

GERMANTOWNE *CRIER*



The Germantown White House
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Photo by Helen M. Bauhof

Mount Airy in Philadelphia: A Pioneering Community

By PHYLLIS KNAPP THOMAS

The author, free-lance writer and homemaker with two children, has written a series of articles entitled "Mount Airy in Philadelphia: A Pioneering Community." She spent months in researching the Germantown-Mount Airy area. From 1963 to 1966 she wrote and edited curriculum material for the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Since then she has taken an active part in various community projects including East Mount Airy Neighbors' Board of Directors, Day Care Committee, and Group Homes Board. Additional portions of the series will be published in coming issues of the "Crier."

Editor



Why the Name "Mount Airy"?

TODAY'S RESIDENTS of Mount Airy might well wonder how this urban community received its name. Except for the rocky heights along the Wissahickon Creek and scattered oases of green, the country scenery has long since disappeared from Philadelphia's Northwest.

Long ago in the pre-Revolutionary era of our history, villagers leaned their elbows on Dutch half-doors and stared in curiosity. An elegant carriage drawn by four black horses was passing by. Rarely if ever along the dusty Germantown road was a finer-looking coach to be seen! Members of the Allen family, and perhaps the former chief justice of the Pennsylvania Province himself, were on their way to the Allen estate in the northern part of what was then the German Township. Why William had decided to call the estate "Mount Airy" was anybody's guess, but the proud name seemed to suit the high and breezy place he had chosen for his country home.

As the years went by, the settlement that grew up around the estate came to be called Mount Airy also. More and more houses were built until the village of Mount Airy merged with the villages to the south along Main Street—Mount Pleasant, Beggarstown (also called Franklinville or Dogtown), and the uppermost part of Germantown—to become the city neighborhood we know today.*

*The Mount Airy mansion was on the east side of Germantown Avenue opposite Allens Lane. Mount Pleasant Village was located where Mount Pleasant Avenue crosses Germantown Avenue. Between Upsal Street and Gorgas Lane was the section along Germantown Avenue known as Beggarstown.

How Far Does Present-day Mount Airy Extend?

Originally William Penn had planned for four villages along the Germantown Road: Germantown from what is now Wayne Junction to Washington Lane (formerly the Abington Road); Cresheim, extending northward to the old Mermaid Tavern, once located on Germantown Avenue's east side at Mermaid Lane; Sommerhausen, reaching as far as Rex Avenue in Chestnut Hill; Crefeld, continuing to Streeper's Mill, where the main road crossed the Wissahickon.

Cresheim (or Krisheim) and Crefeld (Krefeld) were the names of towns in Germany where many of the early settlers once had lived. Sommerhausen was the German birthplace of Francis Daniel Pastorius, who crossed the ocean in 1683 to become Germantown's first leader.

The initial plan and the actual settlements, however, did not coincide. Upper Germantown grew along Main Street until at one time, in the mid-1800's, its northern boundary was Carpenter Lane. Crefeld and Sommerhausen became Chestnut Hill, while Mount Airy came to encompass the entire territory that was once called Cresheim.

In early times a settlement began in the uppermost part of Cresheim. An old map indicated that by 1700 there were ten houses in the vicinity of Mermaid Lane.

Today on the west and east sides of Germantown Avenue respectively are West and East Mount Airy, served by cooperating neighborhood organizations. West Mount Airy Neighbors and East Mount Airy Neighbors define Mount Airy's present boundaries as follows:

to the north—Cresheim Valley Drive

to the west—the Wissahickon Creek (although the postal boundary between Mount Airy and Roxborough is Wissahickon Avenue)

to the east—Stenton Avenue

to the south—Johnson Street (west of Germantown Avenue) and Washington Lane (east of Germantown Avenue)

Today's residents are becoming increasingly aware of their community as unique and distinct.

Mount Airy's Roots Lie Deep in Germantown History

The ship *Concord*, with its passengers on board, lingered near the shore of England for three wearisome weeks. At last weather conditions were favorable, and the long voyage westward began. Two children were born at sea. Otherwise, day followed day uneventfully as seven weeks passed with no land in sight.

On October 6, 1683, at least thirty-three persons from the German town of Crefeld, near Holland—men, women, and children—disembarked from the *Concord* at the small frontier settlement of Philadelphia. Most of them were Dutch Quakers in search of the religious freedom William Penn had promised. (During this troubled period it was hardly surprising to find on the European continent people with Dutch names residing in German territory.) They were met with disappointing news. The land they had hoped for along the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers had already been taken, and they would have to choose a location farther inland.

On October 25 the newcomers gathered at the home of Francis Daniel Pastorius, agent for the Frankfurt Land Company. His temporary dwelling, half house and half cave like other homes nearby, was located on what is now Front Street in Philadelphia. At this meeting—which for later generations marked the founding of Germantown—the men drew lots for the ownership of narrow strips of forested land in what is today the Greater Germantown area, including Mount Airy.

There was no time to waste. At once the colonists began the task of chopping down trees, clearing away undergrowth, and building the simple log shelters (mostly in lower Germantown) that were needed to protect the thirteen families from winter storms.

Soon more settlers arrived—Swiss and German as well as Dutch. There were members of the persecuted sects, including Mennonites, Quakers, and Brethren. There were also persons of the Lutheran and Reformed faiths, as well as many without any formal religious tie.

Skilled in a variety of trades, the settlers wove their own linen and even manufactured their own paper! The first paper mill in the colonies was erected just over the Roxborough line by William Rittenhouse (an early spelling was Rittinghuysen) in 1690.

As the years went by, so many German people settled in the Germantown area that the Dutch influence was almost forgotten. One reminder still with us, however, is the two-part "Dutch" door typical of local Colonial architecture. The next time you travel along

the Mount Airy section of Germantown Avenue, notice the doors of the Johnson House (#6306 at Washington Lane) and the Beggarstown School (#6669, next to St. Michael's Lutheran Church) as interesting examples.

Always a Changing Community

The Germantown-Mount Airy region was never as isolated as people once supposed. Local residents kept in touch with farm relatives in the western part of what is now Montgomery County. The Germantown Road, poor as it was, brought many strangers to local shops and inns. Wealthy men of trade like William Allen, who built summer homes here in the mid-1700's, received news from Europe regularly as their ships returned to port.

When the devastating yellow fever struck more than once in Philadelphia in the 1790's, people fled in droves to this high, healthful area. Here for a visit in 1793 were the shipping merchant Henry Drinker and his wife Elizabeth. The family stayed at the George Hesser house, then located at what is now the northeast corner of Germantown Avenue and Phil-Ellena Street in Mount Airy. Vividly Elizabeth described in her diary the terrors of the epidemic and the coming of the refugees. She also wrote about local events such as the fire at the Livezey grist mill. Elizabeth Drinker's journal, faithfully kept from the beginning of the Revolution until many years afterward, is now a treasured historic document.

The population of yesterday's Germantown and vicinity grew and changed. By the end of the Colonial period there were not only large numbers of German, Dutch, and English residents but also some Irish, Swedes, Blacks, Swiss, and French:

Always mobile, always diverse, these villages of old were never the peaceful havens of popular imagination! There were the inevitable frictions as people of differing customs learned to live together. There were tensions between villagers and "summer people." With the Revolution came even deeper rifts as opposing loyalties separated neighbor from neighbor.

Along with the struggles there were the quiet changes of season, the comfortable daily routines, the moments of joy. And there were the momentous occasions when neighbors gathered together to create something of value not only for themselves but for future generations.

"Think how your fathers left their native land . . .
And, where the wild beast roams,
In patience planned
New forest homes beyond the mighty sea,
There, undisturbed and free,
To live as brothers of one family."

—Translated from the Latin of
Francis Daniel Pastorius
(Germantown Records, 1688)
by John Greenleaf Whittier

Indian Trails and Traces

VANISHING in the mists of the past, the Indians who began Mount Airy's history are—to today's residents—a mysterious people. Lenni-Lenape* men, women, and children, with individual names that have long been forgotten, visited and encamped in what was then a wilderness. Their way of life depended mainly on hunting and fishing and changed the forest hardly at all. Yet we can still find clues that they were here.

Some of these clues are in place-names like "Wissahickon," one of the wildest and most beautiful regions within Fairmount Park. Through its rocky gorge the Wissahickon Creek flows sometimes peacefully, sometimes turbulently toward the Schuylkill River. The name "Wissahickon" is reported to be an English version of an Indian word meaning "catfish creek" (or possibly another Indian word meaning "yellow-colored creek"). Years ago, catfish-and-waffle dinners were a particularly popular meal at the old-time inns once located along the stream.

Indian lore clings to places in the park that are marked by unusual rock formations, such as the Devil's Pool. There, in that secluded spot where the Cresheim Creek joins the Wissahickon, the Good Spirit is said to have banished the Evil Spirit into deep, dark waters.

Another stream, flowing where Belfield Avenue and the Chestnut Hill Branch of the Reading Railroad are today, was known as the "Wingohocking." This name meant "favorite land for planting." No doubt the Lenni-Lenape Indians appreciated places with fertile soil as likely sites for their vegetable gardens.

"Tulpehocken," the name of a street just beyond Mount Airy's borders, comes from an Indian word meaning "land of turtles." Whether or not turtles were seen there, we do not know, but it is interesting to note that the Lenni-Lenape people of this entire region were members of the Turtle Clan.

Other kinds of clues such as arrowheads and stone axes were found north of Upsal Street in the Mount Airy section once called Franklinville or Dogtown. Farther north in Chestnut Hill (near Chestnut Hill Avenue) two Indian burial mounds were uncovered, yielding such relics as weapons, arrowheads, and beads. It is said that the Indians also used to gather at Council Rock in the Wissahickon Woods (near Rex Avenue in Chestnut Hill) until they moved westward in the mid-1700's. For a long time after their departure, Indian picture writings could still be seen on rocks nearby.

Today high on top of Council Rock is the figure of an Indian, carved in granite. Shading his eyes with one hand, he gazes into the distance. The statue as designed

*The Indians called themselves Lenni-Lenape, "the original people." The English called them Delawares after seeing them along the Delaware River, named after the first governor of Virginia.

by J. Massey Rhind does not represent, as many have believed, the famous leader Teedyuscung (or Tedyuscung) but an idealized Lenni-Lenape.

The Tragedy of Teedyuscung

Teedyuscung's link with Philadelphia history is as an able peacemaker between the Indians and the English at the time of the French and Indian Wars. His dream was for Indians and colonists to live together in harmony. A big, tall man, he was competent in speaking English and spoke it boldly. The Moravians called him "Honest John." But the records reveal that the colonists tried to exploit him when he drank too much of their rum. Generally he was too shrewd to be tricked by them. At last, however, he lost his life when his settlement at what is now Wilkes-Barre was set on fire. Although various stories were circulated at the time, the responsibility clearly rested on the representatives of a land company that had vowed to use violence if need be to gain control of Teedyuscung's land.

A Gentle People

Philadelphia may be proud of its tradition of attempting to deal with the Indians fairly. The Lenni-Lenape were viewed by the settlers as strong, honest, and hospitable, to be treated with respect. John Kelpius, the "Hermit of the Wissahickon," became their friend and learned from them about plants with medicinal uses.

However, agreements concerning the purchase of land could hardly work to the advantage of a people who regarded land so differently. When the Lenni-Lenape "sold" their territory so cheaply, they expected to be sharing it with the newcomers as hunting-grounds, in a spirit of mutual trust. Theirs was a culture constantly on the move. They resented deeply the way the settlers took possession of the land, called themselves owners, and excluded everyone else.

In spite of the differences in their ways of life, good will prevailed in the relationships between the gentle Lenni-Lenape and the peace-minded settlers of the Germantown-Mount Airy-Chestnut Hill area. Farm families along the old Germantown Road often saw groups of Indians passing by. Perhaps they were on their way to confer with James Logan at the Stenton Mansion (below Market Square, where they were given feasts). At the Wyck house on Germantown Avenue at what is now Walnut Lane, Indian travelers would find the latchstring on the door hung out in welcome. They would enter quietly, take refreshment, and warm themselves beside the fire before they continued on their way. Some Indians are buried in Mount Airy in the Upper Burying Ground next to the old Concord Schoolhouse (above Washington Lane at 6309 Germantown Avenue).

Tradition links the Indians with the woods that were once behind the old Johnson House at the northwest corner of Germantown Avenue and Washington Lane.

A member of the Johnson family claimed Indians camped there for a week at a time, performing feats of agility and making baskets and fiddles to trade with the villagers.

Farther away from the city of Philadelphia, the Indians' grievances mounted. Frontiersmen came in such numbers that land was settled without any thought for its first inhabitants. In certain instances, devious means were used by Pennsylvania's government—no longer under William Penn's leadership—to acquire additional territory. The way was being paved for some of the bloodiest episodes of the French and Indian Wars, when hostile Indians found themselves pawns in a struggle between foreign powers.

The March of the Paxton Rangers

Settlers along Pennsylvania's western frontier became frequent victims of Indian warfare. Their pleas to the remote and peace-oriented provincial government failed to bring adequate protection. Finally, in February of 1764, a group of armed frontiersmen known as the Paxton Rangers marched angrily toward Philadelphia. They would *make* those leaders listen!

All Philadelphia, and its vicinity, was in a turmoil. Military preparations began to be made. No one knew how many Rangers were coming. Word spread that they were determined to seek out and to kill the Moravian Christian Indians who had taken refuge in the city. It was well known that they had already wiped out without mercy a village of peaceable Indians in Lancaster County.

Boldly along the main dirt road through Chestnut Hill and Mount Airy came the so-called "Paxton Boys." On their way they met and talked with the Rev. Paul Bryzelius, sent to this area to discourage the German Lutherans around St. Michael's* from entering the conflict. Soon afterward, in Germantown, the Rangers were met by several important civic leaders, including Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Chew. Whatever was said, the unwelcome visitors must have been persuaded that their concerns were at least being taken seriously. They sent delegates into the city with a strongly worded petition, spent a rowdy night in the neighborhood of Germantown's Market Square, and went home.

Tragically, many of the Moravian Indians who had sought shelter in Philadelphia died of smallpox. A usually healthy, outdoor people, the American Indians had not had time to acquire resistance to European diseases.

By the end of the eighteenth century the unhappy Lenni-Lenape had retreated farther and farther into the nation's interior. Finally they were seen no longer in Mount Airy's woods and fields.

But they left their indelible imprint upon Mount Airy's history. Reminders of another way of life are the canoes still used on the Wissahickon . . . shoes patterned after moccasins . . . foods such as corn,

pumpkin, squashes, and melons, once shared by Indians with the first settlers . . . streets that follow the routes of well-planned Indian trails. Germantown Avenue was once an old Indian footpath, winding its way through laurel bushes.**

*St. Michael's Lutheran Church is located at the southeast corner of Germantown Avenue and Phil-Ellena Street. The present building dates from the late 1800's, but the church's history began prior to 1730.

**Germantown Avenue is a part of what was once the Minsi Path, named for a branch of the Lenni-Lenape that lived at Minisink Island, New Jersey, according to Paul A. W. Wallace's *Indian Paths of Pennsylvania*, pages 102-104.

Pioneer Spirit and My Neighbor's Good

" 'Called my farm Muscle-in-my-arm,' " cheerfully sang a four-year-old resident of today's Mount Airy.

" 'Called my shack Break-my-back.

Called my cow No-milk-now.

But the land was sweet and good,

And I did what I could.' "***

She was too young to know that the old folksong she had learned at nursery school came straight out of Pennsylvania's pioneer experience. Words and music alike resound with the axe-strokes once required to wrest cleared land from stubborn forest growth. The Pennsylvania Dutch (actually German) people who gave us this song were no strangers to hardship. Having fled from the religious persecution and poverty in their homeland, they first endured the terrible sea voyage, then bore the uncertainties of life on a little known frontier. How well they must have understood one had to sing and laugh in the face of all the odds in order to survive!

" 'Called my shack Break-my-back . . . ' "

The homes of the early settlers in the Mount Airy-Germantown region were made of logs, picturesque with their flower beds and vegetable gardens close by. Many a family had its home-grown flax for spinning and weaving into cloth. There were sheep and pigs, some cows, chickens roosting in the trees, small fields of wheat, corn, and hay, and apple orchards.

As time went by and families grew, homes were enlarged. A front room of stone (the livingroom) might be attached to the back room of logs (the kitchen). Some homes were built entirely of the gray mica-flecked stone found here in abundance. Steep, over-hanging roofs were typical. The doors were divided so that the closed lower half kept out any stray dogs while the upper half, opened wide, let in sunlight and fresh air.

At first, doors and windows were added as needed without much thought for over-all appearance. By the

***As translated by Oscar Brand; from *American Favorite Ballads, Tunes and Songs as Sung by Pete Seeger*, Oak Publications, New York, 1961.

mid-1700's, sturdy two-story buildings gave evidence of some wish for symmetry—at least at the front of the house facing the old Germantown Road. Nevertheless, the fine homes of the more well-to-do continued to be built with a marked simplicity of style. Notice, for example, the Michael Billmeyer House (#6505-07), where Upsal Street crosses Germantown Avenue. Or the Daniel Billmeyer House (#6504) and Christopher Mason House (#6514) across the street. Their strong, simple lines seem appropriate for a community begun by members of sects in pursuit of a "plain" way of life.

Among those who came in search of peace and simplicity were the Dunkers, or German Baptist Brethren. Some chose to settle in the part of Mount Airy north of Upsal Street once known as Franklinville, or Beggerstown. The name Beggarstown may well be a reflection of the Dunkers' active concern for the needs of the poor. For years a log building called the Pettikoffer House was a home for poor widows in need of shelter.

For the persecuted Dunker Brethren, a new land meant freedom—and a new beginning. On Christmas Day, 1723, a group of people in simple dress walked along a path said to have been an Indian trail (where Carpenter Lane is now) to the Wissahickon Creek. In spite of the coldness of the water at that time of year, a number of adults were baptized by immersion.* In the evening the group celebrated together a love-feast, including the rite of foot-washing.

For years thereafter, this close-knit band of German Brethren met for worship in one another's houses. Its ministers received no pay but earned a living by the skilled trades of those times. Peter Becker, their first leader, was a weaver. A later preacher, Peter Keyser, was said to have memorized most of the Bible while grinding bark for the Keyser tannery!**

In 1770 a stone structure to house the Germantown Church of the Brethren was erected at what is now 6611-13 Germantown Avenue. Amazingly enough, it is still there.

A symbol of peace, the building nevertheless stood in the thick of the Battle of Germantown during the Revolutionary War. On October 4, 1777, in front of the church General Francis Nash and Major James Witherspoon were killed by the same cannon ball.

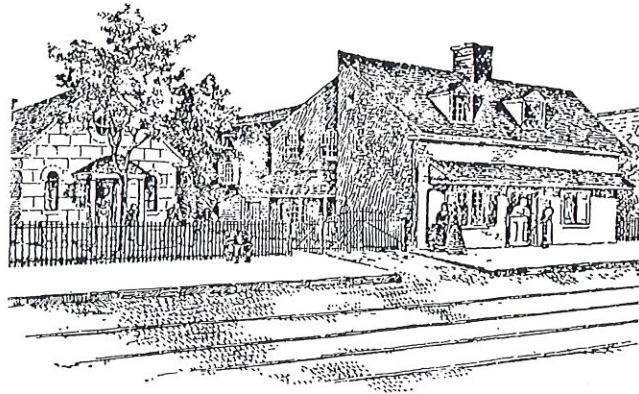
Many well-known names are associated with the church's history. Alexander Mack, a founder of the sect in its earliest days in Germany, joined the group here in 1729 and is buried in the Church of the Brethren Cemetery. Christopher Sauer II, married to Catherine Sharpnack (a Mount Airy street is named for the Sharpnack family), was Dunker preacher and printer both. He successfully carried on the work of his father, Christopher Sauer I, influential publisher of many works in the German language including an almanac, a newspaper, and the first German Bible to be printed in the colonies.

Unfortunately, Christopher Sauer II's peace policies were suspect at the time of the Revolution. In

spite of the many years he had served the community as a respected leader, he was arrested, mistreated, and deprived of all his property. A few years later, in poverty, he died.

Misunderstood or not, the Brethren continued to try to help sufferers on both sides in times of conflict. They also took risks to be of service during epidemics.

Sauer Bibles may be seen today by visitors at the Church of the Brethren's small museum. Also to be found there are foot-washing tubs and utensils for the love-feast. Directly over the museum is the sanctuary with its plain, white-washed walls. The absence of a pulpit is in accord with the Brethren view that congregation as well as preachers belong to "the priesthood of all believers."



OLD DUNKARD CHURCH

Today in the Mount Airy-Germantown area there is no longer a Brethren congregation. But the historic building, with its addition of 1896, still opens wide its doors. A tall, light-haired Brethren minister with a German last name, Ronald Lutz, continues a ministry of community service, which presently includes East Mount Airy Neighbors and the Northwest Interfaith Movement.

Through the latter organization, Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Protestant congregations cooperate to meet urban needs.

A banner on the wall catches the eye:

"For the Glory of God—
and my Neighbor's Good."

This motto was printed two centuries ago by Sauer's press as "Zur Ehre Gottes und des Nächsten Bestes." In either language, the words sum up what Mount Airy's Church of the Brethren is all about.

*Present-day hikers can find a plaque on a stone marker commemorating this event. It occurred near the site where the miller Joseph Gorgas later built his three-story house, sometimes mistakenly called "The Monastery," at the end of Kitchen's Lane.

**The tannery was located near the northwest corner of Germantown Avenue and Washington Lane.