



Historical Society of Hilltown Township Newsletter

December 2024

Once again, we are near the year's end. It means the holiday season is upon us, Winter begins, daylight disappears, and the Historical Society of Hilltown Township sends out our dues and donation forms. We ask, almost apologetically, for help, as we cannot do everything needed without help from you. Enclosed is the dues and donation application. If you are already a life member, please forward it to someone else. The only way to receive these newsletters is if you are a member. We thank you in advance.



The Year 1975

How well do you remember 1975? Some, maybe nothing at all! Here are a few highlights:

Gerald Ford was the president.

The Vietnam War officially ended.

Rubik's Cube and pet rocks were popular.

Saturday Night Live premiered.

A stamp cost a dime.

A quart of milk cost 46 cents.

The Historical Society of Hilltown Township was founded! Yes, in 2025, we will celebrate our 50th anniversary. Read further in the newsletter how we will celebrate the event.

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Hunsberger school

Sometimes, the more a subject is researched, the more conflicting information is compiled. What do we do about that?

I found documentation that the Hunsberger School was built in 1850 on land sold by Abraham Hunsberger. It was a stone building on Quarry Road. Today, it exists as a private residence.

Our ongoing archival work came up with such a conflicting document. We have a copy of the original as well as a transcription. It was written in German, and it is an offer from Jacob Oberholtzer to teach school at the Hunsberger School. It reads as follows:

I, Jacob Oberholtzer, announce to you Hilltown people that I intend to keep school in the Hunsberger school house, if you would provide for me 25 children, and every parent that sends a child must pay the daily tuition of 2 cents. And if there are no further hinderances, I intend to begin the school on the 5th of January 1823, and for the following three months. And all who will send children to this school house must provide the school house with sufficient wood to keep the school house warm. And I promise to teach the children in reading, writing, singing, praying and spelling as far as I am able.

*Jacob Oberholtzer,
Schoolmaster*

Did he teach in German only? Was he bilingual? I would assume that Mr. Oberholtzer wrote this in late 1822, or some 30 years before other records indicate the building was built. There is no point worrying about this discrepancy. What we can say is that this school building is very old indeed.



We recently lost another friend to Hilltown and our Historical Society. Recently, Eleanor Buehner passed. I looked for her at our Fall Festival, only to discover later, on that same day, was her Memorial service. Many of us last saw Eleanor in the spring, during our program on one room schoolhouses. She stood in front of our room and shared her experiences in those schools. She was a 1951 graduate of Hilltown High School. Eleanor loved living in Hilltown, spending most of her life on the Minsi Trail.



On September 21, we held our annual Fall Festival. Once again, we were blessed with perfect weather and large, smiling crowds. We connected with old friends and new friends were made. We are happy to put on such an event, but many people helped in many ways. Let's put our hands together to show how much their efforts are appreciated!

Our helpers and donors:

Hilltown Nursery
Eileen Hockman
Lucy Walsh
Karl Gimber
Aggie Harris
Tom & Rose Sutkins

Boy Scout Troop 67
Wendy Nace
Walter Fachet
Barbara Hohenwarter
Rhea Paci
Smocking Guild
Susan Walker
Carol McCoy
Carol Shallcross
Yolanda Fine
Debbie Rogers
Susan Grasso
Dean Bickel
Dick & Dottie Garis
Tom & Rose Sutkins
Andrew Morshead
Mellisa Taylor
Angela Horner
Visit Bucks County
Carla Tomlinson
Ida Fabian
Beth Taylor
Heather Fitzgerald
Aspiring Artists of the Earth
Robert & Julie Hermann
Bolton's Farm Market
Philadelphia Glider Council
Reese's Garage
Jean Stahl
Bucks County Recorder of Deeds
Lin Fredrick
Ed Tice
Gary Elsing
Judy Miller
John Wright
Gary Miller
Rich Zedrejko
Rechner & Reinhard Dental
Bruce Markley
Mary Shelly
Krystal Weibel & Kristine
Chiaro's Pizza
Deerwood Alpaca

Our directors who worked tirelessly at the festival were:

Dan Paci
Ivan Jurin
Alicia Snyder
Cindy Gery
Donna King
Bob Chope
Carl Clauss
Bill Stahl
Mark McCoy
Scott Fischer

A Corn Husking Frolic

Previously I wrote of Henry Sellers, a fourteen-year-old boy who served a two- year apprenticeship on a Bucks County farm in the early 1800s. Here is his description of a “corn-husking frolic” at the farm. It is also an interesting example of the differences as well as similarities of the English Quaker (Friends) immigrants and the German (Dutch) immigrants. Living side by side, many times two different languages were spoken, but were always willing to help.

Our author to this event is Henry, a Quaker. Also mentioned here is Martha, a neighbor, I believe she is a teen girl a bit older than Henry:

“After being cut in the autumn, the long stalks of the Indian corn are stood up in shocks about the field in much the same manner of wheat sheaves, their ponderous ears still clinging on them. The next step in the work is to detach these ears from the stalks. This operation made the occasion a little mild revelry, called in the parlance of the country, a “husking frolic” or sometimes, a “husking bee”.

A fine night – moonlit where possible – is then selected, and as many neighbors, both

male and female, paid and unpaid, as can be got together to join in the work, gather in the field and, distribute themselves in parties of twos and threes among the long rows of shocks. Now the beautiful golden ears are separated from the husks which closely envelope them and cast on the ground in heaps, ready for the wagon or cart the next day.

A sharp wooden peg, fastened by a leather strap to the palm of the hand, is generally used for piercing and dividing the husks.

By skillful persons, the work is done with most astonishingly rapidity. Oftentimes – as it was with us- a goodly sized field would be done by midnight.

Under a clear moonlit sky, and the delicious breezes of the Indian Summer playing about, with laughter and merriment, free and unrestrained, going on all round, it forms one of the few bright spots in my farming recollections. The scene itself might not inaptly be compared to a gipsy encampment on a very large scale, and was extremely picturesque.

Of cider there was plenty in the field for all who wanted it, but the feast was kept for a later hour, when the work of husking was over. Then all the company assembled round the table, spread with a profusion of good things too numerous to mention. It is needless to add that after such a task all came to the feast with good appetites and did ample justice to it.

Had the good people present all been Friends, no doubt the ceremony ended with that meal, and all would then quietly retire to their homes and beds. But it so happened that

our Dutch neighbors formed a small but influential proportion of the company, and these, not being troubled with or respecting the scruples of the others against music and dancing, became clamorous for a dance. In vain, it was pointed out to them that, besides the hour being late, there was no music to dance by – not so much as a fiddle among them.

“Vell den, if der ain’t no fiddle, ve must vistle, dat’s all”, one of them said, determined not to be baulked by any such trifle such as that.

A compromise was proposed by Martha, by substituting blind-mans-bluff and other games, in which all could join who wanted to. This was accepted by all the Dutchmen, who knew full well that the ball once set rolling, would be sure to end in a dance, as they wished.

So, the best room was promptly cleared of tables, chairs and other incumbrances, and the sports began in right good earnest. The mirth and excitement increased, and the games went on, until, no longer able to restrain themselves, two of the young Dutchmen stood up in the room and began pounding away at the carpet in a thorough-going double-shuffle, that threatened instant destruction of it.

“Oh! Ef you’re a-goin to begin that, we’d better hev the carpet up!” cried Martha in alarm as she saw the critical situation of the Kidderminster.

In a twinkling, the carpet was jerked up and pitched out of the room. A chair was placed in one corner, on which little Bill Simpson was mounted as the chief whistler, he not being a dancer. Then, six or seven of the Dutch men and women went at it with a will and danced themselves frantic to the exhilarating music of the whistlers, led by Bill Simpson. The excitement soon became contagious and took hold of a number of the

young Quakers, including Deborah Jeffries and finally Martha herself! The other persons stood about in corners, or in the doorway, or loitered about in the kitchen, according to the amount of interest they took in the proceedings.

The dancing itself was a great curiosity in its way. It was without figures or forms, but instead, thereof the partners placed themselves face to face, and then backing and advancing again and again, scraped away on their toes with an energy and resolution beyond description, if not beyond praise.

As to Martha, she thoroughly enjoyed the exercise and kept it up, when once she started, with her whole heart and soul. It was curious to watch her perspiring little person, with her arms looking as if pinioned to her side, and her fists tightly clenched, bobbing up and down before her lively Dutch partner, who shuffled and pounded away with an energy short of desperation.

Thus, the festivities were kept up until the small hours of the morning, and the impatience of the graver members warned them to disperse. It is due to these members – who formed the bulk of the company – to say that they did not favor these dancing frivolities, and that they took no part in them at all.

Husking frolics were common enough at this season, for every farmer had his field of Indian corn, although they did not all resort to this mode of gathering it. But whenever called on, neighbor was willing to assist neighbor, and thus not only rendered an important service to each other but lightened the labor of the field by harmless pleasure and recreation. “

This “frolic” system of having large tasks done was not limited to corn. Quilting bees had as any women gathered around a quilt frame as possible, while the children played on the floor beneath. A barn raising could be

called a barn frolic. Virtually any large chore on a farm usually involves friends and neighbors until tractors, sewing machines and cranes ended the “frolic” way of life.

The Hilltown “Glassworks”

There is no doubt that Hilltown has changed since the 1700s. Today, as you drive on Minsi Trail, you may see a nice ranch house. Quite a common sight in the area. This site, however, was once a *glasshouse*, or a factory where glass bottles, windows and glassware were made before the American Revolution.

There are not a lot of references about this glasshouse in old documents, but the quantity of glass remnants in the fields over the years tell a story of their own. Some scant information caused historian Dr. Rudolph Hommel to search for this long-lost site. Around 1947, Hommel arrived at a home where he felt the glassworks might once have been. He asked a housewife who answered the door the same question he had asked many times before in search of the site. “Did any of your menfolk ever plow up bits of broken glass in your fields?” She replied that she had never heard of such a thing. Hommel then asked where her husband may be, since he would be the one to do the plowing. The wife replied “Why, my husband is in the glass field, hoeing”. Hommel replied “What, did you say glass field?” “That’s right said the wife, you did say something about broken glass”. She directed Hommel to the field where her husband was working.

Hommel hurried to the farmer, who explained that at every plowing, pieces of slag, glass, and glazed pottery came up. Because of that, they called it the glass field as long as he could remember. Hommel asked the farmer if could put aside some of these pieces at the next plowing. Hommel did

one better and was on hand the next time the field was plowed. He came away with baskets of materials that left no doubt that this was the location of the old Hilltown glassworks.

Most of the pieces were dark green in color, with pieces of square bottomed bottles. Also found were pieces of melting pots and gall, the scum of molten glass that was discarded. Further searches in the 1960s by others came up with pieces of flat window glass, a piece of the tile roof, and some finer pieces of glassware, stems of goblets and pieces of wineglasses.

How did Hommel learn of a Hilltown glass house? In the church records of the Tohickon Union Reformed Church, it was noted “George Musse, the old glass blower died and was buried the 21 of June 1760”. Musse emigrated to America in 1750 on the ship *Nancy*, from Rotterdam to develop a glass house in Bucks County. The glassworks was completed in 1752, and the first blow was in January 1753.

In a July 1769 issue of the “Pennsylvania Chronicle” Jacob Barge advertised for a load of broken flint glass to be worked up at a “New Glass House”, however no location was given. In the 1790 census, however, a Jacob Barge (born in Franconia in 1758, died 1836 in Bucks County) was listed as a Hilltown resident.

In a German newspaper in August 27, 1776, it was announced that a German servant by the name of Eberhard Meyer had run away for the sixth time from his master Peter Mason at the glass house in Bucks County. Peter Mason was listed as a resident of Hilltown from 1779-1884. The 1781 list reads “Hilltown Township – Peter Mason, Glassworks, five horses, no acres, two cattle, no servants”. At the time, between 1775-1794, Henry Wismer owned the property, so

Peter Mason either rented the land, or ran the glasshouse for Wismer

Prior to the construction of the current house on the site, our founder Jack Fox spent a day and a half casually digging and uncovered the remains of at least seven structures but failed to find the actual furnace. In our barn are three five-gallon buckets of glass slag, gall and melting pot remnants, the result of Jack's digging,

Let's fast forward to the early 21st century, December 2002 and January 2002. PennDot wanted to replace a bridge on Minsi Trail over a tributary of Morris Run. Over 3,000 artifacts relating to glassmaking were found. Other remnants not related to this trade were found also, allowing the approximate dating of the glass items.

Yet another survey of the land was conducted in 2006, using highly technical means. This allowed the group to "see" beneath the surface of the ground using ground penetrating radar. Spot holes were dug uncovering a multitude of items. Ultimately, stone foundations were discovered, and over 4,000 artifacts related to the glass industry were identified. A burnt brick surface appeared to be the floor of the glasshouse. Pieces of charcoal were found. When this glasshouse was first built, this was a heavily forested area, and wood was a major resource used in heating the glass. Curiously, in addition to the glass making artifacts, a small number of prehistoric artifacts were found, dating from the Late Archaic period. Stone tools dating from 4,000 to 1,000 BC suggested the site may have been used by Native Americans.

Writing this article had me wondering exactly how glass was made in colonial times. I knew sand had something to do with it. I'll now share with you some research into the old process, just in case you too were wondering. Three basic ingredients were

used; sand 75% (silica), soda ash 15% (could be produced by burning seaweed), and limestone 10%. Glassblowers were talented scientists whose formulas were guarded. In a crucible (melting pot) made of sandstone or ceramic clay, the ingredients were thrown together until the proper viscosity was obtained. The glass object, whether it was a bottle, cup, or even a windowpane was blown by the glassblower. The product is then slowly cooled (annealed) to prevent a rapid cooling that would cause the glass item to break. That is the simple explanation!

How many other sites lie beneath the ground in Hilltown?

A Timeline of Hilltown, Bucks County

Celebrating the Fiftieth Anniversary
of the Hilltown Historical Society



Strassburger Homestead c. 1910

This is the cover of our fiftieth anniversary book. We were formed in 1975 under the leadership of the late Jack Fox. Around 1980, we took possession of the historic Strassburger site, containing five acres and three pre-Civil War buildings. These buildings keep us busy! This book is now available to the public.

Some of the chapters include The Original People (Lenape), the European settlers,

Hilltown in the Revolutionary War, early education, early churches, a brief look into the future and more. This book was published as a fundraising item, so for \$18, it can be yours. We can hand deliver it locally, or by adding \$4.50, we can mail it to you. We can also arrange pickups at our Strassburger Farmstead. There are also some copies at the Treasure Trove.

We think this would be a perfect Christmas gift. Act now, as the number of copies are limited.

What kind of a December newsletter would we have without some mention of Christmas, once commonly referred to “Xmas”? During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the term was quite common. Christmas postcards commonly used the term “Merry Xmas!”. I think by the mid-20th century, this practice was considered blasphemy, possibly even vulgar. I wondered how far back this practice went, so I checked out my Newspapers.com account and searched for an early use of this term in Pennsylvania.



The ad featured here was from the News Herald newspaper of Perkasio from December 21, 1899.

Aha! On page one, on the Pennsylvania Gazette, on November 19, 1807, were two letters shared to the readers. They were from John McKee, apparently writing from Choctaw Bluffs, a location in Alabama. Both letters used the word “X’mas”. A notation made by another subscriber to this website noted this was the first use of that term in the United States that he could find.

As I review that 1899 newspaper, a different type of Christmas is advertised. At the Rufe-Gussman store in Quakertown, there is a Santa Claus room, billed as a representation of Santa’s workshop. At the school located in “Garisville”, all students were presented with a box of candy. The news article noted that the pupils were making great progress in their studies. I bet they were also making great progress in their gift boxes! Garisville became Fairhill some time later.

Wanamaker’s department store in Philadelphia was but a train ride away. They advertised full sized down quilts for \$5. A woman’s gold watch started at \$16.

Pennapacker’s Restaurant in Perkasio was selling ice cream at 35 cents per quart. Edward Frey, an electrical contractor from Quakertown, offered to wire your home for electric lights.

The Hilltown Historical Society wishes all the best to our readers and members. Please remember to give a hand to those in need. Merry Christmas!!

Bill Stahl



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Many have claimed that Pennsylvania Germans brought the idea of the traditional evergreen Christmas tree to America in the 19th century. The first written record of a decorated Christmas tree in the area comes from the early 1820s. One of the ways the Pennsylvania Germans celebrated was with an upside-down Christmas tree hung from the ceiling. Why, you ask? Many ornaments were edible, so suspending the tree from the ceiling kept the snitz (dried apple garland) and other treats out of the reach of mice.

Taken from "Lancaster Online"

