

Willow Grove Walking Tour

This walk is conducted periodically, however the information covered on the walk is included here for those researching the history of the community.

1. Frazier's Hill

This area of Upper Moreland's 'Woodlawn Park' takes its name from the site of the Woodlawn Elementary School. Historically the area is also known as 'Horseheaven' located on top of 'Frazier's Hill.' Both of these names apply to the same hill. Theo. Bean's description of the area will supply the clue as to why the Geodetic Survey marker was placed at this location. (*History of Montgomery County 1876*).

"Several springs of water gush from out the hillside, and in the Willow Grove, furnish an unfailling supply to several fountains. On the north northeast and west sides these flow into Roundmeadow Run, which in less than two miles distance empties into the Pennypack. On the southeast side they give rise to Terwood, another branch of the latter stream. Sandy Run has its origin from several springs on the south side. This is a trout stream and a branch of the Wissahickon. It will be observed that this hill forms a dividing ridge and that its waters flow into both the Delaware and Schuylkill." This is an excellent description of a watershed.

Further descriptions of this summit by Bean are to found under "Natural Features" and read more like poetry than the usual writing of a steeled historian. The beauty of the summit also inspired the editor of the New York Herald to moving prose (*See 'Water Cure.'*). During the 1700's to mid 1800's most of this summit was still tree covered and provided many last resting places for dray and stage coach horses thereby becoming known as 'Horseheaven.' Many tales about the forest of 'Horseheaven' were circulated in the 1800's. Tales of a giant that took walks across the hill and stood 10 to 15 feet tall were common. "About 1790 a man from Ireland made his home near the hill and he dared to venture into the forest. He returned with a tale of a monster that actually swallowed its head."

2. William Frazier, Overlook Farms

By 1898 the small family farms were being bought up by wealthy Philadelphians and consolidated into summer estates. One such land owner, William West Frazier, had made his fortune in sugar refining and bought three properties in Abington along Meetinghouse Road. There he built three manor houses, Tockington, Avila and Chelton. After his retirement in 1892, being an entrepreneur at heart, he also purchased as much of the land between the Pennypack Creek and Old Welsh Road, and Easton Road to Papermill Road as he could.

Upon this land he created 'Overlook Farms', which took its name from the vista over the Terwood Valley from the east promontory of 'Horseheaven' or Frazier's Hill. Nine of the buildings from this development still exist. The Manor House still exists as an apartment house at Frazier and Manor Roads. Here Mr. Frazier entertained the remnants of his Civil War Unit, 'Rush's Lancers', each year before returning to Gettysburg for 'Remembrance Day.' A single farmhouse on Old Welsh Road was the home of the caretaker for Frazier's Settlement House Summer Campers, whom he brought out from the city each summer. The present Roychester building was Frazier's Turkey Farm barn turned into a youth center by his grandson, then a clergyman from St. Annes. St. Annes was built on land originally donated by Frazier for the

building of a chapel. A double farmhouse can still be found on east Moreland Road near Division Street.

3. U.S. Geodetic Survey Marker, Fredrick Hassler

On top of Frazier's Hill overlooking Willow Grove, government surveyors back in 1839 buried a small hollow earthenware cone. This clay cone was an original survey marker, one of about twenty in all, from the country's first U.S. Geological Survey. In 1869, and again in the 1940's, attempts were made to locate the cone without success. It was presumed to have been destroyed or just plain lost. On October 17, 1978, a Philadelphia Electric Company surveyor, working with the National Geodetic Survey, tracked down the long lost marker, three feet down in the Woodlawn schoolyard. According to Mr. Payne, a PECO surveyor, "The nation's first survey covered only the east coast. It did not include the rest of the country until after the Civil War. Today we use concrete post markers and there are over 5,000,000 in existence. They are used by everyone from utility companies to highway departments and bridge contractors. Such a concrete post was placed in the schoolyard to replace the earthenware marker." At the time of the survey, the spot was occupied by the Krier farm. The 1839 marker is now on display in the Upper Moreland Library.

Mr. Hassler, the surveyor, had emigrated from Switzerland in 1805 to establish a colony in the southern United States. Stranded, the mathematician was appointed by President Thomas Jefferson to conduct the coastal survey for the new nation. After many adventures, Hassler died in Philadelphia in 1843 at the age of 62.

4. 'Horseheaven'

Having returned to the street, note the very high towers to the west of the school yard. This point is one of the highest along the Edgehill Ridge that runs through the County from the Susquehanna River. There are no higher points between here and the Atlantic sea coast. This position makes these towers very valuable for transoceanic radio communications.

From an article by M. Whitehead and A. Gartenberg; Today's Spirit, 1976: "During the early colonial history of the surrounding countryside, Willow Grove was a central location for the many stage coach lines. Five lines passed through the village, which was then called, 'Round Meadow.'

Situated just 13 miles north of Philadelphia, the stages traveled through this area enroute to and from Easton, New York, Doylestown, New Hope and Lambertville. Roads were extremely bad in those days and travel was difficult for both passengers and horses. Many horses became injured or could not make the steep hills in the area. As a result, a stop at the intersection of Easton and York Roads was necessary. There horses had a chance to rest or were changed. It was here also that dead horses were buried. On the east side of the road near the base of the hill, the horses were laid to rest."

5. Henry Darwin Rogers

Source: T. Bean, Geology of Pennsylvania Survey. "Henry D. Rogers, afterwards professor of natural history at the University of Glasgow, but now for a time deceased (1878), while engaged on the geological survey of the State of Pennsylvania in the summer of 1851, made his investigation of this hill (Frazier's Hill). In the first volume of his work may be seen a sectional view of its structure and stratification. He stated that the stone here was identical with that in Edgehill and, of course belonged to the same formation."

According to 'Geology at Penn', "the department of Geology and Mineralogy was founded in 1835 with the appointment of Henry Darwin Rogers as its first professor. The appointment of a professor of Geology was considered boldly innovative because of the 'irreligious' nature of the subject. While on the faculty, Rogers became the first State Geologist of Pennsylvania and organized and directed the first Geological Survey of the State. This report (the hill) was beyond question the most important document on the geology of America that had appeared up to that time."

Biographies, Rogers, H.D.: Aug. 1, 1808 – May 1866, Geologist.

As you stand at the head of a steep drop before you, look north. The hill rising on the other side of the valley is Huckleberry Hill leading to the summit of Sampson's Hill. Hatboro and the Pennypack Valley lie beyond.

6. Sampson's Hill

As Old York Road approaches the Pennypack Valley, it descends the western side of the spring-covered Frazier's Hill. It is here that Easton Road joins it in crossing the Willow Grove Swamp. After crossing Roundmeadow Run, Easton Road and Old York Road once again go their separate ways. York rises to the crest of Sampson's Hill before it dips down into a wider valley of another tributary of the Pennypack Creek. In 1720, a Welshman by the name of Sampson Davis built a cabin on the crest of this second hill. York Road on Sampson's Hill has always been exposed to strong, violent northwest winter winds which are famous for creating weirdly sculptured snow drifts. Local tales of the ghost of a drunken Indian haunting this section of Old York Road, having been denied shelter at one of the travelers cabins during a blizzard and freezing to death, has no basis in fact. Because of the sudden and violent flooding of the Pennypack, this area of the valley had never seen a permanent Indian settlement. From the Lehigh trade, jasper arrowheads found in the Pennypack at Bryn Athyn during the building of the cathedral (1920's), the Pennypack appears to have been merely an access route for Native Americans with little contact with local residents. The reduction in the steepness of Sampson's Hill was necessitated when Old York Road became a turnpike. A dynamite blast sent a huge block of granite sailing into the top of a large cherry tree on the summit. According to Bean, "Here it hung for decades much to the amazement of passing stage coach passengers." He also mentioned that Sampson's Hill was noted for an excellent vein of commercial grade soapstone.

7. Newtown Road Schools

At the bottom of the hill on the south side of Davisville Road (then Newtown Road) near the Second Alarmers building stood the second school house of Willow Grove on a half acre of land donated in 1839 by John Rex, the original owner of the Mineral Springs Hotel. The first school was a crude log cabin on York Road and Park Avenue. The second school, torn down for new housing, was replaced as a school when a new stone two-story structure was built across the road on ground donated by C. Ehrenpfort. When Mr. Ehrenpfort purchased the Mineral Springs Hotel and grounds, he decided to modernize to compete for the city patrons to the new Willow Grove Park.. As a result he hired the same architect used by the Park. Horace Trumbaur had just designed 'Gray Towers', now Beaver College, for Frazier's brother-in-law W. W. Harrison. Trumbaur used the same gray stone for the new school building Ehrenpfort donated to the township. When Upper Moreland outgrew the Trumbaur school, it was sold and has been used

by the V.F.W., restaurants, catering services and lately a religious group. Due to renovations, the old school has 'disappeared.'

8. Sampson Davis, Thomas Parry, Benj. and William Morgan

Source: A History of Willow Grove Written for Schools & Community, Willow Grove Guide, October 16, 1975. "Thomas Parry: In 1731 he built a grist mill on Roundmeadow Run. William F. Morgan ran an ice business at this mill. The area now known as Morgan's Mill lies one mile east of the Grove. Sampson Davis, a land entrepreneur, bought a large tract, part of which we now know as Sampson's Hill." Sampson Davis operated the first grist mill at the Davisville and Terwood Roads location which was significantly expanded by Thomas Parry in 1731. Thomas Parry then sold the mill to Benjamin Morgan.

William F. Morgan is known to have run an ice business from this same mill. A typical mill village (Morgansville at one time consisted of ten houses) grew up around the intersection of Parry's Road (Newtown Road and later Davisville Road) and Mill Road (Terwood). The mill was demolished in the 1960's leaving nothing but a salvaged 'bridge tree' and a partial wooden gear now on display at the Upper Moreland Library.

"This mill appears in the tax records of 1776 as belonging to John Parry who also owned 106 acres. It was a contemporary of the Newsmith grist and saw mill in the vanished village of Yerkessville. The Parry mill was located on Roundmeadow Run. The name of the stream was given by early settlers to a small stream that flowed through Willow Grove and into an adjacent swamp. Roundmeadow had its origin in the many springs in Abington Township and after a distance of two and a half miles it empties into the Pennypack. Geologically, this run is interesting as fossils and traces of ordovician beach have been found in its waters."

9. The 'Water Cure' Institute, Dr. Livingstone, The Helicopter

There exists an odd connection between the Victoria Falls of Africa, Thomas Edison, helicopters and Roundmeadow Run. The curve the Run takes as it flows around the base of Frazier's Hill to the north to join the Pennypack can be seen in the curve of Davisville Road and the railroad tracks to Hatboro. Across the Run from the Trumbaur school was the 'Water Cure' Institute (Dr. Chas. Schiffendecker's Hydropathic Institute, circa 1850's). The mineral waters of Willow Grove had long been credited as curative.

The wife of James Gordon Bennett, Jr. came to the Institute for several summers for the healing waters. Her husband was the editor of the New York Herald, which he had inherited from his father. While Mrs. Bennett was at the Institute, Mr. Bennett spent his summers roaming the Pennypack Valley and living at the Red Lion Inn. It was from here that he sent a young reporter, Henry Stanley, to Africa in search of a missing humanitarian and explorer, Dr. David Livingstone. Stanley later became Sir Henry Morton Stanley and famous in his own right as an explorer (Victoria Falls).

In 1880, at Mr. Bennett's suggestion, Thomas Edison experimented with the helicopter. Although he was unsuccessful (1887), Edison said he believed the helicopter would become more important than the airplane. It is interesting to note that Harold Pitcairn, a local resident, should later solve the problem Edison could not.

The Upper Moreland High School now occupies the site of the 'Water Cure' Institute. The Vaux (Vaugh) Mill, lost by 1776, was located across Terwood Road on the site now occupied by the sewage treatment plant.

Retrace Davisville Road to within two blocks of York Road. On the south side can be found the 1924 Willow Grove Fire House.

10. Five 1880's Houses, The Willow Grove Fire House

Along the north side of Davisville Road between Terwood and York lie a row of five frame houses built during the 1880's. They differ markedly from the stone house construction of the 1780's. The passage of time and continuous occupancy of these buildings can be seen in the varied additions and alterations made to them. On the same side of the road across from the 1924 Fire House stands a pair of fine brick Federal-Style double houses.

Source: A. Gartenberg, Today's Spirit. "The fire company was first organized in the early months of 1906 after a fire leveled a general store owned by David Nolan at the intersection of York and Easton Roads." A hand drawn hose cart and hose were finally purchased after much effort and were housed in the Knights of Columbus Hall. The second task was to install an alarm system to call the firemen. It was common practice at that time to replace worn out iron 'tires' on railroad locomotive wheels. It was also common practice for volunteer firemen to use the old railroad wheels as alarm signals. The Baldwin Locomotive Works supplied, without charge' a railroad wheel tire to the fire company. It was installed in the wooden frame near the Roy Seller's Garage. In July 1924, ground was purchased on Davisville Road for the construction of a new fire house which was completed in August of that same year. The first motorized fire truck, affectionately known as 'Bertha' was placed in service on September 24, 1924. The renovated American La France Pumper is on display at the adjacent fire company building built in 1968. Eventually the 1924 brick building was outgrown and presently exists as a commercial property.

11. 'Hundred Horse Spring', The Fountain House Inn

The run-off of the Fountain House Inn's '100 Horse Spring' lies in the driveway between the fire house and the first block east of York Road. Running across Davisville Road is a rivulet of water. At first it appears to be a gutter run off. Closer examination reveals it to be cold, crystal clear and supporting a growth of watercress in its crannies. It would be easy to miss all that is left of the Fountain House's famous unfailing '100 Horse Spring'.

The Inn itself was around the corner, one block south along York Road. Between 1700 and 1730 several roads were built north of Philadelphia. The Old York Road was built through Willow Grove in 1711. This is the date given by the State for the founding of Willow Grove. The Byberry and Old Welsh Roads were laid out soon after. Since this location was "one good set of horses from Philadelphia", it was the logical place for a tavern and livery. The ample supply of spring water flowing into the 'Willow Grove Swamp' gave the first inn its name. By 1717, the Fountain House was built. The spring at the Inn was said to be able to water 100 horses a day. The spring is still running and can be heard over the storm inlet at Davisville Road and Woodlawn Avenue in front of the Willow Grove Moose Lodge, though seriously diminished and polluted. "The water of the Fountain House Spring does not have the strong odors (the rotten egg smell of sulfur) of the Mineral Springs of Memorial Park." Both springs fed the Roundmeadow Run, the last vestige of the unique Willow Grove Swamp. The Swamp was as botanically unique as is the New Jersey Pine Barrens. Only hidden away clumps of sphagnum moss and 'Horsetails' (*Equisetum arvense*) remain.

12. Willow Grove Post Office, 1812

To the south of Davisville Road, on the east side of York Road (73 York Road), lies a small two floor masonry structure. This was the third Willow Grove Post Office from 1920 to 1951. In November of 1700, the first pioneer post office was established in colonial Pennsylvania by an act of the British Parliament. By 1789 there were nearly 100 known towns and villages in Pennsylvania. Most of which had begun as a trading center or military post on the frontier. In that same year Congress established a postal system in the United States and began making arrangements for the transportation of mail. Stage coach taverns were both official and unofficial post offices throughout most of the 18th century. Unlike small post offices where profits were minimal, post offices at taverns promoted the interests of the tavern keepers. Mails were often opened in barrooms by curiosity seekers. Newspapers were frequently carried away by travelers to whom they were not addressed. It was therefore very logical that the first post master in Willow Grove was Israel Michner, the innkeeper.

From the Red Lion Inn the post office moved to a general store at Easton Road and Park Avenue, then into the Rush Building on Davisville Road near the train in the early 1900's. The mail was transferred from the railroad station to the post office by pushcart. Three hundred and fifty boxes served the community as there was no mail delivery service. From 1951 to 1962 it was located at 31 Easton Road near the Willow Grove Bank and to its present location in 1962 at Easton Road and Lincoln Avenue.

13. Seller's Garage, 'Bertha', 'The Homestead', Fountain House

In the first block south of the old post office building stood Sellers Garage. This much used site had once been part of W.W.Frazier's Overlook Farms complex. Before the brick fire house on Davisville Road was built, the hand drawn hose cart had been stored in a shed donated by Frazier near the site of the hanging fire alarm 'tire'. Sellers Garage, adjacent to this site, although much altered, still exists as a retail establishment.

The Fountain House Inn occupied the straight section of York Road north of Sellers Garage until well into the 1900's as photographs of trolley tracks and a truck accident will attest.

At the curve of York Road south of Church Street can be found another one of W.W. Frazier's Overlook Farm Houses. This one was named 'The Homestead' and predated its 1898 inclusion into the complex. County records give its date as 1725. The building still exists as an apartment building.

In crossing York Road and retracing your direction toward the railroad tracks, you re-enter the most re-used block of 'The Grove.' It once contained The Shot Tower, Slom's Department Store and Rothwell's Drugstore.

14. The Shot Tower, Phosphate Works, Trolleys & Trains

Source: A History of Willow Grove Written for School & Community, Willow Grove Guide, October 16, 1975. "York Road has other old buildings not so easily identified because of stores having been built in front of them. One of the most interesting of these was the 'Shot Tower' at the south corner of York and Davisville Roads. It is said that here molten lead was made into shot for the Army, The old tower was part of the building formerly occupied by Slom's (Slem's) Clothing Store, demolished in 1975." The story of a shot tower having once occupied the site of Slom's Store is intriguing. However, the building did not seem high enough to serve the shot making purpose (3 _ floors, including the cellar). There were odd circular masonry tanks in the cellar of the Slom's building which bore a strong resemblance to those used in the generation of

illumination gas during the Victorian era. A resident of the German Baker next door did remember the bakery having been gas lit, but could not say whether the building next door had also been gas lit. Rothwell's Drugstore later occupied this corner for many years.

West of York Road on Moreland Road near Davisville was the Newport Phosphate Works. Newport was part of the Edgehill Tyson family which was heavily involved with the smelting of iron and production of limestone. Other important commercial enterprises in this immediate area were an ice house, a creamery and the train station.

Trolley and train connections made this area quite valuable. The trolley line was between Jenkintown and Hatboro. Special bicycle carrying excursion trains were run from Philadelphia for day trips to Willow Grove.

15. Roundmeadow, Plank Road

The original name 'Roundmeadow' was lost when in 1792 Reading Howell, a cartographer in passing through noticed a man planting willow trees. Willow trees were used by farmers to stabilize and dry out the swampy soil. Howell designated the area as Willow Grove on his map instead of Roundmeadow. The name was adopted permanently.

The large stones used in the base of York Road kept sinking deeper into their marshy beds due to weight, springs, and the thawings and freezings of winter. It has been estimated that the stone road bed is at least twenty feet thick in places (as high as a two-story house). The marshy character of the site caused an intersecting road to be laid upon planks. The 'Plank Road' is now known as Easton Road. According to T. Bean, "At one time the Willow Grove Swamp must have contained nearly one hundred and fifty acres. To avoid its mirey grip, Old York Road was laid out in the shape of an 'S'. This configuration is still discernable today. Unfortunately the swamp has been completely drained and the Run laid into sewer pipes. "Aside from the clumps of tussock, calamus, several kinds of coarse sedge and carex also grew. There was a bog of black peat of from four to six feet thick lying on a substratum of white clay. From the abundance and variety of beautiful wild flowers found growing here, young ladies collected bouquets for the magnificent parlor vases of the city. Hunters came for the snipe and woodcock. Sour gums and alders dotted the watery landscape. About the only thing that remains of that large sunlit meadow are the black birds."

16. The Red Lion Inn

Source: M. Whitehead, Willow Grove Spirit. "Located at the junction of York and Easton Roads was an inn under the sign of 'The Wagon'. At the time of the Revolution this inn was bought by Joseph Butler and became the 'Red Lion Inn' until 1868 when it ceased to be a public inn. The site is now occupied by The Willow Inn.

"Just prior to the Civil War, no less than five stage coach lines made this their 'change of horses' stop at Willow Grove. The farmer traffic to Philadelphia markets was also very heavy. It is estimated that three hundred horses could be given overnight livery accommodation, and in the tavern, blankets were laid upon the floor for the weary farmers while the stage travelers enjoyed room and bed. The Red Lion frequently housed a hundred men who slept upon her floors. This famous old tavern was burned about 1880." It is to be suspected that part of the patronage load was carried by the Mineral Springs Inn just across the road.

"The Red Lion Inn was built in 1732 and operated by an anti-Britisher named Joseph Butler who was captured by the Red Coats and taken to Philadelphia. In 1777 when a skirmish occurred at Edge Hill and Susquehanna Roads in Abington, the Red Lion served as a hospital for

Morgan's (American) wounded troops. The field behind the inn was used as a rifle range by some Virginia Volunteers encamped in front of Jacob Dubree's house."

17. The Mineral Springs Inn, Dubree Scythe Factory

In 1868, John Berrell purchased the Red Lion Inn. Because of the decrease in stage travel, he gave up his business at this location and all business was then conducted at the Mineral Springs Inn. This inn was located on the easterly side of York Road at the intersection of Easton Road.

The Mineral Springs Inn was built in 1803 by George Rex and was later operated by George Rex, a nephew of the original George Rex, who was apparently a good businessman. He capitalized on the abundant spring water on his property which was impregnated with a high concentrate of iron. He supplied the water to his patrons for drinking. Later he constructed bath houses for bathers to use for immersion in the mineral water. His extensive inn and property included all of the hill up to present day Summit Avenue. After Rex sold the property, improvements were added as the imposing colonial-type hotel changed hands several times. The property contained a large picnic grove with a fair sized lake for boating and bathing, a dance hall, a carousel, an indoor rifle range, a number of small concessions as well as a large shaded beer garden. Prohibition spelled the final end for the inn, which was torn down in 1937. The land was purchased by the Willow Grove World War II Association as a war memorial and then presented to Upper Moreland Township as a park.

The fact that the inn was built on the site previously occupied by the Dubree Scythe Factory of 1799 might help in locating its site. Walls of the scythe factory raceway may still be found.

18. The Manor House, Willow Grove Park

One of the first houses built in this area, in 1719, according to available records, was the two-room, two-story and attic dwelling on Park Avenue near Easton Road. The house and some twelve hundred acres of land were sold by William Sluby and his wife Sarah, to Thomas Shute and Nicholas Waln. The property was Sarah's inheritance from her father, Dr. Nicholas Moore. The Manor of Moreland had been divided into five equal strips at Moore's death. The house was erected by James and Jacob Dubree, father and son who found the first industry in the area – a scythe factory. They added a pretentious two-story plus attic wing to the western end of the house. This original 'Manor House', a perfect example of early colonial architecture and workmanship had been restored at great expense by Harry and Phoebe Patterson. In 1950, they sold it to the Township of Upper Moreland for use as an administrative building. A new Township building complex was erected in its place in 1969.

In the next block west can be found one of the last of the large Victorian boarding houses of the Willow Grove Park era. It was constructed around 1910 and is now an apartment house.

Willow Grove

Historic

Walking Tour

Willow Grove Post Office, 1812

Sponsored by the Natural History Committee of the
UPPER MORELAND
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION