

Updating Township History

The Historical Commission is expanding a 1973 edition of Westtown's past

By Gail Guterl, Historical Commissioner

Although small - 11,000 residents in 8.8 square miles - Westtown is rich in history. In 1973, Westtown resident Arthur James recognized that and wrote a book about the township's past. James, a professor of Chemistry who taught at Lincoln University, Temple University, and the University of Peshawar in Pakistan, died in 1989. His book outlines how the township formed, who lived here, notable early homes and farms, and other facts. Although born in East Bradford Township, the James family had a long history in the township. His ancestors were connected to a thriving township enterprise, James Pottery, of which there are examples at the Chester County Historical Society, and he lived in the township for many years.

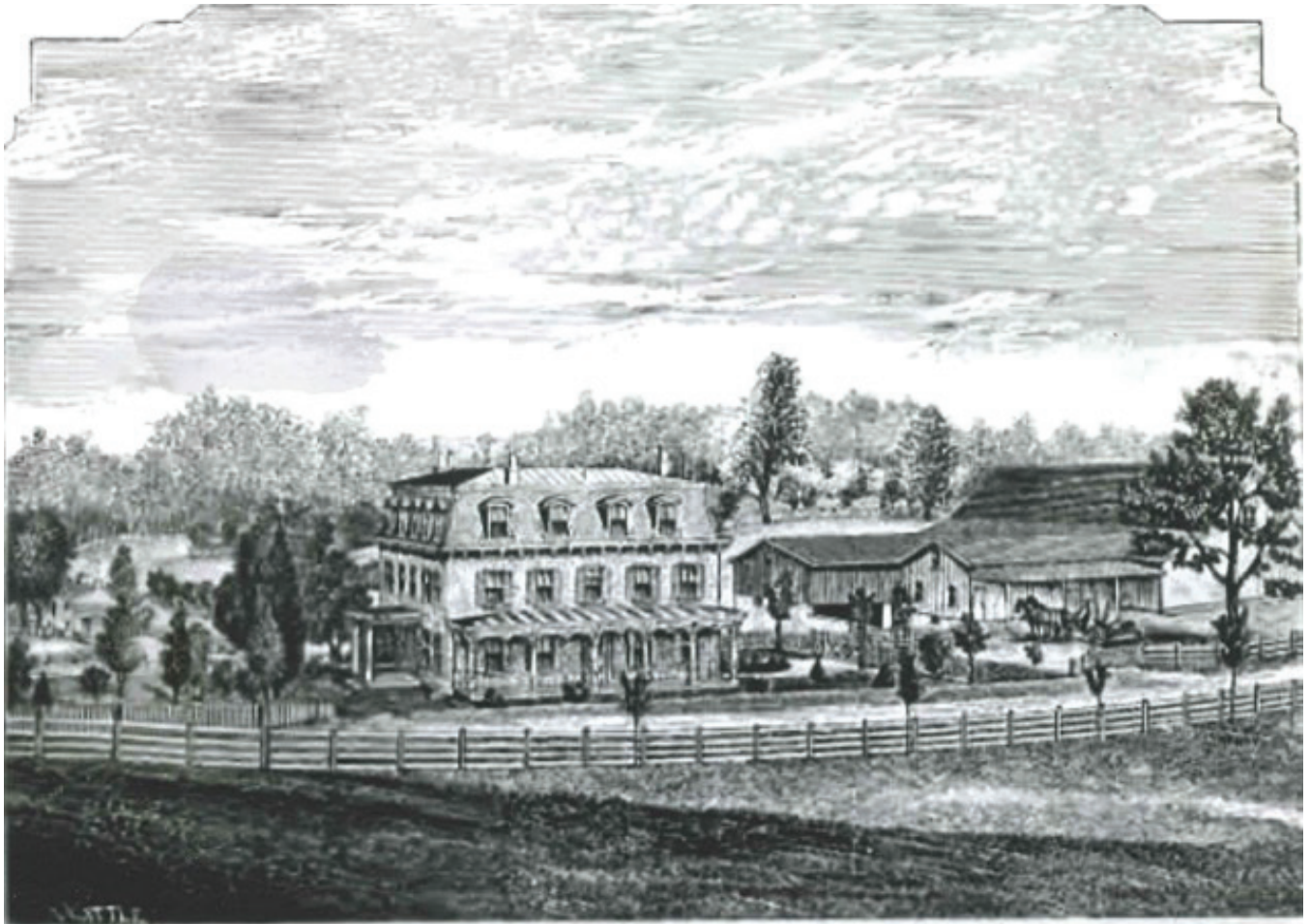
Since its publication, *James' From Farmland to Suburbia: Westtown Township Chester County Pennsylvania* has been the go-to document for information on township history. However, since the Westtown Township Historical Commission formed in 2013, we have learned so much more through research done by commission members and from information submitted by Westtown residents.

So, in 2018, the commission began discussions with Arthur James' surviving children, ages 93 and 89, about acquiring the copyright to the book in order to update it. The family legally transferred the copyright to the township in May 2018, and soon after that the Historical Commission got to work. (In a wonderful coincidence, the King of Prussia attorney who drafted the document grew up in Westtown and did the work pro bono.)

The Commission's plan is to expand and update the 59-page book and post our efforts on the Historical Commission's page on the township's website. We hope to have the book online in May, 2019. We have opted to publish it electronically at this point to allow for frequent additions. In our research and through contributions by township residents, we are always discovering new and exciting facts of township history such as:

- In the 18th century, a silver mine operated on the western edge of Westtown Township.
- Several free African Americans living in the township fought in the Civil War as part of the U.S. Colored Troops, and are buried in a neglected cemetery in the center of the township.
- The Westtown Post Office is in Thornbury Township and at one time the Thornbury Post Office was in Westtown.
- The township has a rare geology, serpentine rock, found also in Maryland, Oregon, and California. Serpentine stone was once quarried at the western edge of the township.
- Clothing was so valuable it was handed down from one generation to the next in last wills and testaments and most people never wore brand new clothes in their lifetime.
- One of our township's farmers was a member of the Flying Farmers Association who taught himself to pilot his own plane, which he taxied from a field on his farm.
- There is a Westtown link to the CIA.
- A property and house ruin in the township may have been impacted by the Battle of Brandywine, Sept. 11, 1777. While the main battle was fought in Birmingham Township, history has shown that skirmishes were fought on Westtown land.
- In the 1940s, Wilmington Pike was so quiet one could cross the road easily to catch a bus into West Chester. Bus fare was only 5 cents.

The Commission hopes to present as complete a picture as possible of our township's history including information about the native population that originally lived in this area, the Lenni Lenape. The history will provide expanded information on old houses and farmsteads in the township.



RESIDENCE OF GEORGE FAUCETT, WESTTOWN.

Things Change: The township's updated history book will highlight events, structures, and people that made their mark on the township, as well as how the township evolved. For example, the topography of the township has changed over the years in areas bordering Rt. 202. This illustration from Futhey and Cope's History of Chester County published in 1881, shows the Faucett family house and farm, later owned by the Cheyney family, on Wilmington Pike on the northern border of the township, on what is now Rt. 202. For years the house was at street level, but as the highway was expanded, first in 1939 and then in the 1950s, Rt. 202 was elevated and only the second and third story windows were visible from the highway. The house was torn down in 2015 and is now the site of a new development, Westtown Woods.

Besides our research in the county archives and at the Chester County Historical Society, the book will offer personal recollections from long-time residents. If you have any information you'd like to share with the Commission for this history, please don't hesitate to contact us at historical@westtown.org.

We will give plenty of notice before the history is uploaded to the township website at www.westtownpa.org, so watch for the announcement.

INTERESTED IN IMPROVING YOUR BEAUTIFUL TOWNSHIP PARK?

Please join us at the Friends of Oakbourne's upcoming meetings at 7:00 pm on January 17 or April 18, 2019 at Oakbourne mansion. Contact Tom Bare (tmbare@hotmail.com or 610-399-1572) if you are interested in donating a park bench or tree to be planted in Oakbourne Park to honor a special person or loved one or to commemorate an important occasion.