

A Brief History of Westtown School

Westtown School has been part of Westtown Township for over 200 years, situated with Street Road to the south, Westtown Road to the west, and Shady Grove Way and Walnut Hill Road to the east. The school was founded by members of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends as a boarding school for Quaker children that would encourage spiritual formation and provide a useful education. The school opened in 1799 and is regarded as the oldest, continuously operating coeducational boarding school in the country. The school took its name from its location in Chester County, the township marked as “West Town” and “West-Towne” on two early maps of Pennsylvania by surveyor Thomas Holme, appointed by William Penn. Today, as an independent college-preparatory school, Westtown welcomes over 600 preK through 12th grade students to its day and boarding program from Chester County and other area residents, as well as from around the country and the world.

Westtown School still occupies the original 600 acres purchased in 1794 from James and Eleanor Gibbons. The deed for this purchase is housed in the school archives. The Gibbons farm attracted Yearly Meeting members for several reasons: approximately 325 acres of virgin timber, plenty of acreage for farming, a water supply (Chester Creek) and the site’s proximity to Philadelphia. At that time, it was a full day’s stage ride from the city to Westtown, a safe distance from the influences and illnesses of the city, but still reachable in a day. The vast expanse of land for the school would also expose the students to the workings of nature in the fields, woods and streams, making feasible the study of the natural sciences, an important part of a Quaker education. The curriculum also included reading, mathematics, geography, penmanship, and other useful subjects such as book-keeping, surveying, and sewing.

Westtown’s first main building was constructed with bricks made from clay on the farm and timber from the forest. A mill race was created on Chester Creek for a saw mill which cut lumber for a new barn in 1794, and then a “small building” for the “sawyer” was erected in

1797 near the mill. The sawyer’s home still stands in the north woods of the campus as a faculty home. That same year a springhouse was erected; later it was enlarged to house the dairy operation of the school’s farm. It remains today along Westtown Road as a faculty home. A grist-mill built in 1801 along Chester Creek no longer stands, but the house built for the miller, also along Westtown Road, is still maintained by the school. These are a few of the many buildings on Westtown’s campus that tell the story of the school’s past and present.

Westtown’s current main building was designed by Philadelphia architect Addison Hutton and was completed in 1888. Its rooftop has 98 chimneys! Industrial Hall, an 1869 classroom building estimated to weigh 800 tons, was moved to make room for the new main building. Over the course of 21 days, Industrial Hall was pulled along a track of timbers by means of a windlass and a combination of pulleys, with the power furnished by six horses. Photographs in the school archives document this amazing feat which was witnessed by students attending the 1885 summer session. Industrial Hall remains in use for upper and middle school classes.

While not in the classroom, students of all generations at Westtown have enjoyed a range of outdoor recreational activities. The exhilarating - but sometimes dangerous - experience of sledding down an icy track on large, wooden bobsleds made an impression on a young Westtown student in the 1850’s named Samuel L. Allen. As an adult, he designed a safer, steerable sled and was granted a patent for his invention in 1889 - the Flexible Flyer. Ice skating was favored, too - first on a frozen pond, and later on Westtown Lake, constructed in 1912. The 16 acre lake is used in all seasons for outdoor fun while also providing another campus area for environmental study.

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