

A History of Franklin Township

Franklin Township is named in honor of Benjamin Franklin, who during the late 1760s and early 1770s owned land adjoining what is now the Village of Kemblesville; he took ownership, though an agent, of 200 acres to settle a Post Office debt. Like many other Chester County communities, Franklin Township's development is closely intertwined with the success of agriculture, the gradual construction and improvement of roadways, and more recently, suburban growth in Chester County and the Wilmington-Newark metropolitan area.

The earliest known inhabitants of the area were the Lenni Lenape, an Algonquian tribe. Their settlements were largely independent and governed by their own chiefs. The Lenape cultivated a variety of crops especially beans, corn, and pumpkins and squash and gathered wild fruits and nuts. They burned off forest underbrush to encourage the grasses favored by the game they hunted, creating a parklike environment in the woodlands. The only documented site associated with them in the area is the village called Minguannan on the White Clay Creek in London Britain. The comparatively peaceful Lenni Lenape were often in conflict with the Susquehannocks (to their west) and the Iroquois (to their north), and were a tributary tribe to the first when the Swedes arrived and to the second in William Penn's time.



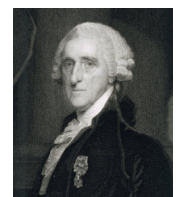
The area of SE Pennsylvania that includes Franklin Township was claimed by the Dutch as part of New Netherlands in 1609. From 1638 to 1655 it was part of New Sweden. It reverted to Dutch rule (as part of the colony of New Amstel from 1656 to 1664), then passed to the English control from 1664 (as part of New York). Called Upland County by the Swedes, the area became Pennsylvania's Chester County in 1682.



Northern and eastern Franklin was once London Company land; it received its lands from William Penn in 1699. Its 17,000-acre London Tract was mostly located in present-day London Grove, London Britain, and Franklin (the last two were originally part of New London). Much of this land was originally leased with stipulations that a certain number of acres be cleared and plowed yearly. The remainder of the township was originally smaller Penn grants, with some exceptions. Some settlers of these grants received land from the Penns as early as 1704, but most settlement occurred later. London Tract settlers began to obtain deeds from the London Company in 1722 and 1723. South of Strickersville Road, some settlers obtained their land from a grant that originated with the Calverts, the proprietors of Maryland, due to competing claims over the Maryland–Pennsylvania boundary. In the 1710s the part of this grant now in Franklin was deeded to members of the Alexander family, who had apparently already settled and farmed the land many years before that, suggesting that they were — or were among — the earliest European settlers of Franklin.

New London, of which Franklin was part at the time, was chartered as a township in 1723. The eastern border of what would become Franklin was established two years later when London Britain was separated from New London. The southern boundary of the Township, with Maryland, is part of the Mason-Dixon Line, which was surveyed in the 1760s by Englishmen Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon as part of the settlement of the boundary dispute between the Calverts and the Penns.

In the 1700s this area was divided into large farms with widely dispersed farmsteads. Most of the first residences were one-story buildings with a single interior room, sometimes with a loft. Though few exist today, some examples remain, such as the rear portion of the Susan Fury House on Den Road. The “Widow Fury” (presumably Elizabeth Fury, an ancestor) is listed on the tax rolls of 1753, and Fury's, an early tavern, is a landmark on Reading Howell's 1792 map of Pennsylvania. An earlier settler was Susannah McKean. The McKean Farmhouse (c.1720) has a side-hall plan and is one of the earliest examples of it in rural Pennsylvania. Her grandson Thomas McKean (1734–



Thomas McKean

1817), born on Franklin township land, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence (as a Delaware representative). He served as president (governor) of Delaware, chief justice of Pennsylvania, and governor of Pennsylvania.

Milling grew in prominence in the 1700s and remained important through the 1800s. Most mills were grist mills, but many were equipped with a saw or paper mill. An 1847 map of Chester County shows six mills on streams in Franklin. Three of Franklin's former mills remain standing, and ruins of other mills and their races are still visible. By 1750, the road from Lancaster to Newark was laid out, and it became a major route for moving agricultural products, though in those early years goods were typically transported to the ports of Newport or Christiana, Delaware. Inns and stagecoach stops were established, including the the Furey family's Plow and Harrow Inn (c.1758) and the McCleave tavern (1763, the predecessor of the Kemblesville Hotel), as were Franklin's villages, Kemblesville and Chesterville.

In the early 1800s, the Kemblesville area boasted three mills, a hotel, and later a nearby pottery works (Darlington Cope's pottery, after 1840). In 1816, the village shows up on a map as Kimble (after Samuel Kimble's tavern). It later was known as Kimbleville, after the same family, descended from John J. Kimble, who settled in 1793 on former McKean land. John's youngest son, George, was a storekeeper who opened the village's first post office in his shop in 1823. George's brother Samuel operated the Kemblesville Hotel and tavern, which became the local polling place. Family members spelled the name "Kimble" or "Kemble," and throughout the 19th century the name of the village vacillated among "Kimbleville," "Kimblesville," and "Kemblesville."



Flint Hill Methodist Church

Walker Road. That congregation dated to the late 1840s. The church later served other congregations and as a school. The Auburn Baptist Church was also built in the mid-1800s, although it has undergone alterations; its congregation remains active today.

Chesterville, the other main settlement in Franklin, was a compact village with several buildings; both it and "Kimbleville" appear on Bowen's 1847 map as two of the three settlements in New London Township. A post office opened in Chesterville in 1848 in a store operated by Samuel Byles; Milton Shortlidge served as the first postmaster. On the opposite corner was the Wiliam Missimer Farm. Missimer operated a wheelwright and blacksmith shop. Chesterville was never as large or important to the local economy as Kemblesville; its post office closed in 1901.

Agriculture continued to be profitable throughout the 1800s and farming remained economically important into the mid-1900s. Increasing grain output in the early 1800 and a shift to commercial farming made possible by the railroads led to the construction of larger barns. Chester County became an important dairy supplier to Philadelphia and elsewhere. The development of rail lines skirted Franklin Township; the closest line in Pennsylvania was the Pennsylvania & Delaware Railroad, which followed the White Clay's East Branch to Landenberg and beyond, cutting through extreme northeastern Franklin Township. The Wilmington & Western also stopped in nearby Landenberg.

In the autumn of 1876, William Nesbit began publishing a paper in Kemblesville called *The Item*, which ran for about two years. Nesbit then started *The Register*, which was for a time a semimonthly and then became a weekly. Its publication ceased some time in 1879, and Nesbit removed to Philadelphia.



Before the 1830s, most schools were funded by parents. In the 1830s, the “Common School System” was introduced, which required municipalities to be divided into local school districts, each served by its own schoolhouse. A number of one-room schoolhouses were in operation in Franklin Township between 1875 and 1956, when the Kemblesville Elementary School was built and the system was fully absorbed into the Avon Grove School District (est. 1953).

As the 19th century ended, Kemblesville had become increasingly important as a commercial center. Dr. J .G. West had become one of the leading citizens of the village. A medical doctor and a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania who moved here in 1860, West lived in a large brick house at New London and Appleton roads. He added a wing to his house in the late 1800s where he operated a drug store and post office and, after retiring from his practice (he was succeeded by his son Frederick), he served in the Pennsylvania legislature.



The West House in Kemblesville

Gas lines and steam heat were installed in the Kemblesville Hotel in 1905, and electricity arrived in the village in 1908. Telephone lines had already come to Kemblesville in 1895, and the first exchange was established in the West drug store. In subsequent decades, phone lines and electricity were extended throughout the Township. In 1911, a stagecoach service carried mail and passengers between Kemblesville and Newark twice a day.



Routes 896 and 841

In 1920, the Franklin Township Board of Supervisors adopted a resolution to borrow \$30,000 for improving New London Road (Route 896) from London Britain to New London. This was completed in the spring of 1922. Residents petitioned and voted to have Franklin Township declared “dry” in 1933, the same year that the 21st Amendment to the U.S. Constitution repealing the national prohibition on liquor was ratified. (It has been implied that before Prohibition, workers from Elk Mills found Kemblesville to be a lively spot on Saturday nights.)

The development of the automobile led to upgraded roads, which led to new residential construction. Most new residents did not work in nearby fields or businesses but drove to work elsewhere. Shopping also changed, as it became possible to drive to Newark, Wilmington, and elsewhere for a greater selection of consumer goods. Traditional but obsolescent businesses in Kemblesville, such as the saddlery and blacksmith shop, closed or were transformed by the times, and other businesses also ceased operating, such as the general store (1955) and the hotel (1969). In the mid-1980s — more than 100 years after it was established — the Township government moved into an official township building, converting a former farm machine shop to offices and meeting space.

As the 21st century began, Franklin Township had changed from an agricultural township to a rural bedroom community. Though many farms became residential developments, the Township has seen some growth in small horse farms, nurseries, wineries and vineyards, and the like. The community has also seen the growth of new churches, and although the Kemblesville Elementary School closed in 2003, the building reopened as part of the Avon Grove Charter School in 2008. The Township has developed a township park and acquired preserve land, and state and trust preserve lands also have been established in Franklin.

Follow the Franklin Township Historical Commission on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/FTHCPA> and check out Township historical information and resources at <https://history.franklintownship.us/>

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