



Haverford Township Historical Society



BRYN MAWR POLO FIELD: A GREEN SPACE AT THE CENTER OF OUR HISTORY

By Kathy Case

Before the Polo Field

Stand in the center of the Polo Field today and imagine a dense forest with a small stream and several natural springs. (You can still find one of those springs near Railroad Avenue.) The green space that covered the northern-most corner of Haverford Township over 300 years ago is now down to about 18 cleared acres. Those acres have seen a lot of history during their struggle to survive.

The area bordered a path used by indigenous peoples for millennia before the European settlers appeared. The old path evolved into parts of what are now Montgomery Avenue, Old Lancaster Road and Conestoga Road, and it wandered from near Philadelphia into Lancaster County. Thousands of Lenape hunted, fished, and camped nearby over the centuries, and who knows what artifacts may lie beneath the earth.

William Penn had promised the north Haverford Township borderlands to members of the Llewelyn family (Morris, John, and David) in 1681, when he was still in the Old World, and before he signed treaties with Lenape sachems for the lands. By the early 1700s, Rees Thomas likely owned the land. *(Rees Thomas's newly restored log house (ca.1704) stands on County Line Road and Mondella Avenue, just beyond the hospital parking garage.)*

The Revolution literally passed by on the Old Lancaster Road. In 1777 the Continental Army took that road out of Philadelphia towards Lancaster; Anthony Wayne used it to go to Paoli; and Washington came that way to stay at the Buck Inn *(razed in 1964, now the Lexus dealership)*.

For at least 140 years a house stood near what is now the Polo Field parking lot. *(Neighbors remember this old house being torn down about 1980.)* L. Castner owned the Polo Field land in 1848 (1), and maps show a house on it. A small inn called the Castner Inn (owned by a Z. D. Sissler) was at this site in the 1800s (2). Did the original Castner house serve as this inn? Samuel Black did not own the Polo Field land until about 1870 so he likely did not build the house. *(Black's main house, "Upland," is the stone building next to the Ludington Library. He also bought the Preston farm and subdivided it into the Preston neighborhood of today, on both sides of Preston Avenue and the north side of Buck Lane between Haverford Road and Railroad Avenue.)*

Around 1834 the tracks of the primitive Columbia and Philadelphia Railroad were laid near the bottom of the field, heading to the White Hall Station *(now part of the Bryn Mawr Thrift Shop)*. The Pennsylvania Railroad had purchased the Columbia and Philadelphia Railroad by 1857, and the field had stood sentinel when Abraham Lincoln's funeral train passed by in 1865 on its way to Illinois via Harrisburg. The trip echoed Lincoln's earlier route to his inauguration in Washington. It is said he also took this route to

Gettysburg to deliver his famous speech. The Pennsy later built a new track alignment to eliminate the White Hall curve, and by 1872 Railroad Avenue was turned into a road.

The Bryn Mawr Polo Club

George W. Childs Drexel acquired much of the Haverford Township land along County Line Road up to Old Lancaster from Samuel Black's widow, by about 1892. (*Drexel's main estate was "Wootton," off Bryn Mawr Avenue in Radnor Township; since 1950 it has been the home of St. Aloysius Academy.*) A son of A. J. Drexel the renowned banker, George was the publisher of the Philadelphia Public Ledger and was a horse owner and breeder. He also planned the development of properties along County Line Road (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Polo Field area on Mueller Atlas map, 1896

In 1898 Drexel joined with others to charter the Bryn Mawr Polo Club, which existed until 1935. The first games were played on the Polo Field in 1900 when the land passed to the Polo Field Association officially. Even though polo was played on the field for only about 40 years, the name stuck.

A recent history of polo in the United States (3) notes, "...the green shirts of Bryn Mawr remained the most powerful force in Pennsylvania polo," gaining six junior championships between 1905 and 1920 and winning the 1912 US open, and a senior championship in 1914. Members of the Strawbridge family dominated; another champion was Charles Randolph Snowden, who owned an estate called "The Pines," across Railroad Avenue near the field (*site of Bryn Mawr Extended Care and several medical offices*).

The Polo Field Association hired the Philadelphia architects Keen and Mead (4) to renovate the old farmhouse/inn into a clubhouse in 1901. By 1913, horse stalls appeared along the property line near Dayton Road and in the corner by Penn Street (Figure 2).

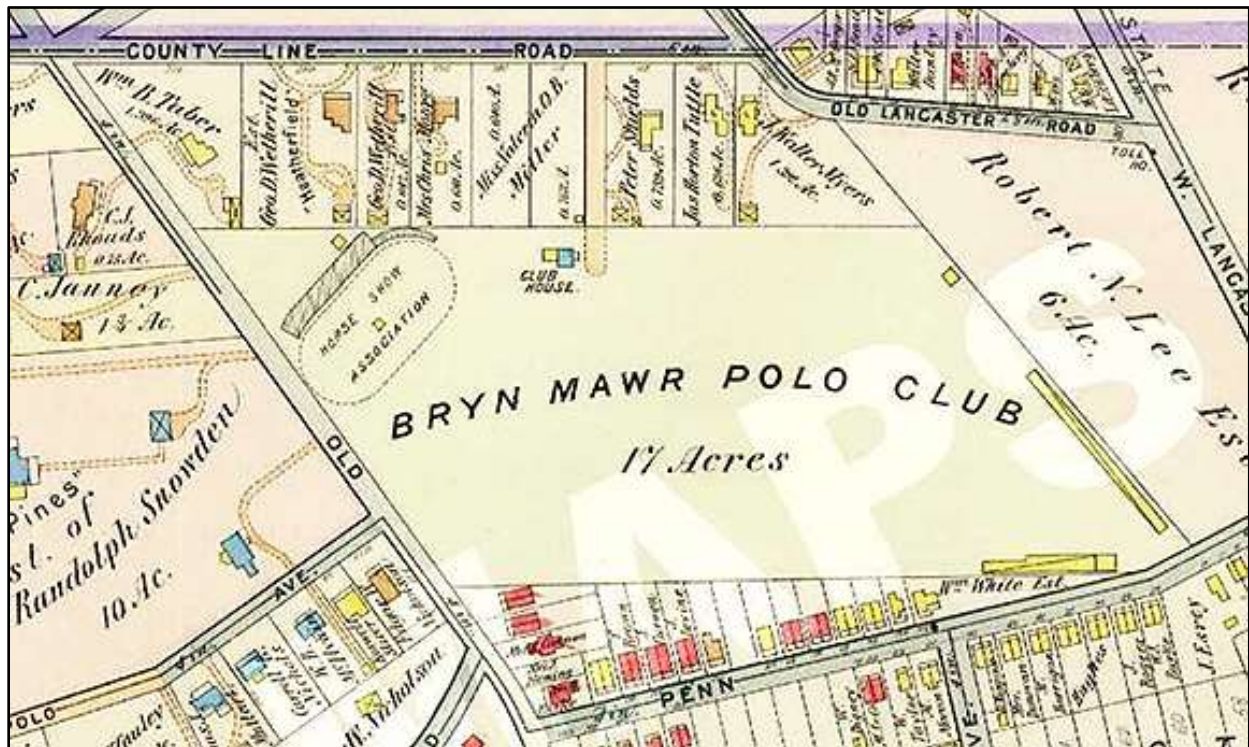


Figure 2: Developed neighborhood on Mueller Atlas map, 1913

The Bryn Mawr Horse Show

According to a horse show publication, Bryn Mawr was “one of the hotbeds of horse breeding and fox hunting of the East” (7). A group of equestrians, including members of the Polo Club, formed the Bryn Mawr Horse Show Association in 1895. The show was first held on the grounds of the Bryn Mawr Hotel (now *The Baldwin School*) on September 19-20, 1895, and continued through 1913, after which it moved to the Polo Field. Thus the Bryn Mawr show was older than the Devon show, which started in 1896.

Shows were not held in 1917-18 and 1941-45 because of the wars, with the last horse show in Bryn Mawr held September 25-27, 1947. From 1948 to 1953, the show teamed up with the Devon show (8) and then the Bryn Mawr horse show name disappeared. In the age of carriages, harness horses and four-in-hand teams were plentiful, but in later years hunters predominated and draft (working) horses were added. Famous high-society Philadelphia family members participated: Wanamaker, Ashton, Reeve, Drexel, Clothier, duPont, Biddle, Chew, Cassatt, Dixon, Lloyd, Montgomery, and Strawbridge.

Much press attention was paid to the attire of the gentrified attendees, often more than to the horses. Proceeds from the annual fall event went to different medical and charitable groups (usually not to Bryn Mawr Hospital, which got proceeds from the Devon shows held in the spring). In 1947, when ownership of the field had changed, proceeds went to Haverford Township, and the township got a percentage from the 1948 show held at Devon.

To accommodate polo games and the horse and hound shows in one field, a ring with tanbark base, grandstands, and a judging pavilion was constructed at the edge of the field near Railroad Avenue. (*You can still see the depression where the ring and stands were.*) The attendees who reserved boxes around the ring were named in the program. Platforms for the hound show were erected near the clubhouse, and there were many tents and pavilions.

The Bryn Mawr Hound Show

The proposal to establish a Bryn Mawr Hound Show Association was greeted enthusiastically in 1914. Launched by local sportsmen John R. Valentine (of Highland Farm near Coopertown) and “master of hounds” J. Stanley Reeve of Haverford Township, among others, this event proved more enduring than either polo or the horse show (9).

The dogs shown were often beagles (Figure 3) but also included a variety of other breeds. All were classified as hunting dogs (fox hounds). The 1915 show introduced whippet races.



Figure 3: Bryn Mawr Hound Show and Polo Field clubhouse

Hound shows were held at the Polo Field in 1915-16, 1918-40, and 1946-47. The hound show moved to Rose Tree Hunt Club from 1948 to 1955, and in 1956 to Radnor Hunt Club, where it is still held and still called the Bryn Mawr Hound Show.

Cattle Make an Appearance

In about 1931 a Bryn Mawr Guernsey Cattle Show was first held in conjunction with the Bryn Mawr Horse Show. The cattle show was discontinued after 1935. Perhaps the show emphasis on a means of milk production, rather than riding for pleasure, was a wise public relations move during the Depression.

The Haverford Township Historical Society has a unique collection of programs, medals, ribbons, trophies, photographs, and newspaper coverage of the activities on the Polo Field. This collection is housed at Nitre Hall on Karakung Drive. You can see most of these artifacts online by entering “horse show” (in quotes) in the Keyword Search at the [society’s website](#).

Parts of this history of the Bryn Mawr Polo Field also appear in an upcoming edition of the historical society’s newsletter, *The Haverford Herald*, and on [the website](#).

Building a Neighborhood Around the Field

In 1898-99, George W. Childs Drexel engaged Samuel Garrigues to survey the field and outline about six building lots along County Line Road and three along Railroad Avenue. The third lot surveyed on Railroad (about 1 acre) was later incorporated into the Polo Field grounds, although the survey lines for this lot continued to appear on maps for many years. These lots were cut out of Drexel’s original 26-acre purchase, and houses were built on them from 1905 to 1908. Several homes were sold to people active in the Polo Club or Horse Show, such as George D. Wetherill, who called his estate “Heatherfield” (*now 125 County Line and the Shamrock Lane properties*).

Penn Street was already being developed in the last decades of the 19th century, although by 1913 there were still empty lots (see Figure 2, above). The estate of Robert N. Lee, called “San Marino” (*the main house was approximately where the Acme is now*) was gradually developed into the homes on Dayton, Old Lancaster, Lee, and San Marino after 1920.

A Change in Direction

By World War II, the Polo Club no longer existed, the Horse Show and the Hound Show were suspended, and the mortgages and the taxes on the land had become seriously in arrears. By about 1937 ownership had been transferred to the Bryn Mawr Land and Improvement Company, founded in 1893, with offices in the Bullitt Building in Philadelphia. Little is known about this company or how it acquired the land from the Bryn Mawr Polo Field Association. One of the members of the Polo Association, former Pennsylvania governor George H. Earle III, was somehow involved in the Improvement Company.

Investment banker J. Gates Lloyd, Jr., who lived at “Linden” on Darby Road (now the Quadrangle office), had been voluntarily working to clear up the property situation for Haverford Township since about 1939. He had received assurances from the Board of Commissioners in 1941 that there was interest in having the Polo Field become a township playing field.

Lloyd acquired or paid off the mortgages and got assurances for tax abatement from Haverford Township. He also persuaded Lower Merion Township to advance funds in return for co-use of the field. Armed with these accomplishments, he met with the Haverford commissioners in August 1942 and was shocked to discover that some were adamantly opposed to having a playing field in the far corner of the

township, or “up there” as they put it. There was a 6-acre field behind the Preston School on Martin Avenue, which they thought was more than enough for recreation. Several commissioners’ comments had overtones of racial and outsider prejudice, and some wanted Lloyd to sell the field to a developer, to increase tax revenue.

Lloyd chastised the Board for bad faith, which, because of his standing in the community, was sufficient to convince them to support the playing field (10). The Bryn Mawr Playfield Association was incorporated in 1944, following Lloyd’s plan, and is believed to still own the field, which is perpetually leased to the two townships.

The Playfield Association’s bylaws stipulated governance through a Board of Directors representative of both townships, with one additional member to be nominated by H. Gates Lloyd, Jr. (who died in 1993) and renewal of the agreement every 10 years. Over the past nearly 75 years there have been concerns about maintenance, and many groups not from either township use and sometimes abuse the field.

Without an active civic association for over a decade, individual Polo Field neighbors have had to advocate with both townships for better care of the field. Consensus on how the field should best be used and preserved is lacking. Ideas include more trees and bushes, more parking, a pedestrian path, a running path, benches, water stations, fewer playfields and limiting use, enlarged playground and picnic areas, a return to entirely green space, and offering community gardens.

In 1915, tenth grader Margaret Eyre won a prize for her essay on a polo game at the field (11). She wrote, “Imagine a vast expanse of level ground, covered with such a wonderful, velvety carpet of grass that not a flaw could be detected...” and described “...the gently sloping lawn of the Country Club, its grass shadowed by the tall dignified trees into a deep and mellow green.”

Over 104 years later such a lyrical description seems a field of dreams... or perhaps describes a goal.

Special thanks to the following Haverford Township residents:

Richard D. Kerr, Haverford Township Historical Society secretary and historian, did extensive research and donated artifacts to the society representing Bryn Mawr Polo Field activities.

Gail Kennedy Lovett, Brynford resident and tireless warrior on behalf of the Polo Field, unearthed the Board of Commissioners minutes and documents about the transfer of the Polo Field to township use.

George Harding, Brynford Civic Association past president, noted the correct date of 1895 for the first horse show in conjunction with the release of his 2011 book, “Main Line by Rail.”

Sources

1. [Ash 1848 map](#), showing Polo Field land.
2. Farrow, Barbara Alyce. [The History of Bryn Mawr: 1683-1900](#). Bryn Mawr, PA: Committee of Residents and Bryn Mawr Civic Association, 1962, p. 44. Available from Bryn Mawr College.
3. Laffaye, Horace A., [Polo in the United States: A History](#), 2014.
4. [Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide](#), Keen & Mead architects.
5. [Klinge Atlas map](#), showing Haverford Township, 1929.

6. Plans from Jonathan D. Lenge (or Lengel), 1931, for [Bryn Mawr Horse Show Association box stalls](#).
7. *Show Horse Chronicle*, Vol. 7, No. 26, (August 1, 1917), p. 13. Reproduced by Google Books in [The Saddle and Show Horse Chronicle](#), Vol. 7.
8. [Harding, George, 2011](#), discussing his book *Main Line by Rail*.
9. Higman, C. Barton. [History of the Bryn Mawr Hound Show 1914-1989](#).
10. Minutes of the Haverford Township Board of Commissioners, August 3, 1942.
11. [Our Town](#), Vol. I, No. 40, Thursday, July 15, 1915, Narberth, PA.

[This article originally appeared on the Brynford Civic Association website. For related information see "Historical Society Collection Features Bryn Mawr Polo Field Events" under the History Resources- Events menu on the Haverford Township Historical Society website. The two articles were co-written, then tailored to have different emphases.]

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