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MAY 2014

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The Challenge

PRESERVATION • RESEARCH • EDUCATION

EARLY COUNTRY HOMES: EMLEN HOUSE & LAVEROCK HILL

A Presentation by Ed Zwicker IV

Thursday, May 15th, 2014 – 7:30 p.m.

First Presbyterian Church Bethlehem Pike & East Mill Road in Flourtown, PA

Located just over the northwest border of Springfield Township, in Upper Dublin, sits one of the area's oldest and least known historic homes: **Emlen House**. This grand home remained a private residence throughout its first 250 plus years of existence. The George Emlen family occupied the house from the time of its construction in the 1730's until 1812, at which time it passed through a succession of famous and not-so-famous hands. Yet during the last century, only three different families have called this grand house their home. The wealthy wine merchant George Emlen Jr. originally constructed a farm house at 1616 Pennsylvania Avenue in Springfield for his summer residence, while living in Philadelphia full time, as did his English immigrant parents before him. George Jr. purchased land across Pennsylvania Avenue in Springfield and Upper Dublin Townships, and built the more famous Emlen House at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Both Emlen houses still stand today. And what history they have both seen pass by their doors! With the British occupation of Philadelphia in 1777, the Emlen family permanently moved to their Whitmarsh Valley home. They played host to General George Washington from November 2, 1777 through December 11, 1777 in the main house, while his staff stayed at the original farmhouse across the street. From this headquarters, Washington directed his troops who were entrenched across Militia, Camp, Fort, and Edge Hills. They successfully repelled General Howe's British troops in a series of skirmishes across these ridges and valleys, before moving onto Valley Forge for their more famous winter encampment. Emlen House and its surrounding property would later expand, contract, and expand again as its succeeding owners molded it to their own family's tastes and needs. Today we are fortunate to have this well preserved Colonial era country home in our own backyard, although it is currently owned by a developer, so its future is uncertain.

Moving back to the eastern edge of Springfield Township, sitting astride both Springfield and Cheltenham, is the Gilded Age era estate of **Laverock Hill**. In the latter

half of the 19th century this consisted of a house and 23 acres of farmland owned by James Brooks. In 1892 he would sell it to John Clarke Sims, Jr., the secretary of the Pennsylvania Reading Railroad Company, who subsequently commissioned the architectural firm of Cope & Stewardson to raze the original house and build him a suitable country residence looking out over the Whitmarsh Valley. This Jacobean style residence, originally named Falcon Hill, was

host to many high society events hosted by the Sims. When John Sims died prematurely at the aged of 55, the property was put up for sale, and rented until a buyer could be found. During this time an heiress by the name of Miss Julia Garrett passed



Emlen House (left) and Laverock Hill

away and left the bulk of her estate to her stock broker, Isaac Tatnall Starr. He purchased Falcon Hill in 1915, and hired architect Charles Platt to remodel and enlarge the main house, and he then renamed it Laverock Hill. Starr would have Platt design new outbuildings and greenhouses, as well as remodel the stable and barn. Platt would also collaborate with Ellen Biddle Shipman to create a formal garden next to the main house, replete with reflecting pool and pergola housing a bronze statue of Pan by New York sculptor Henry Herring. Starr and his wife raised their three children at Laverock Hill, with daughter Hope being the last resident of the estate long after the death of her parents. This Gilded Age country home is today owned by a developer, and its fate is undecided.

Your storyteller for the evening will be Ed Zwicker IV, former president and board member of the Historical Society. He will recount stories of Emlen House and Laverock Hill, including their early beginnings, growth through the years, and the events and people surrounding them at different points in their history.

This presentation is free of charge and open to the public. Reservations are not required and light refreshments will be served.

For more information call 215-233-4600

PLEASE NOTE:

Attendees to the May 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

Did you know that Pennsylvania ranks 29th in the percentage of residents who volunteer a portion of their time in some capacity? While almost 52% of Pennsylvanians make monetary contributions to charities, non-profit groups, and churches; only 26% donate their time, and only 8% attend public meetings.

I applaud those of you who share your financial resources to whatever extent you are able. To those of you who give your time, however, I'd like to give you a standing ovation. We all know it is not easy to balance the demands of family and work. To volunteer adds another ball to the juggling act but, in my opinion, it's worth it.

Volunteers are critical to the well-being of our communities. Many organizations have small operating budgets and depend greatly on their volunteers to provide the services that we sometimes take for granted. Volunteers serve as role models for our children. The personal satisfaction that comes from giving back to the community is immeasurable. There are also health benefits.

While I have a special fondness for those who volunteer for the Springfield Township Historical Society, I encourage you to consider volunteering a little of your time to whatever it is in your community that you see needs to get done. We all have valuable skills that could be shared.

T. Scott Kreilick – President, Springfield Township Historical Society

"IF YOU'RE NOT OUTRAGED ABOUT SOMETHING,
YOU'RE NOT PAYING ATTENTION" —author unknown

Yeakel Cemetery Project UPDATE

The Yeakel Cemetery Preservation Committee is pleased to report the completion of a Survey and Condition Assessment performed by Kreilick Conservation, LLC. of Oreland.

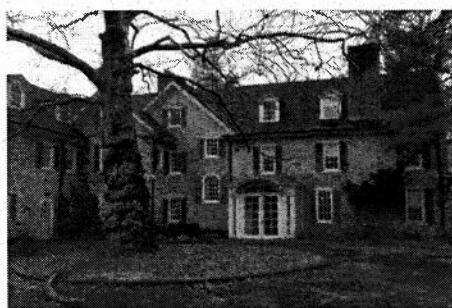
The grave markers are the most significant component of the cemetery. In many cases, they are the only artifacts remaining from the lives of these early inhabitants. Burial grounds are a treasure trove of historical information. The orientation of the graves, organization of family groups, inscriptions and maker's marks all contribute to further the understanding of our community's past. The completion of this survey is a critical milestone in the preservation of this site.

During the course of several weeks in the fall, professional conservators along with student volunteers, worked at the site laying out gridlines and recording the features of the graveyard. The team carefully identified over 130 stones noting their precise locations, dimensions, inscriptions, and condition. All of the data collected was then organized into a comprehensive report that documents the site as it exists today. This ensures the preservation of the valuable information represented at the cemetery.

The three hundred page report includes scaled plot plans, hundreds of photos, and detailed recommendations for the repair and restoration of the grave stones and will be an essential part of the cemetery's application for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. A copy of the report will soon be on hand at the Historical Society Archives for public review.

Now that winter is over, conditions are improving at the site. The committee is now scheduling contractors to begin removing three dangerous trees and re-grading the site to divert rain water away from the enclosure wall. For more information about the preservation effort, and to find out how to contribute to this effort, please visit www.yeakelcemetery.com.

Emlen House Tour and Ice Cream Social



Please mark your calendar for a tour of the locally significant estate, Emlen House, located on Pennsylvania Avenue in Fort Washington.

On Thursday May 15th, local historian Ed Zwicker IV will host a slide presentation on the history and significance of this property, as well as Laverock Hill (see feature article). This program will be held at the First Presbyterian Church in Flourtown and will begin at 7:30pm. Pre-registration is not required.

Tours of the Emlen House will be offered on Saturday May 17th at 9am and 10:30am and advanced registration is required. Attendees will meet at the property and will be able to explore the grounds to

enjoy the vistas and views and tour this important home. Photography will be permitted. Since the site is slated for development, this is a truly unique opportunity to experience this property before development begins and see the house before the proposed restoration. An ice cream social will follow each tour.

Tickets will be \$20.00 per person, \$18 for Friends of STHS. Advance registration will be required by sending the registration form along with a check payable to STHS to STHS, PO Box 564, Flourtown, PA 19031. Registration forms can be found at our website, www.springfieldhistory.org.

The entrance to Emlen House is located 2/10 mile northwest of the intersection of Pennsylvania Avenue and Oreland Mill Road. If traveling using GPS directions, the address would be 1951 Pennsylvania Avenue, Fort Washington, PA. Parking is limited, so carpooling is encouraged.

SLIDE PRESENTATION – Thursday, May 15th 7:30pm at First Presbyterian Church, Flourtown – *reservations not required*

TOUR – Saturday, May 17th 9am and 10:30am. *Advance reservations required.*

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The Historical Society has recently joined Facebook; find us at **Springfield Township Historical Society**.

**The Archives are
OPEN
to the Public**

TUESDAYS 7pm – 9pm

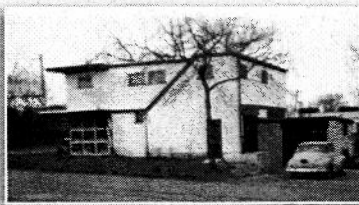
WEDNESDAYS 11am – 1pm

SATURDAYS 9am – 12noon

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

SPOTLIGHT ON *Springfield's Historic Businesses:* GRIFFITH POTTERY

Second in a series of articles highlighting historic businesses in Springfield Township.



Griffith Pottery House, Inc., located at 100 Lorraine Avenue in Oreland, Pennsylvania, is celebrating its 70th year in business. For all of this time, the firm has been owned and operated by members of the Griffith family. Originally known as the Griffith Pottery House, Inc., it started in 1944 as a hobby of A. James Griffith, Jr., while he was working as a salesman for a chemical company. "My Dad enjoyed working with clay, became expert at it and began teaching students the ancient art of ceramics," according to Kevin Griffith, the youngest of the family's five children who now runs the Oreland business.

Determined to turn his hobby into a business, Mr. A. James Griffith, Jr., opened a store at 23 Maplewood Avenue in Germantown where both beginners and advanced hobbyists came to learn more about how to model clay and trim, fire and glaze their work. In 1945, Mr. Griffith published a book, entitled *Simplified Ceramic Art*, which describes how to make ceramic pieces and ceramic jewelry and it became quite popular with students and hobbyists alike. During World War II, administrators for the United Service Organization (U.S.O.) clubs – the GI's home away from home – purchased and distributed copies of his book throughout the United States. This how-to book gives readers the basics on pottery techniques and also describes how to execute various decorative processes depending on whether the artist wants to create a household item, a commemorative piece or a fine work of art.

For example, sgraffito (in Italian "to scratch") is defined as a decorating pottery technique produced by applying layers of color to a ceramic or leather piece and then scratching off parts to allow the under color clay to show. "That's the process my Mother would use for personalizing a wedding plate with the bride and groom's name and wedding date along with a marriage motif in the center," explained Kevin, recalling how his mother went to great lengths to make sure the design, the inscriptions and the finished results were perfect for the newly married couple.

After the war, the hobby of making ceramics was developing at a rapid rate in the Philadelphia area so Griffith Pottery expanded, moving to its present location in Oreland in 1951. As technology advanced, screen printing was implemented so the family could produce larger quantities of items at faster speeds while still maintaining consistency and quality control. The business also grew through strategic partnerships with larger companies, such as American Olean Tile and changed its name to Griffith Pottery House, Inc., in 1974. The ceramic classes were soon replaced by large orders from customers for custom screen printed porcelain jewelry, ceramic tiles, ceramic ashtrays and ceramic steins.

In particular, more people wanted ceramic tiles in their businesses, hotels and homes. Ceramic tiles also became popular keepsakes. Kevin recalled one big order that came from the *The Ladies Home Journal*. "They asked us to produce 1,000 tiles of a red-haired Mom and black-haired Dad proudly pushing their baby girl in a stroller along with the saying "Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman," he said. "My father talked about this project many times as it gave him his real start into

production," he recalled. "Another large order, probably one of the most difficult jobs we completed, was for the Willard Hotel Restoration Project (now the Willard InterContinental) in Washington, D.C. "They asked us to make about 40,000 tiles and match them to wall paper designs from the 1920s and 1930s." Not only that, the tiles had to be arranged and installed individually to ensure the print patterns matched and lined up perfectly with one another.

In 1987, A. James Griffith, Jr., retired turning the business over to his youngest son Kevin Griffith. "My parents were my mentors; they had a high level of integrity and were constantly looking for new ways to improve the quality of the products," he said. "What's more, my Dad always met deadlines even if it meant working all night,

a wide range of clients throughout the United States, including corporations, non-profits, hotels, schools, fire companies and many other organizations. Though the owners have made some changes to the business, they maintain the family's commitment to producing quality work and doing whatever it takes to meet deadlines and their client list has grown. "We've enjoyed doing projects for Johnson & Johnson, McNeil Pharmaceuticals, Royal Doulton, American La France, Ahrens-Fox, the Montgomery County District Attorney's Office, Pepsi, United Way, Prudential, the Wildlife Preservation Trust, the Washington D.C. Historical Association and the Springfield Township Historical Society," said Dawn.

And they proudly continue the tradition of contributing to the Oreland community. "Most people know us well and we continue to help out whenever we can. It's a great tight-knit community," said Kevin. For years, Dad volunteered at the Oreland Little League. He ran the group and would do everything from planting grass seed to preparing the field for games. We continue to support the team, the fire company and other groups and donate to the annual Fourth of July Parade."

Kevin's two sisters, Nancy Griffith DePaul and Beverly Griffith Gwordz, recalled what it was like growing up as part of the Oreland community. "We were an integral part of small town America," explained Nancy. "We attended and helped build the local church, patronized the bank, service stations and stores in the community, buying "local" as much as we could. Mother was part of the altar guild, Brownies, and PTA and active in the community." Dad volunteered too and was so devoted to his kids that he would often work late into the night so that he was free to spend time coaching and being there for us during the day," said Beverly.

While much has changed in the business and in the community over the past seven decades, much has also remained the same. Mr. A. James Griffith, Jr., used to put the family's name, address and phone number on the bottom of everything they made so that future generations would know exactly who created their pieces. "My Dad stood behind his work and so do we," concluded Kevin. "We wouldn't have it any other way."

Written by Dorothy C. Nickelson

Mission Statement

At Griffith Pottery House, Inc.,

our goal is to provide you, our customer, with the highest quality products using our very finest craftsmanship.

Whether your needs are modest or extraordinary, count on the team at Griffith's to come through for you.

We assure your total satisfaction!

weekends and holidays. Customers appreciated that and would send us referrals. Growing up, I always wanted to be around my parents and helped out where I could, whether it was by sketching a simple design for someone who dropped in the store or by preparing a screen for printing in the darkroom."

As his Dad grew the business by being on top of new developments, so too do Kevin and his wife Dawn invest in technology that has grown the business. When they took over Griffith Pottery, they expanded the firm's capabilities by adding equipment that enabled them to do screen printing on t-shirts, jackets, awards and a wide range of promotional products. They've also invested in embroidery machines for adding sewn logos to apparel and a laser engraver to create custom awards. The firm's art department has also been upgraded with the latest computer technology so that a variety of artwork can be generated for transfer to any promotional product.

Today, the firm creates customized artwork, printing it on ceramics, glassware, plastic and textiles for

DIGITIZATION PROJECT UNDERWAY

Over the last several years, staff and volunteers of the archives have been cataloging the collections on PastPerfect's cataloging software. One goal of this project is to make many of these collections available to researchers online. In particular, our extensive photograph collection will soon be available for online searching. Researchers will be able to view photographs and associated information on their home computers and will be able to purchase photographs for home use and publication. In order to accomplish these goals, the STHS has raised \$13,000 through fundraising efforts, and a generous donation from the Springfield Township Rotary Club. These funds will be used towards the purchase of new computers, a high-end scanner, printer, cameras, and more. With the completion of this project, many of our collections will be available to the public online, and will help ensure the collections are preserved for many generations to come.

FROM THE *archives*

This photograph is from a collection of unidentified photographs in the STHS archives. Anyone who can help us identify this building is encouraged to email STHS at archives@springfieldhistory.org or call 215-233-4600.

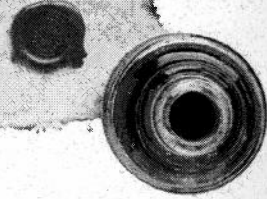


Reserve the Date

Thurs., May 15, 2014 – 7:30 p.m.

**EARLY COUNTRY HOMES:
Emlen House & Laverock Hill**

A Presentation by
Mr. Ed Zwicker IV



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