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## MARCH 2014

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# The Challenge

**PRESERVATION • RESEARCH • EDUCATION**

## ROPSLEY – *The Estate of Francis and Marie McIlhenny*

A Presentation by Mr. Ed Zwicker III

**Thursday, March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – 7:30 p.m.**

**First Presbyterian Church**

*Bethlehem Pike & East Mill Road in Flourtown, PA*

During what has come to be known as The Gilded Age many distinguished Philadelphia families sought the rolling hills of Springfield Township to build their grand estates. Many of these esteemed homes exist today and continue to capture the imagination. One such property is Ropsley, the estate of Francis and Marie McIlhenny.

McIlhenny was a prominent Philadelphia attorney who commissioned the renowned architectural firm of Mellor, Meigs and Howe to build a home for his family in Wyndmoor, Pennsylvania in 1916. The house was completed in the same era as Edward T. Stotesbury's Whitmarsh Hall and the nearby Samuel Rotan estate, "Lanes End" – formerly the Wharton Sinkler Conference Center. The site, at the top of Montgomery Avenue hill was a challenge for the architects with nearly a third of the 4 acres affected by the steep incline and creek bed below. Early designs were clearly the work of George Howe, famous for designing the PSFS building in Philadelphia. Howe's training in Europe is evident in Ropsley's distinctive Tuscan villa style with tile roofs and open loggias. The final drawings show the hand of Arthur Meigs with both French and English elements of design predominating.



*Ropsley, commonly known as the "Poe House"*

Francis McIlhenny died in 1927 and Marie remarried Edgar Allen Poe, a relative of the famous writer, in 1932. Ropsley then came to be known as The Poe Estate and, after the McIlhennys, passed through several owners. The property was split when the gate house and a one half acre portion were sold off. In recent years, all original property elements have been rejoined and the

current owners have done extensive restoration to bring the house back to its original glory.

Join us on March 13th when Ed Zwicker III guides us through the history of Ropsley. The presentation will show how the land developed through previous owners before the McIlhennys and take us on a virtual tour of the estate using photos and original architectural plans. Last year, Mr. Zwicker, and his son Ed, produced a masterful presentation of the history of Laverock Farm and the Newbold family and we welcome him back in this continuing series on great homes of Springfield Township. This Historical Society program is open to the public and free of charge. Reservations are not required and light refreshments will be served.

**For more information call 215-233-4600**

### PLEASE NOTE:

*Attendees to the March program are encouraged to bring a canned food item to donate to the First Presbyterian Church's neighborhood food pantry. Please help us to support this important cause.*

# President's Corner

The 1st Annual History in Motion event was a great success! The event, held November 21st at the Ambler Theater, raised \$7,336.25. The proceeds will be used to begin the process of digitizing the Society's archives. I would like to acknowledge the many STHS Friends and Donors that made the night a memorable one. In particular, I would like to thank our Signature Sponsor Chaddsford Winery for their generosity and support. Board Members Vince Bruner and Mandy Helwig deserve much of the credit for organizing the

event and making it happen. We have already begun planning for the 2nd Annual History in Motion. Details will be forthcoming.

I am also pleased to report that the Rotary Club of Springfield Township applied for and received a \$3,000 grant from the Rotary District that will be donated to the Historical Society to further the digitization project. So, we are more than half way to our goal of \$20,000 to fully fund the project!

**T. Scott Kreilick** – President, Springfield Township Historical Society

"HISTORY IS THE WITNESS THAT TESTIFIES TO THE PASSING OF TIME; IT ILLUMINATES REALITY, VITALIZES MEMORY, PROVIDES GUIDANCE IN DAILY LIFE AND BRINGS US TIDINGS OF ANTIQUITY."

*Cicero (106 BC-43 BC)*

## Whitemarsh Hall Home Videos from 1931 Donated to STHS!

1931 was the last year of true Gilded Age splendor at Whitemarsh Hall, before the delayed effects of the 1929 Stock Market Crash and subsequent Great Depression forced Edward and Eva Stotesbury to curb their spending on lavish entertainment and the \$1 million annual maintenance for the mansion and its 325 acres of gardens and woodland. The head gardener that year was Maurice Deschamps, who was also an amateur photographer and videographer. Mr. Deschamps took a series of home movies in that year that capture many rare scenes at Whitemarsh Hall. The film opens with a trip through the front gates on Willow Grove Avenue, past the gate house, and down the 2-mile

long, crushed white gravel driveway, past the Henri Leon Greber statuary in The Plaza, through the woods, down Maple Alley, and finally arriving at the front entrance of the Horace Trumbauer designed Whitemarsh Hall. We ascend to the roof of Whitemarsh Hall for breathtaking views of the surrounding gardens, property, and country side. Deschamps then descends to ground level to take us through the formal gardens designed by Jacques Greber, and past the statuary of Frank Lynn Jenkins and Jules Edouard Visseaux. Following this are scenes that show how the outside property was maintained by a staff of about 70, including caring for the gardens, maintaining the 100-foot trees, and cutting of the grass with

dozens of tractors and hand mowers. A particularly precious segment is one of Mr. Stotesbury being attended to while he sits on the back terrace at Whitemarsh Hall.

In addition to scenes from Whitemarsh Hall, there are video segments of El Mirasol (the Stotesbury's Palm Beach, Florida home), downtown Philadelphia, and horse drawn sleighs on a snowy Forbidden Drive in Fairmount Park. The films contain many other priceless scenes, such as those of Deschamps himself, his wife and daughters, and a playful segment with a gentleman that is believed to be Jacques Greber.

Copies of these films were generously donated to both STHS

as well as the Chestnut Hill Historical Society, by Tina Adams, whose late husband Brad was one of the grandchildren of Maurice Deschamps. Accompanying the videos were documents that included correspondence from the Stotesburys to Deschamps, as well as Mr. Deschamps description of all the major plants and trees on the Whitemarsh Hall property. Segments of these videos will be a part of an upcoming presentation titled "The People of Whitemarsh Hall." Check our website and newsletter for the announcement of when this will be presented. We are very appreciative to Tina Adams for sharing these precious and rare insights into the Stotesbury's Whitemarsh Hall!



**History in Motion** – Our "History in Motion" night was a great success! We appreciate the wonderful support of our sponsors and the community. Many thanks to all who made this a success.

### The Archives are OPEN to the Public

Tuesdays 7pm – 9pm  
Wednesdays 11am – 1pm  
Saturdays 9am – 12noon

For more information, call  
215-233-4600

## Yeakel Cemetery Project Update

The final resting place of some of Springfield Township's earliest residents is receiving much needed attention. The Yeakel Cemetery Preservation Committee has been hard at work increasing public awareness, raising funds, and managing the preservation work at the site.

In the fall, the preservation effort received wonderful press with an article in the Philadelphia Inquirer and front page headlines in the Springfield Sun and Chestnut Hill Local. The Enterprise and Chestnut Hill Historical Society newsletter have also featured the project. These articles have helped to renew interest in a forgotten piece of our community's history. The committee's website has seen a huge increase in traffic and many have contacted the group to volunteer and donate.

The committee has raised nearly \$20,000 in contributions, so far, and is working to raise another \$50,000 for the project. They are currently in the process of applying for nomination of the cemetery to the National Register of Historic Places. National Register eligibility is a prerequisite for state grant funding.

The generous donations already received have made it possible to begin the project. A skilled team of conservators, working with volunteers, has completed a survey and condition assessment of the site. The detailed survey identified and recorded the precise location of over a hundred features of the site. The conditions, dimensions, and composition, of each marker were documented and all the data collected will be compiled into a report that will be archived, ensuring the significant historical information represented at the site will be preserved.

More work is ready to begin as soon as the weather conditions permit. Four hazardous trees must be removed and, due to the close proximity of fragile gravestones, will be carefully taken down by hand. After that, the conservators will return to begin the conservation of the gravestones. This first round of treatment will focus on cleaning, repairing, and resetting the most vulnerable stones.

The committee is grateful for the support from the community and is eager to continue the preservation effort. You can learn more about the project by visiting [www.yeakelcemetery.com](http://www.yeakelcemetery.com).

# SPOTLIGHT ON *Springfield's Historic Businesses:* **METLAB**

*First in a series of articles highlighting historic businesses  
in Springfield Township.*

Metlab Co., located at 1000 East Mermaid Lane in Wyndmoor, has been in the heat treating business for the better part of a century. For 70 years, the firm was owned and operated by members of the Knerr family. Horace C. Knerr, a University of Pennsylvania graduate who earned his degree in electrical engineering, founded the firm in 1928 as Metallurgical Laboratories, Inc. Originally, the company was in the business of fabricating aircraft airframe components then later specialized more in the heat treating rather than in the fabrication business.

After World War I, the emerging aircraft industry created a demand for the expertise that Horace Knerr had developed during his prior experience at the Naval Aircraft Factory. He patented the first “drop bottom” or “gantry” furnace. This furnace design revolutionized the heat treating of long slender steel parts such as aircraft wing beams – providing minimum distortion and rapid cooling. “The local commercial heat treaters did not have the special furnaces nor the specific expertise required to fabricate and heat treat the large, but light and delicate welded tubular configurations needed”, explained Conrad H. Knerr, 89, Horace’s son, who, along with his brother, Barry, 81, managed the business for more than 45 years.

“The company was first located at 11th and Montgomery in Philadelphia, added Barry. “Years ago, my father drove by what was once the Nelson Valve Company in Wyndmoor on his way to see a movie at the Erlen Theatre on Cheltenham Avenue,” he said. “He was surprised to see factories in what he had believed was mostly an agricultural and residential area. That prompted him to take a further look at the area and to relocate the business there.” In 1937, Knerr purchased the 122,000 square foot property on Mermaid Lane, retaining 40,000 square feet and selling the remainder of the property to Globe Hoist Company. With larger headquarters, the firm was better able to expand and take advantage of opportunities provided by the thriving aircraft manufacturing industry that once existed on the Atlantic seaboard but has since moved to the West coast.

Shortening its name to Metlab, the business rapidly expanded during World War II, assisting in the war effort and serving as a job shop to larger organizations. For example, the firm provided heat treating and metallurgical consulting services to the Budd Company (now ThyssenKrupp Budd), one of Philadelphia’s long-standing metal fabricators located in Hunting Park. “As Hitler waged war in Europe, the need for every conceivable type of military equipment greatly exceeded Europe’s ability to supply it,” recalled Barry. “America gradually became the arsenal that furnished a great deal of it. When America became directly involved in the war, the demand for heat treating in our industrial complex became huge.”

During this period, Metlab was recognized by the U.S. government, receiving five Army and Navy “E” awards for excellence in war production. Over the years, the firm developed an inventory of production facilities that made them among the best-qualified commercial heat treaters in the United States. Metlab employees have worked on a wide-range of projects that involved heat treating components such as railroad rails and switch points, helicopter spars, bearing races, gears, such as rolling mill drive gears and marine drive gears, missile cases and rocket bodies. Their reputation as one of the largest commercial nitriders in America helped them to win the heat treating contract for the 35,000 pound main propulsion gears for the USS Seawolf submarines, a class of nuclear-powered submarines used by the U.S. Navy during the Cold War. Later, this process was used for the nitriding of the ring gears, which control the rotation of the solar panels that provide power for the International space station.

## *Metlab’s Mission Statement*

*To provide quality, high  
added-value heat treatment and  
surface enhancement as a  
commercial service to the  
industrial community, on a national  
basis, in an environment which  
enhances the satisfaction,  
capabilities and pride of  
workmanship of our employees.*

Throughout its history, Metlab employees have contributed to the science of heat treating by making countless refinements to its processes—process improvements benefiting large manufacturers as well as the ultimate consumers. “Almost everything we use has been heat treated at some point in its manufacture”, explained Barry. “The man on the street has almost zero knowledge of this. For example, without the heat treatment of bearings, crank shafts, piston rods and gears, a car would not run 1,000 miles, much less the 100,000 miles plus it’s expected to run today.” Much of this legacy of innovation and continuous improvement can be traced back to its founder, Horace, who the brothers said was something of a “mad genius.”

Working at Metlab has long been a family tradition. Conrad and Barry worked in the factory and the office during summer vacations, “Our sister, now deceased, worked as our father’s private secretary for a number of years,” explained Conrad. Conrad’s oldest daughter, Andrea, provided the crew

that assisted in the construction of what was, at the time, the largest commercial nitriding furnace in America.

After having careers that spanned more than 5 decades in the family business, the Knerrs sold the heat treating business and its equipment to its present owners James Conybear and Mark Podob in 1998. Conrad and Barry then formed The Knerr Group, Inc., a real estate management company, retaining the ownership of the building in which Metlab is principal tenant. Conrad is President and Barry, Secretary and Treasurer of the enterprise. And the family tradition continues. “My daughter Marcie is currently working with us in the office to learn the business of managing the property,” Conrad said.

Though they no longer own Metlab, Conrad and Barry maintain offices on the site and are still very much a part of the community. They maintain the yard along Mermaid Lane as a green zone buffer between their industrial site and the residential neighborhood. “The community is very special,” said Barry. “Witness the Wyndmoor Hose Co. #1, which we support. We contribute regularly to the fire company, the Wissahickon Valley Water Shed, and the Salvation Army. We’ve also contributed to the laudable efforts to restore the historic Black Horse Inn.”

*Written by Dorothy C. Nickelson*

**Kitto Award** – Edward C. Zwicker, IV, (left), former president of the Springfield Township Historical Society, was presented with the historical society’s Marie Kitto Award at its recent annual meeting by current president T. Scott Kreilick. Zwicker, who headed the township service organization from 2004 to 2012, received the award for his contributions toward the organization’s mission, which focuses on the research, documentation and community education of Springfield Township’s history. Zwicker has given programs on township history and written books with his brother Charles on “Whitemarsh Hall,” a Wyndmoor estate the razing of which precipitated the founding of the historical society in the 1980s, and on Springfield Township. Under his leadership, the historical society relocated to the Black Horse Inn in Flourtown. He continues to be active in the historical society by volunteering in the archives and doing research along with his father, Edward Zwicker III, for future programs and books.



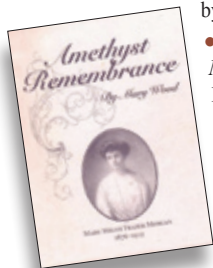


# Archives UPDATE

The Archives was fortunate to receive the following donations which enrich our collection and preserve the fascinating history of Springfield Township:

- Two CDs of films taken by the Head Gardener, Maurice Deschamps in 1931 of Whitemarsh Hall entitled *Whitemarsh Hall: The Estate of Edward T. Stotesbury* and *The Gardens at Whitemarsh Hall & Philadelphia Scenes in October 1931*. These CDs were donated by **Tina Adams** whose husband was the great grandson of Maurice Dechamps.
- John and Agnes Roberts collection of documents, photographs and maps donated by **Patricia Siedentopf**.
- The book *Amethyst Remembrance: Mary Welsh Frazer Morgan* 1876-1912 by Mary Wood donated by Mrs. Mary Welsh Wood. This book is a biography of Mrs. Wood's grandmother who lived at 8625-8635 Montgomery Avenue in Springfield Township. This donation was facilitated when **Molly Murphy**, who currently resides in the same house, uncovered the book while researching her property.
- Volunteer **Heather Killinger** donated another roll of archival tissue paper to finish storing the Whitemarsh Hall blueprints and completed the process of re-housing them in archival boxes.
- Five wooden columns and a pedestal that surrounded one of the fireplaces in Whitemarsh Hall were donated by the **Old York Road Historical Society**.

Anyone interested in seeing these items is encouraged to visit the archives.



## Reserve the Date

**Thurs., March 13, 2014 – 7:30 p.m.**

**ROPSLEY – The Estate  
of Francis and Marie  
McIlhenny**

A Presentation by  
Mr. Ed Zwicker III



Address Service Requested

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