for expanded leisure activities. Beechwood Park, a large amusement park opened in May 1907, a few days after the opening of the Philadelphia and Western train line. The park never drew the anticipated crowds and closed after only a few seasons. Today, the only remnant of the park is a small cement support near the Beechwood-Brookline station.

The Merion Cricket Club Golf Association expanded Clifton Hall, an old farmhouse off Ardmore Avenue, into its golf clubhouse. The Merion Golf Club grew beyond its East Course (1912) to include the West Course (1914). The Llanerch Country Club (1919) consists of a golf course, swimming pool and clubhouse. Two other golf courses were operating by the 1940s. The Brookline Square Club (1925) on Mill Road was short-lived and saw its land later used partly for the present middle school and senior high school, and partly for the Woodmere Park development. The Pennsylvania Railroad Golf Club (1925) was established on land that later became the Chatham Park development. At one time Haverford had more golf clubs than any other municipality in Delaware County.

Parks began appearing in the township by 1920, often at the instigation of civic organizations. The Township opened its first park in 1933, and has bought and created additional park spaces since. Recreation space in the township increased dramatically in the early 2000s when the Township acquired the former Haverford State Hospital grounds along Darby Creek and turned them into the Haverford Reserve, hosting many recreational facilities. The Township now has over 400 acres of recreational space within its 10 square-mile area. It also boasts more than 15 miles of trails within its borders, with all residents living within a mile of a trail. These neighborhood parks, playing fields, parklands and trails, along with recreational facilities at the Skatium, the new Haverford Area Y, and the Haverford Reserve, could not have been imagined by the early settlers.

## **Today's Township**

Haverford Township today is primarily residential, with most housing built in the first half of the 20th century. Residences are a mixture of single homes, twins, row houses, apartments, condominiums, nursing and assisted living facilities, and one retirement community. There are retail and service businesses, many restaurants, two shopping centers, a strong educational system, a network of volunteer fire companies, and a dedicated police force. With a current population of around 50,000 within just 10 square miles, the Township is considered fully developed and is the second-most densely populated municipality in Delaware County.

©2022 by Haverford Township Historical Society. Personal non-commercial use permitted; all other rights reserved.