

The Chronicle

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How Did Collegeville Get Its Name?

Submitted by Phoebe French (phfrench@ursinus.edu)

The area between Trappe and the Perkiomen Bridge went through many different names before it was decided that it would be called Collegeville. After countless years of quarrels between residents, the town was finally named for all of the learning institutions built here.

"It seems like the first documented name of this area was Perkiomen Bridge," said Manni McNeil a member of the Museum Committee and the Ross Library of the Historical Society of Trappe, Collegeville, Perkiomen Valley. "But the name kept changing and people were always fighting over it."

The Edward Lane family built the Old Perkiomen Bridge Hotel in 1701 and thus the area adopted the name "Perkiomen Bridge." Soon after, residents and surrounding peoples called the area Townsend because it was mostly farmland and marked the end of Trappe.

A post office called "Freeland" was authorized in 1850 for the use of the population who lived in the area midway between the Perkiomen Bridge and Trappe. The name Townsend had disappeared and the dispute was now between calling the area Perkiomen Bridge or Freeland.

The dispute was not put to rest until the Perkiomen branch of the Reading Railroad for the area was completed and the station was named Collegeville in 1868. Who originally chose the name is not clear, but the name was adopted "in honor of all the colleges located there," as indicated by the state highway marker.

From the beginning, it was made clear that the area held education in high esteem. According to the Historical Society of Montgomery County Pennsylvania Sketches, Volume III, the area was largely dominated by a German population in the 1750s, and one of the eight charity schools for educating and teaching the English language to the German youth in Pennsylvania was located in Trappe.

Education in Collegeville began in a log cabin on the farm of Andrew Todd, whose sixty-two acres are now part of the Ursinus College campus. In 1832 the log cabin was replaced with a one-story house of stone that served as an elementary subscription school until 1844, when the township finally accepted the state's General Public System of Education Act of 1834. The school then became known as the Freeland Public School. This building was used until a two-story building was built about 30 years later on what is now 5th Avenue. The Freeland School was in use until the Collegeville Borough School was built in 1897.

continued on page 4

Dear Friends of the Society . . .

The year is half gone and the pace has quickened with many community events and vacation schedules.

Anne Grasberger is our new webmaster, replacing Richard McDowell who served us so well and for so long. Look at the new website and follow what is happening in our Society and in the communities that we serve. There are many links to wonderful information. Thank you, Anne.

Manni McNeil continues to make progress in the Ross Library with her work group, and we can see light at the end of the tunnel now. Sue Krimmel is working on our flower beds, and David Detwiler has tilled, planted the garden and is repairing the fence at the Muhlenberg House. Thanks to all of you.

Our very busy Property Committee is repairing the face of the shed at the Muhlenberg House. If you have any free time and would like to join a short-term work group, give us a call. Jon Costanza, Eric Hundertmark, and Tom Biggar could use some extra help.

A committee has been formed and will meet at Dewees Tavern on a regular basis to plan for the 300th Anniversary of Trappe in 2017. This will be a huge event. There is much to celebrate and be proud of and there is much planning to be completed.

We are looking forward to our Inner Window installation at the Muhlenberg House and appreciate the donations that many of you have provided. This will protect our artifacts and preserve the Restoration Room Exhibit. The measuring and ordering is on schedule. The Lamplighter Quester Chapter 117 has been instrumental with a grant to move this to completion.

We have been very pleased with our Ursinus College student internships this year. You will see the article about how Collegeville was named. Another student has completed research on the Coleman painting and is working on a Brig Holker sign for Dewees Tavern. In addition we have a Summer intern, David Plitcha, senior history major at Albright. His research will be the early history of transportation in our community. These are wonderful opportunities for us, and the students.

continued on page 3

We've heard a lot about Frederick Augustus Conrad Muhlenberg, the second son of the Rev. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg and his wife Anna Maria Weiser. Trained as a Lutheran pastor, he tried store-keeping and then went on to become a politician, member of the Continental Congress, Speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, signer of the Bill of Rights, and first Speaker of the House of Representatives. The house and store he owned from 1781 to 1791 has become the center of interest about this extraordinary leader. But what of his brother-in-law, the flamboyant gentleman who appeared suddenly in the Muhlenberg family in 1775 and who purchased that house and conducted the mercantile business there from 1791 to 1803? Who was this General Francis Swaine?

Maria Catharine, better known as Polly, was the third daughter born to Henry and Maria Muhlenberg. While staying with family members in Virginia, she raised eyebrows and prompted letters among her older brothers because of her attraction to "engaging strangers." And then came word that she had eloped with Mr. Francis Swaine, a dashing gentleman of unknown background. What was known was that his father, John Swaine, lived opposite the Miter above the Barracks in County Cork, Ireland.

When the Revolutionary War began and Pastor Peter Muhlenberg cast off his preaching gown and recruited a regiment in Virginia, Swaine became adjutant to his brother-in-law, by then a Brigadier General. General Washington himself gave Swaine a captain's commission in 1776. Shortly after he was promoted to Major, he brought his wife Polly up to Pennsylvania to be close to her parents.

Biographer Paul Wallace tells us that Polly was love-sick and that Swaine, worn down by the demands of warfare, began to slack off his duties. On August 22, 1776, he was court martialed and reprimanded in General Orders for "repeated neglect of duty." He resigned from service and joined the folks in Providence. He became a frequent messenger between army camps and family homes, and apparently his charming and cheerful manner served him well.

On July 28, 1779, Swaine was appointed Pennsylvania clothier to the State of Pennsylvania. Unfortunately he was just as much a failure in this position as he had been as Brigade Major. Much against the advice of his father-in-law, "Daddy," as he addressed him in his letters, Swaine then opened a store in New Hanover, just as unsuccessful a venture as one in Philadelphia. Father Muhlenberg was so troubled by Swaine's wild dreams and schemes: "Idleness is the source of all Vices and Sins, shop keepings in these precarious times are liable to Misfortunes and changes, and without them may hardly afford sufficient Maintenance for one child, much less for a whole Family, who are not yet used to live by Bread, Salt and Water, as many thousand honest Families' must learn to practice in the old Countries and in these Parts also....," he wrote in the summer of 1780. The young husband and father should settle down and take care of his family instead of looking for a handout from his elderly and sick in-laws.

In one of the Patriarch's stern letters, written in November of 1781, he suggested that Swaine leave his family at home and venture out. "There are many ways and Opportunities open yet, where an honest young Gentleman may improve his Talent and make a Fortune either by Land or Sea, in the Military or Civil Occupation"

Swaine may have been an irritant to the old folks, but when

Mama Muhlenberg suffered her horrendous burns, Polly and Francis were incredibly attentive to her needs.

Old Pastor Muhlenberg didn't live long enough to see Swaine's accomplishments when he turned his charming ways to politics. In 1801, when Peter Muhlenberg resigned as Major General of the Second Division of the militia from Bucks and Montgomery Counties, Swaine was promoted to Brigadier General of the First Brigade.

The Swaines held Pew #21 at St. James, Perkiomen, Episcopal Church in Evansburg.

Francis Swaine became most prominent in the newly-created Montgomery County and Norristown, its county seat. General Francis Swaine was sheriff of the county from 1787 to 1790. His growing interest in county affairs prompted him to move into town, offering to rent his "genteel Dwelling House, Store-house, Stone Barn, Carriage-house, Waggon house, Milk-house, and Smoke-house with Pump near the kitchen Door" in Trappe. Mother Muhlenberg moved into the new home with her daughter and son-in-law. She died there August 23, 1802, at the age of 75, and was buried beside her husband in Trappe.

The affable, up-and-coming gentleman from the country held commissions as Prothonotary of the Court of Common Pleas, and Clerk of such courts as Quarter Sessions, Orphans Court, Courts of Oyer and Terminer, and Jail Delivery. He chaired a committee on the Poor-Laws that petitioned the Pennsylvania Assembly to obtain relief and eventually to erect the County Alms House in Upper Providence. He served on committees that raised funds and supervised the building of the Norristown Academy.

Norristown was incorporated in early 1812, and at its initial election, held Friday, May 1, Francis Swaine was voted the borough's first burgess. Polly Swaine was now "First Lady" of Norristown. The joy was short-lived, however, for she died that fall on October 15, and was buried at Augustus Lutheran Church. The couple had had one child, George Washington Swaine, born November 16, 1779. The widower Swaine was married to Mrs. Elizabeth Arndt of Easton, widow of Jacob Arndt, on September 25, 1814.

Swaine was chairman of the committee that took charge of the fire engine that belonged to the borough, and he was a commissioner of the Bank of Montgomery County. When his term as burgess came to an end, he served as a member of Town Council. In 1817 the Swaines moved to Reading, where they lived at the southwest corner of Elizabeth and Penn Streets. Their mansion in Norristown was advertised as a house and lot "adjoining the Bank, 32 feet six inches in front, 38 feet deep, with two commodious Parlours, large Hall and eight Chambers, piazza between the back Parlour and Kitchen, with Cellars under the whole. The house has been recently repaired, painted, and papered." The lot included an excellent garden, good barn, carriage-house, and milk-house.

General Francis Swaine died June 17, 1820, at the age of 66. He was interred near the walls of Trinity Lutheran Church at Sixth and Washington streets, Reading. He was buried with military and Masonic honors. His widow later married William Ambrose Lloyd and herself died in 1830 in Northumberland, Pennsylvania.

Old Henry Melchior Muhlenberg missed out on the days of glory his daughter Polly and her dashing husband Francis

experienced. But he also did not have to witness an event that would probably have been quite painful to him.

Sheriff Francis Swaine oversaw the first execution in the new Montgomery County when he hanged John Brown on April 12, 1788. Brown had been sentenced to death for burglary, apparently not his first offense. Swaine ordered the hanging to take place in the rear of the jail on Airy street, erecting the gallows “on the highway, and in the most public manner.” Several citizens criticized Swaine vehemently for this gruesome display. Swaine defended himself, saying that he “could not get the permission of any land-owner in or near the place to permit him, as an officer, to fulfil the due performance of that which was required of him by law.” One wonders if Polly had wished she could sit down with her Papa to talk about what her officious husband had done. And what did Mama Muhlenberg have to say in the ensuing days as the controversy raged around her son-in-law? ❖

Future Fundraising Events . . .

In 2016 we are planning a collaborative event with the Speaker's House and the Historical Society of Montgomery County featuring Steve Barry, a New York Times best selling author, who has an interest in historical preservation. For several years he has been appearing at his own expense at events sponsored by Historical Societies or Museums to assist them in fundraising for particular projects.

A committee composed of representatives from all three groups submitted an application for an event in 2016. The application was approved. While we are waiting for the release of Steve Barry's schedule for 2016, work is continuing for this event. Towne Center Book Store is interested in working with us on the book signing portion of the event. We are identifying possible locations for a reception, luncheon/dinner, and writer's workshop. Contacts are being made to obtain cost estimates. We have also identified potential sponsors and are preparing a letter to be sent to these once we have a firm date. We are also gathering information on writer's groups in the Philadelphia area. We will be contacting local merchants for donations for a silent auction to be held at the time of the event.

If you have interest or experience in event planning we invite you to work with us. Please contact Tom Biggar, Chair, Property Committee, at 484-902-8200 if you are interested in working on this project. ❖

Dear Friends . . .

continued from page 1

Finally, I would tell you that we are exploring ways to prevent further damage to our stone wall at Route 113 and Main Street. The large trucks that use that route are driven by very skilled drivers most of the time but, as you can all see, the wall has been damaged repeatedly. Because of the traffic volume and congestion the trucks keep rolling and not a single accident report has been filed with the State Police. We have talked with Trappe Borough, the State Police, and Senator Vereb's office. Recently, a member volunteer helped us form a committee to work on a solution. If any of you would be inclined to join this small “short term” committee to help with this, please let us know.

Enjoy this beautiful season. I hope to see you at the museums, the garden tours, and other community events—and remember that volunteering is good for your health!

Robert Dallen
President

**From The Journals of
Henry Melchior Muhlenberg**

1743

January 16, Sunday. Today was a pleasant day as far as the weather was concerned. So many people showed up that it was impossible to hold our service in the barn and we had to go out under the open sky. They made a platform for me from which I was able to preach and look out over the people. I read for this time the Gospel and took the text from Matthew 11:28 ff., “Come unto me.” After the sermon I held a public confessional service and also explained the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. The people were much moved and shed many tears of shame and joy, as they testified to me. After the sermon I felt somewhat unwell on account of breaking out into perspiration during the vigorous address, and besides a raw wind had begun to blow. If the merciful God would only help us to get a church! Since the plantations here are totally surrounded by forests, there is a strong echo which moved me to think of the wilderness mentioned in several passages of the Prophets. The wilderness is great enough in all conscience, and the sheep, too, are lost. It is so very difficult for us to obtain a chalice here; there is none who is able or willing to make one, so as yet we do not have one. I might well wish for a pair of them, even if they were only copper or tin. It is also to be desired that in time we might acquire a bell, for the people live far apart and there is nothing with which to give them a signal.

Today I again announced to our congregation that they should not give me any money at Baptisms or the Lord's Supper. After the Holy Communion, we also had a Baptism. The Anabaptists are quite numerous in attendance and thus they hear what is declared at the Baptism of infants. I announced to the Providence congregation that I would remain with them for the week and conduct school for the older children. When a friendly rivalry broke out between two members, each of whom desired to have me in his home to conduct the school, I decided to have the school in one house in the forenoon and in the other in the afternoon, which is somewhat more convenient for the children. The houses are a mile and a half apart, so the children may choose the nearest. Up to the present date they have given me food and drink free of charge. Those who are having their children instructed gather things together and hardly know how to make their good will sufficiently manifest.

Submitted by The Rev. Thomas Kochenderfer

**Sunday Tours at Dewees Museum
and the Henry Muhlenberg House**

Our Sunday Guided Tours of our two historic sites have started. Plan to stop by between 1:30 and 4:00pm to enjoy a tour and learn about the history of our area.

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

Collegeville . . .

continued from page 1

This new brick school housed students attending first through tenth grades. This marked the first time that there were high school grades. The *Independent* of June 1, 1900 said, “the second annual commencement of Collegeville High School will be held at Bomberger Hall.” By 1938, the school was so overcrowded that Trappe and Collegeville decided to create a joint schooling system.

According to Montgomery County: The second hundred years, private education in Collegeville dates back to 1848, when Abraham Hunsicker founded the Freeland Seminary School for Boys. In 1869 Ursinus bought the seminary and made it into the preparatory department of the new college. Called Freeland Hall, it was the only building of the college for some years. Freeland Hall was razed in 1968 to make room for Myrin Library.

In 1849, J. Warren Sunderland and Abraham Hunsicker founded the Montgomery Female Seminary on the end of what is now Glenwood Avenue. On October 27, 1851, it was made into Pennsylvania Female College, or what was affectionately called, “Dear Old Glenwood.” In the 29 years the four-year liberal arts college was in operation, over 2,500 women attended.

When Pennsylvania Female college closed in 1880, Ursinus admitted women into its college courses. In 1884, Minerva Weinberger, daughter of Dean J. Shelley Weinberger of Ursinus, was the first woman to attend Ursinus.

A round, stone gazebo currently sits at the end of Glenwood Avenue dedicated to Sunderland, a co-founder of the female college. ❖

Direct Link: <http://ursinusgrizzlycom/2015/04/30/how-did-collegeville-get-its-name/>

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Calling all Carpenters and Painters!

If you have time to volunteer your help with our project of fixing the face of the shed at the rear of the Muhlenberg House, please call the office at 610-489-7560. Materials will be provided.



... Thank You!