If Walls Could Talk: Giving History a Voice

By Gail O. Guterl, Westtown Township Historical Commissioner

A house with a ghost. A racehorse that never raced. A home with a strong connection to a French battlefield cemetery. It is often said, "If only walls could talk!" Well, they don't, but thorough research can reveal fascinating stories about many structures. Certainly, Westtown Township has its share of homes with rich histories.

You will be able to read about them soon in the updated History of Westtown, to be posted on the Westtown Township website before the end of this year. Until then, here are a few tales to whet your appetite.

The Racehorse that Didn't

At the western edge of the township is a house that was almost ruined by a racehorse. Built by Francis Strode in 1865 as a farmhouse, this rather plain Victorian on General Howe Drive may not have had all the embellishments of that style because it was built in wartime when building supplies were scarce.

In 1875, Strode sold 46 acres to Charles C. Oat of Philadelphia, who bought the farm for his son D. Beaumont Oat, who was married to Mary E. Strode, Francis' daughter. The story goes that Beaumont and one of his three sons, Charles, mortgaged the house in the early 1900s to buy a racehorse for $10,000. The horse died the night before its first race. Beaumont died in 1908 in debt and the house sold at auction for $1,475 to settle his debts. The story relates that it took Charles 15 years to pay off the balance of his and his father's debts.

Thus, a Westtown property was almost ruined by a racehorse who was not to blame.

The Ghost in the Parlor

Travel about a half mile down New Street from General Howe Drive and you will come upon a stately serpentine stone house built in 1855 by Joseph and Joanna Osborne.

After many owners and estate names over the years, the house, now a church property, has been the site of many wedding ceremonies. Viewing the photos taken in the house's elegant parlor after one such ceremony, someone noticed a young man in Victorian formal dress and top hat in the photo. Is he the ghost of one of the owner's sons who was crushed by a horse and carried to the house where he died?

"This might explain the occasional footsteps heard in the house."

– Resident

"Chestnut Hill"—The Schlaanstine House/Orvis Tree Farm

Even houses that no longer exist have stories to tell, more far flung than the borders of Westtown Township. Until May 2019, an elegant stone house sat at 401 West Pleasant Grove Road originally and then 1074 Wilmington Pike, just south of the jug handle at Stetson Middle School. Built on 25 acres of land which was first owned in 1795 by Nathan Atherton, evidence of cut stone and arrowheads show a spring on the site was used by the Lenni Lenape.

After several owners, the house was purchased in March 1945 by Raymond F. and Jess Schlaanstine, who planted many unique specimen trees on the property. The couple's 19-year-old son, Fred, had been killed in action in France in 1944. Somehow after the war, the couple received a letter from Marguerite and Jan Meyerowitz of Épinal, France, where their son was buried in the American Military Cemetery, saying they visited Fred's grave and laid fresh flowers on it. A renowned musician, Jan Meyerowitz and his wife, Marguerite, eventually visited the Schlaanstines in Westtown and performed in a musical in Kennett Square. When the Meyerowitz's returned to France, the Schlaanstines sent trunks of clothing to the people of Épinal.

The Meyerowitz's emigrated to America in 1946, where Jan worked as a composer (with pieces often starring Marguerite) and taught at the City College of New York. Meyerowitz, a German composer of Jewish ancestry, met Marguerite when he went to southern France during World War II and was hidden from the Germans with the help of the French Resistance. One member of the Resistance was a singer name Marguerite Fricker, whom he married after the war.

Jan Meyerowitz Laying Flowers on the Grave of Fred Schlaanstine May 30, 1945. *From the Collection of Jonathan Hoppe*

The Baily House. *Illustration from Futhey & Cope's 1881 History of Chester County, PA*

Swarthmore College in Westtown?

A stately house on 300 acres on South Chester Road might have been the main building of Swarthmore College had negotiations gone differently.

It was reported in a November 1887 article in the Daily Local News that the estate, owned by Abram Baily, had attracted the attention of those wishing to establish Swarthmore College. The article, commenting several years after the fact, said the committee offered Baily $180 per acre; he held out for $200.

The committee then looked elsewhere and found what they required in the Delaware County town of Westdale. They founded Swarthmore College in 1864 and changed the town name to Swarthmore. Had the parties negotiated their $20 difference, Westtown would today be the home of the nation's third-highest ranked liberal arts college.