



Historical Society of Hilltown Township Newsletter

April 2022

In the last month's newsletter, we published the upcoming events for this year. Things are looking up! Our May program is at the township building and will show old images along Hilltown Pike, once known as The Great Road. Ivan Jurin and Bob Moyer will complete the program. In June, we will have a re-enactment of the Sanitary Commission, a Civil War support group. This will be at the Farmstead along with an Open House. See page 7 for a more detailed description of our May and June events. We will also have a program in August "Legends and Mysteries of Hilltown Township". You can obtain updates at our Facebook page as well as our website.

Contact us if you have an interest in touring our three buildings. They are available for viewing by appointment.

Donation

From Walton Kolb and Kathy Holloway, we received an old cider press, made by Hocking Valley. It needs a bit of work, and maybe we'll be serving apple cider at the Fall Festival? If so, we'll just need apples and manpower!

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Hocking Valley Senior Cider Mill.



Image from the Hocking Valley 1875 catalog

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I recently read about a census taken in 1880, describing a young lady named Catharine Cudley, age 15. Under occupation it read "Does as she pleases". Most likely this information was provided by one of her parents! I wonder what was listed for her in the 1890 census?

History of our Strassburger Farmstead

You may have noticed that there are several signs along Bethlehem Pike regarding our property. The oldest identifies the site as the Hartzell Strassburger Homestead. The second, and newest sign identifies the property as the Reuben and Elizabeth Strassburger Farmstead. Why? Read on for an explanation of ownership of our site:

The property that the Reuben and Elizabeth Strassburger Farmstead now resides on was once owned by the Hartzell family. Isaac Norris, a merchant from Northern Liberties in Philadelphia sold 530 acres of land in Hilltown Township to Henry Hartzell in 1748.

Between 1748 and about 1830, the property was in the hands of the Hartzell family. Further sales and purchases changed the size of the lot under the Hartzell family ownership. Tax records indicate that there were two log buildings somewhere on the large parcel. In 1830, John Moyer purchased a 120 acre lot. At about this time, the barn, red brick house and summer kitchen were built. John Moyer sold 34 acres and a contiguous 7-acre woodland lot to Reuben and Elizabeth Strassburger in 1849. This is when the addition to the brick homestead was built, serving as a store along Bethlehem Pike.

The property was counted in the 1850 federal agricultural census. It was listed as having 34 improved acres and 6 acres unimproved. There were 6 milk cows and 6 swine. Produced on the farm the previous year were 150 bushels of Indian corn and 600 pounds of

butter. Being a merchant by trade Reuben Strassburger had little time for farming, so he hired the Levi Gerhart and Gideon Appenzeller, the laborers counted in the 1850 census of population, as tenant farmers. They lived in the white building on the site, previously known as the tenant house.

Deed records for the property indicate that in 1861 Reuben Strassburger sold the tenant house and six acres to Thomas Proctor, a farmer. This separated the tenant house from the other buildings on the farmstead and reduced Reuben's land to 27 acres

Reuben Strassburger advertised his remaining property for sale in the Bucks County Intelligencer dated August 11, 1868: "[R.Y. Strassburger], intending to relinquish the store business, offers his valuable STORE STAND and PROPERTY, containing about EIGHTEEN ACRES of excellent land. The buildings thereon consist of a two-story Brick DWELLING HOUSE, 30 by 40 feet; a two-story Brick Store Room adjoining the same, 18 by 36 feet; also a large outside kitchen; a large frame warehouse and open sheds convenient to the store room; a barn and wagon house, 36 by 70 feet, stone stable high, with two threshing floors, carriage house adjoining the same; hog stable, wood shed and all other necessary out buildings. The buildings are put up of the best material, and are as good as new. The store stand is one of the best in the county of Bucks."

Reuben Strassburger sold the house and store, with about 15 acres of land to Henry A.

Moyer. An additional lot of farmland of 12 acres was included in the sale for a total of 27 acres. Henry Moyer was a shoemaker who operated his business in the store addition. Henry A. Moyer died c.1875 and the property was sold by his estate to Isaiah Moyer in 1878. The estate of Henry A. Moyer advertised the property for sale in 1877 in the Bucks County Intelligencer: "On November 6, 1877 there will be a sale on the premises of Henry A. Moyer, deceased, of Hilltown on the Sellersville-Line Lexington turnpike road, about 1 ½ miles below the former. Tract #1 is the well-known store stand, formerly Strassburger's Store, on 15 acres of highly improved land divided into convenient fields under good fences. A young apple orchard in the prime of bearing together with a great variety of fruit trees, grapes, etc. Improvements include a brick dwelling house suitable for two families with a large store room attached and newly refitted. A large barn in good repair and all other necessary outbuildings. The stand is in a good neighborhood, convenient to the railroad station. Very desirable home and business place. Tract #2 is 12-acres of arable land in a high state of cultivation divided into two fields. They will be sold together or separately by Joseph G. Moyer and Henry G. Moyer, Auctioneer is J.R. Krout."

The parcel of about 27 acres owned by Isaiah Moyer in 1880 was far more productive. The property had 25 fruit bearing trees and 15 bushels of apples were produced. Also notable is production of 500 dozen eggs from 100 hens. The 1880 census of population lists Isaiah Moyer as a 26-year-old farmer with his wife and his four daughters, all four under

age 6. Living with them is his father-in-law, 57-year-old Aaron Nace whose occupation is farm laborer.

The properties changed hands several times in the late 19th and early 20th century. In 1920 the property with the farmhouse, store and barn were purchased by Lewis and Lizzie Steele. They retained the property until 1928. Lewis Steele and his wife Lizzie were cigar makers in Hilltown Township according to the 1920 census of population.

The two properties: one with the farmhouse, store addition, barn and about 27 acres; and the other with about 6 acres, the tenant house and blacksmith shop were both purchased by Franklinville Realty in 1930. This brought back together the property that was the original 34-acre parcel purchased by Reuben Strassburger in 1849.

The president of the Franklinville Realty Company was Reuben and Elizabeth's grandson, Ralph Beaver Strassburger. Ralph Strassburger owned Normandy Farm located in the small hamlet of Franklinville in Whitpain Township, Montgomery County. He had nearly unlimited wealth, having married Mae Bourne, daughter of Frederick Bourne, the President of the Singer Sewing Machine Company. He and Mae received a gift of \$4,000,000 on their wedding day in 1911 from her father.

Ralph was a member of, and served as president of, the Pennsylvania German Society. A 1937 article in the Sellersville Herald states that Ralph Strassburger was dedicating his grandfather's home for the headquarters of the Pennsylvania German Society. Ralph and his wife purchased many fine German antiques to display in the

building for meetings. Some remain. The house was not used long as the headquarters for the society as Ralph Strassburger resigned as president c.1940. He moved to France where he owned a large estate.

Ralph Strassburger died in 1959 in France and his wife Mae died in 1975. Their only son Peter Strassburger inherited all of their considerable estate, including the Reuben and Elizabeth Strassburger Farmstead. In 1986, Peter donated the property to our Historical Society, the current owner of the site.

Many thanks go out to David Kimmerly. He researched the ownership when applying to obtain status as a National Register of Historic Places status. It was granted in 2017.

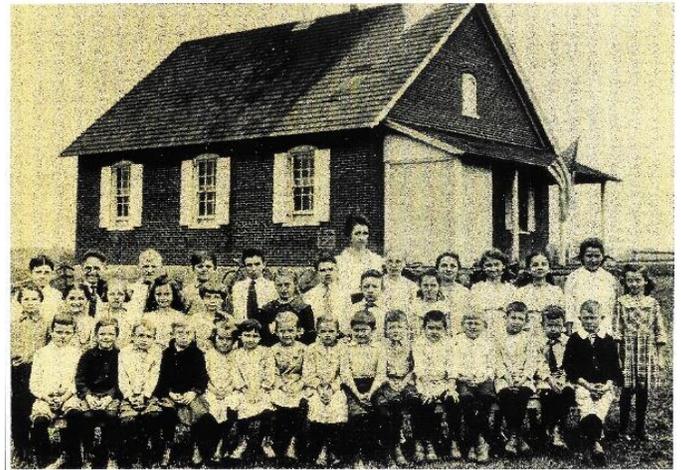
Published in the book “Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in the Olden Times” in 1884, the following oddity was noted; “1765 – There died this year in the Northern Liberties, at the age of sixty, Margaret Gray, remarkable for having had nine husbands”.

I may have published this story some years ago, but a recent donation made me think of it once again.

“Hilltown Teacher Heroine in Fire”

This was the headline in the Central News (Perkasie) Newspaper on March 26 1924. Elizabeth Bowen was the teacher at the Gehman School at the time. This is the school building that stands at the corner of Route 113 and Telegraph Rd. (Ice cream is now sold there). Miss Bowen had 34 students that day, ranging from 1st to 8th grade. Mid-morning,

she noticed smoke wafting across the adjacent field. At first, she wasn't alarmed, but in time, the amount of smoke increased. She went outside to investigate, only to find flames bursting through the roof and cupola that held the school bell.



Gehman School before the fire

Miss Bowen returned inside to announce that school was dismissed for the day, and the older children helped the younger ones with their coats and lunch buckets. Once all of the students were safely outside and standing in the field across the road, she sent some students to the neighboring McCormick home to send the alarm to the Silverdale and Perkasie Fire Companies. The teacher and some of the older boys went back inside the burning building to retrieve what they could. Unfortunately, the fire had spread too much and only a Victrola, a filing cabinet and a few books were saved. Found next to the saved items was a bucket of coal that a boy thought should be saved. The boys also attempted to rescue a piano from inside the school, but by the time they got it to the doors at the porch, the flaming cupola crashed down and they abandoned their effort.

When the Silverdale Fire Department arrived, flames were coming through the roof. A few minutes later, when the Perkasio Department arrived, the entire top of the building was in flames. The building was deemed a total loss. The fire was caused by a spark from the chimney that ignited the wood shingle roof. For the remainder of the school year, the students met at the Silverdale Fire House for classes. The building was rebuilt in time for the new school year, this time with asbestos shingles.

Now, we recently received a damaged school bell as a donation. Its origin is unknown, but we were told it had been at a site since the 1920s, only five miles from the site of the school fire. Might we have that Gehman school bell, taken from the site? The one that crashed through the porch roof as the children were trying to save the piano?



The damaged bell, today

According to the Bucks County Historical Society

“It would definitely be regarded as very morbid now, but in Henry Mercer's time it was not that unusual to gift young men going off to college with a human skull. It was supposed to be a reminder of the uncertainty of life and the certainty of mortality, to make the most of whatever time one was going to get”.

A Boy's Life on the Farm – 1800s

This is a look back to farm life in pre-Civil War times. Documented by Elizabeth Garber in 1956 telling about life of her father Percival Slough (born 1837) of Montgomery County. He was one of many children in a tiny house, so he was sent to be brought up by his grandparents. He lived with them in a small log cabin, one floor with a loft. He shared the loft with wasps and squirrels, who were trying to hide their nuts. Although the farm was 100 acres, farming alone could not support a family, so his grandpa took up blacksmithing also. Farmers from miles around would stop by with their blacksmithing needs. It was an efficient way of sharing news in the country. Everyone in this household had their tasks. Produce grown on the farm was taken in a covered wagon to a market to sell by the grandparents. One job for Percival was to go outside to the well and pump out enough water for their daily needs, then carrying the buckets to the

house and barn. On very cold days, the pump had to be thawed first.

The kitchen had a large fireplace with a bake oven beside it. Bread was a staple, and hops would provide the yeast.

The wheat, rye, corn and buckwheat were all driven to a mill to have it ground. The miller didn't take money, just a portion of the ground grain

Trapping was another chore, pelts were tanned, meat was eaten. When Percival could be trusted with a gun, (an altered musket in this case) shooting became a much more efficient way for small game.

Spring was a busy time preparing the ground for planting. It was also the proper time to hunt for new water sources. "Take a green willow branch that has been cut lengthwise, hold it by the leafy end and walk slowly". The cut end will drop to the ground when water is under the surface". Potatoes were always planted in the sign of the crab. (Each month has several days dominated by the Zodiac signs). To plant corn, take three steps and drop 4 grains of corn along the row. Why? One for the blackbird, one for the crow, one for the cutworm, and one to grow.

The women handled the flower and herb gardens, these gardens were always planted in the Sign of the Flower Lady, which comes a few days after a new moon each month. Wild herbs were gathered in the spring.

A root cellar was dug into a bank, high enough to walk into. It was lined with straw to keep the frost out. Vegetables were stored here, and were kept fresh and firm.

The grandma was something of an herb doctor. A common ailment among farmers

was bone felon, an affliction from milking cows. It occurred on the finger or thumb. Local doctors would cut them, but the grandma had a potion that would cure it. She was also able to treat warts and moles. She knew when it would rain by watching the behavior of the chickens.

In the fall, apples were sorted. The best ones were taken to market to sell. The rest were used for cider, applebutter, or cut into pieces. Early in the winter was for slaughtering the hogs. The scrapple and sausage were kept in containers filled with grease to keep the air out. This would preserve the meat. It was a neighborhood affair, a great social event. When the work was done, we would all dance. When the neighbors did their butchering, we went there to help.

The winter brought very cold temperatures. Ice was cut from the streams in slabs and stored in a hut lined with straw and sawdust. Layer upon layer of ice was put in, each separated with layers of straw.

Life on the farm wasn't all work. Strength contest between the boys were a regular event. Singing and dancing events were held, it was a good way to meet members of the opposite sex. Although growing up on farm involved a great deal of work, in later years, Percival reflected what a good life it was.

Bill Stahl

Upcoming Events – May & June 2022

Wednesday, May 25 @ 7:00 PM
“Villages of Hilltown”



The Old Mt Pleasant Hotel, aka Crossroads Tavern

Take a virtual ride up Hilltown Pike with Bill Stahl and learn of its history. See images along the way from the 1800s. Then join Van Jurin, as he presents ‘lost’ villages, such as Pennville and how Dublin and Silverdale became boroughs, independent of Hilltown Township. Bob Moyer will continue his recollections of Blooming Glen. Early photographs will enhance the program. The audience is welcome to share their experiences living or visiting Hilltown villages. The program is **FREE**, donations are welcome.

Hilltown Township Building – 17 W. Creamery Rd & Rte. 152, Silverdale

Saturday, June 4, 11:00 – 4:00 PM

“The Sanitary Commission of the Civil War”



Open House at the Strassburger Farmstead. Bonny Forbes will explain the purpose of the Sanitary Commission that was set up as a support program during the Civil War. Her group, clothed in Civil War era outfits will demonstrate the tasks performed by this commission. Program at the Farmstead, outdoors, 11-4. All buildings will be open to the public. We are planning this as an outdoor event, so bring your picnic lunch! We have plenty of large shade trees. As usual, all of the buildings will be open. *Rain date June 5*

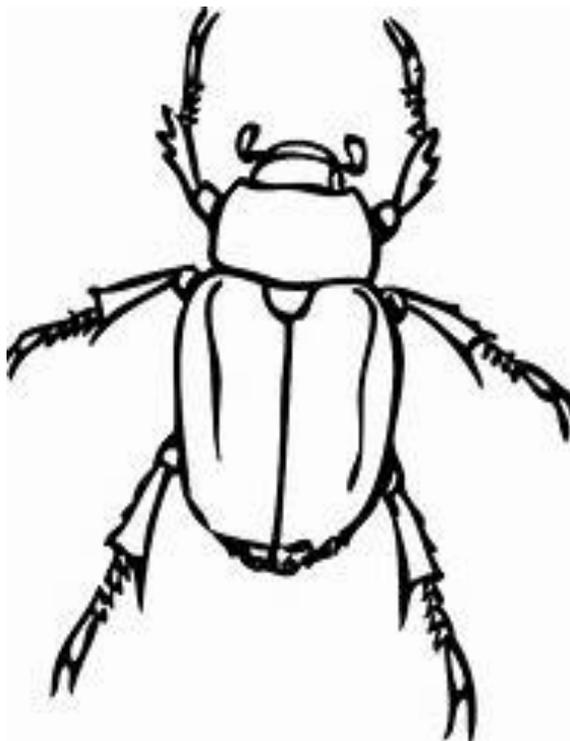
407 Keystone Drive & Bethlehem Pike, Sellersville



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Color Me!

Japanese Beetles

Those bronze-metallic-colored beetles are about ½ inch long and are seen clinging to leaves and each other. They were the first garden insects we were introduced to as kids. Because they were larger than a lot of insects, they were easy to grasp in the fingers and drop into a can of soapy water. When we were on Beetle Patrol, we skulked around the grapevines and roses grasping at every beetle we could reach. Their feet were kind of sticky and we didn't like that, but they could be brushed off the leaves and into a can without much trouble.

During the day, they feed on plants in the full sun. They skeletonize leaves in their feeding. At the end of summer, they burrow under the grass and lay their eggs.

From "The Garden Log" by Jean Skeath Stahl