A statement made in a front page article about the naming of Collegeville appearing in the last issue of The Chronicle cannot go unchallenged. In question is this claim: “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.”

In the several accounts of the history of Collegeville and its institutions of higher learning, only passing attention is given to Townsend, an omission which will be corrected in The Historian’s Corner.

J. S. Weinberger’s “History of Freeland College” (1903) cited in the last Chronicle, had this to say:

“The post office for Freeland Seminary for the first three years was Trappe. From 1851 to 1861 it was Perkiomen Bridge. As the school prospered a village began to grow around it and it received its name Freeland from Freeland Seminary. In 1855 an effort was made to have this village called Townsend, in honor of Samuel Townsend, who had removed here from Philadelphia, and in the county map published about this time it is called Townsend; but this name did not last long. In 1861 the post office of Perkiomen Bridge was moved to the store of Frank M. Hobson, who was appointed postmaster. The following year the name of the post office was changed to Freeland. When the Perkiomen Railroad was opened and time table No. 1, May 8th, 1868, was issued, there was a bitter fight over the name of the station, called Freeland. The railroad company finally decided to give a new name to the station, and accordingly called it Collegeville. In September of the same year the post office was moved to the station, and the name changed to Collegeville.”

The question becomes not what was a “Townsend,” but who was this man Townsend after whom a village took its name?

As Weinberger said, Samuel Townsend came from Philadelphia, where he operated as a real estate broker, landlord, rent-collector, sometimes working with a partner, sometimes not. He and his wife Ann had resided at Richmond and Cumberland streets. After buying up a considerable amount of property in the upper end of present-day Collegeville in 1855, Townsend commenced work on his dream. Townsend had purchased houses and lots from John Heneks, John Todd, Enos Lewis, Eleanor Shupe, Abraham Hunsicker, Henry A. Hunsicker, Edward Evans, and D. Morgan Casselberry. The property he bought from Enos Lewis was what is now known as the Speaker’s House.

One of the first things he did was to give a name to his dream. When Richard K. Kuhn prepared to publish his map of Montgomery and Bucks Counties in 1855, he went around collecting money from those people who wanted to have their properties marked. Mr. Townsend agreed to give Kuhn $150 to call the area around his property Townsend, thus outbidding H. A. Hunsicker’s effort to have the place designated as Freeland.

An article in the May 15, 1855, issue of the Montgomery Ledger announced:

“A NEW TOWN. The citizens of the beautiful village lying along the Perkiomen & Reading turnpike, west of Perkiomen Creek, have adopted the name of Townsend, in honor of S. Townsend, Esq., an enterprising gentleman of Philadelphia, who has made several large purchases there, with the intention of erecting a magnificent country residence, and other improvements. We paid a short visit to the place last week, and were very much pleased with the people and the enterprising spirit by which they all appear to be animated. Several buildings are being erected, and others to be commenced in a short time. These buildings are large and handsome, presenting a fine appearance to the traveler along the turnpike. The Mennonists are erecting a new meeting-house in the place, and Mr. Geo. W. Hamilton a new house part of which is to be occupied by him as a store. The Boarding Schools of Townsend—Pennsylvania Female College and Freeland Seminary—are institutions of State wide reputation. We had the pleasure of being shown through both of these institutions. They are fine edifices, and in every way adapted to the comfort and convenience of pupils. Freeland Seminary for Boys, we were informed by its Principal Mr. Hunsicker, has now a larger number of pupils than at any previous summer session. Prof. Sunderland, Principal of the Female college, gave us the same gratifying information in regard to his institution. In both cases success is well-served. ‘The Townsend House’ kept by our friend Mr. Abm. Beard—a perfect model of a landlord by the way—possesses excellent accommodations for visitors and travelers. Any of our friends who may journey that way, should give him a call. Should the Norristown and Allentown Railroad be built, it will pass through Townsend, and be of immense advantage to the place, as it will doubtless be one of the most important stations on the line. We were informed by Mr. Townsend, President of the Company, that a sufficient amount of stock has been taken to ensure a commencement of the work this season.”

Townsend began developing his property, selling some of it in small lots. But things started to fall apart soon thereafter. Plans for the Norristown and Allentown Railroad were derailed by the Panic of 1857. Samuel and Ann Townsend, after a deed of separation in 1857, divorced on June 4, 1858. Mr. Townsend then married Christiana B., either that night or the next day, according to one of his older sons. The entrepreneur was hauled into court for a number of reasons. It is through the testimony of witnesses in those adjudications that we are able to learn more about Samuel Townsend. One such witness, the oldest son George, who lived in the house next to the Townsend farm, claimed that his father intended...
to give his ex-wife $25,000 secured in ground rents and mortgages. He wanted to keep the children to himself either in Philadelphia or on the farm. He considered boarding some of them at Mr. Abraham Beard’s school in Freeland (but not with their mother on the country farm). Ann Townsend had custody of the children some of the time, boarding and clothing them and in some cases paying their school bills. Son Henry studied at the University of Pennsylvania and Princeton Theological Seminary. Thomas spent some time with each of his parents and some time in the army. Samuel, Mary Ella, and Elizabeth always stayed with their mother. One of the children, Annie, was a cripple, in bad health, and unable to take care of herself. The farm was very poor, the daughters were unable to work it, and the sons were living on their own. Eventually the mother returned to Philadelphia, and she kept the younger children with her. The 1860 Upper Providence census enumerated Samuel Townsend, 43, gentleman, born in New York; Christianna, 24; Thomas, 20; Annie L., 17; Samuel, 14; Mary E., 10; and Elizabeth, 7.

Townsend’s dream continued to disintegrate. Richard K. Kuhn, the mapmaker, sued him to recover on a promissory note for $75 and $150 for maps and $45 for damages. When Townsend first asked Kuhn to put his farms on the map and to call the place Townsend, Kuhn refused, saying that the people wanted it called Freeland. Besides that, the Rev. H. A. Hunsicker, principal of Freeland Seminary, had paid to have the place called Freeland and to put an engraving of the seminary buildings on the map. Townsend then agreed to indemnify Kuhn for any loss he might sustain by reason of the name of the place, and Kuhn went ahead and printed his maps according to Townsend’s instructions. When the maps were printed, Hunsicker refused to take his maps ($45 worth) or pay for them because the seminary buildings were not on them. The jury found in favor of the plaintiff, Richard Kuhn.

As if the testimony of Townsend’s ex-wife and children wasn’t serious enough, what his former business associates had to say cast serious doubts on his character.

Mr. Townsend employed several men who were variously partners or assistants; they were the ones who really kept his businesses going. Several co-workers revealed that Townsend could not read or write except to sign his name to letters and checks. Townsend brought his brother and sister east from Ohio to assist him with his businesses, but they ended up being a liability. The brother, Thomas, lived on one of Townsend’s farms near Trappe for a few months but lived most of the time in one of Townsend’s Philadelphia houses. Samuel was unable to support Thomas and his family as promised.

Townsend became known for habitual drunkenness and in fact had to appear frequently in court to answer charges against him. His son George testified that he would have to remind him when a hearing was to take place and then would take him there. “My father required some person at certain times to give him his care and attention personally. I would not like to render such services to any one as Mr. Wilson [Robert Wilson, one-time partner] sometimes rendered to Father…. My father would at times drink a great deal too much. Mr. Wilson would very often be with him taking care of him. I have seen Mr. Wilson drink along with father on such occasions. They adjourned from the office several times a day to take a drink. Father would drink Whiskey and Brandy. Mr. Wilson would sometimes take something light viz. Sarsaparilla & Lemonade. My father always paid for these drinks. This took a good deal of money. Father would generally treat everybody. The partnership was dissolved about one year before father’s death. When father and Mr. Wilson would adjourn from the office to take a drink I would not go with them but would sometimes go to the door of the Hotel…. I don’t mean to say that father was always so intoxicated that someone had to attend to him. In the mornings he would be able to attend to business say until 2 or 3 o’clock P.M. when he would become inebriated.”

According to the Montgomery Ledger of October 9, 1860, Samuel Townsend died on the 4th instant at his residence in Freeland at the age of about 50 years. His widow Christianna began to sell off his property soon after his will was probated on October 8. Dr. James Hamer bought the major property, a mansion house and 92 acres 128 perches at an Orphans’ Court sale in 1864. The newspaper advertisement for the sale gives some idea of the lovely property Townsend enjoyed. “…..The improvements consist of a large stone mansion house, containing 3 rooms, entry and back kitchen on the first floor, 4 rooms on the second floor, and 3 on the third; large stone barn wagon house, carriage house, corn crib, and other outbuildings, all of which are in good order and have been fitted up at large expense. A Fish Pond has been made on the premises, adding much to their beauty. This property is very handsomely located and has been within a few years much improved and the lawn around the house planted with fruit and ornamental trees. It is situated in an improving neighborhood, and is one of the finest in the county. The land is of good quality and easily cultivated. There are about five acres of woodland, and a good stone quarry on the premises. There is also on said premises another Stone Dwelling House with shop and stable ….”

The 1871 and 1874 atlas maps of Collegeville show very plainly the fish pond on Hamer’s property, which had been mentioned in the newspaper advertisement of the public sale of Samuel Townsend’s beautiful estate at Freeland. Margaret Hocker Hoover, in her Concerning Collegeville (1966), noted that “Hamer’s Pond along Main Street above the college” no longer exists.

This is a sad story but one that needs to be brought out of the shadows of Collegeville’s history. The truth hurts, but the Gospel teaches us that “the truth will make you free.”

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