

# The “Rediscovery” of Jesse Mercer’s School House\*

By Paul Mullin, Westtown Township Historical Commissioner



Painter and Bowen's 1847 "Map of Chester County, Pennsylvania" showing Mercer's School House, (Mercers S.H) just above the 'S' in "Westtown." Note that the Taylor Burial Ground is also recorded in what is now the Pleasant Grove Development.

On an 1847 map of Chester County, Pennsylvania by Painter and Bowen there is a notation for a "Mercers S.H." near the southwest corner of the intersection of today's South Concord and Oakbourne Roads. Westtown residents Thomas and Lydia Mercer donated the land on which this little schoolhouse was built in 1806. The 1806 deed found in the Chester County Archives indicates that Thomas Mercer donated approximately one-quarter acre of ground to his heirs as well as William Hawley, Abel Otley, Titus Taylor, and Thomas Burnett and their heirs "... to and for the use, benefit and convenience of a school lot and no other intent or purpose whatsoever."

The earliest records that confirm the schoolhouse being in use is the Chester County Poor School Children's Teacher' Bills 1805-1837. These records contain bills submitted to the County Commissioner's Office by teachers seeking reimbursement for teaching and providing supplies to financially disadvantaged school children. There are several records for the year 1813 for Jesse Mercer's schoolhouse. Jesse Mercer was Thomas Mercer's son.

In 1819, the "Subscribers" to the school enacted a resolution that only "Subscribers" could benefit from the school and families had to indicate how many children would be attending. A subscriber was a parent who paid a monthly tuition fee to

the teacher. Subscriber's names included Thomas Henderson, George Matlack, John Forbes, Joseph Matlack, James Hannum, Jesse Mercer, Obed Otley, Benedict Darlington, James Henderson, Robert Yearsley, Isaac Hall, John Davis, James Faucett, Titus Taylor, and others. The school seems to have been supported by local farmers interested in the education of their children.

## Meeting Notes of Mercer School Subscribers, Chester County Historical Society, Westtown, March 19, 1819

At a meeting of the subscribers of the Mercer School, the following resolution was adopted. Resolved that Eber Henderson be instructed to offer a subscription to each one of the employers of the above school for the purpose of raising a school for the benefit of those only who subscribe. It is further necessary that each one of the employers shall subscribe as near as possible what he expects to send in order to raise the number of at least twenty-five scholars. Otherwise a suitable teacher cannot be had.

(Author's note: I suspect the fractions mean the fraction of time a child would attend: 1 ½ would be one student full time and one student half time)

## Scholars

Thomas Henderson 1/4	J. Mercer 1
James Hednerson 1/2	George Matlack 1
Jonathon Millison 1/2	Abel Otley 1/2
John ? 1/2	Gideon Miles 11/2
Robert Yearsley 1/4	Joseph Matlack 1/2
James Walton 1	John Hickman? 1/2
James Hannum 1/4	? Otley 1
William Wickersham 1/2	Francis Hickman 1
Benedict Darlington 11/2	? Eachus 1/4
Isaac Hall 1/2	John Davis 1/4
Robert Anderson 1/4	James Faucet 1/3
William Slaughter 1/2	Samuel ? 11/2
Titus Taylor 1/2	William Yearsley 1/2

From subsequent newspaper accounts, all did not go well with the Mercer School. The Village Record of May 31, 1826 carried an advertisement: "60 DOLLARS REWARD" to anyone who could "... identify the person, or persons, who had broken into Mercer's School on two occasions and had destroyed school property." The advertisement was signed by Abel Otley and Jesse Mercer, two local farmers:

### 60 Dollars Reward

Will be paid by the subscribers to Mercer's School, to any person who will discover and make proof sufficient to convict the authors of the following atrocious acts: About the first of April last, some person or persons, broke into Mercer's School-House in Westtown, and carried away all the sash, glass, and stove-pipe, belonging to said house: the subscribers to the School met and had the damage repaired under the impression that no further violence would be offered: however, on the night of the 20th of May, the same or some other persons broke and entered the same house, and after doing considerable damage, again carried away all the new sash, glass, and stove pipe.

An 1856 map of Chester County is the last record found of the schoolhouse still located on or very near to the Oakbourne Mansion gatehouse. In 1857, the property where the school was likely located and the surrounding area was sold to John Hulme. The deed contains the names of some descendants of the families listed in the original deed of the school property, as well as some of the names of subscribers to the school mentioned above, but no mention of the school.

\*This article was originally prepared by the author for the updated history of Westtown, "From Farmland to Suburbia: A HISTORY of WESTTOWN TOWNSHIP, CHESTER COUNTY PENNSYLVANIA" by Arthur E. James, originally published in 1973 by the Chester County Historical Society. Watch for the posting of this book on the Westtown Township website in January.

In September of 2018, after noticing that the stone used for the gatehouse was different from the mansion, the Westtown Township Historical Commission inspected the interior and exterior of the gatehouse to attempt to determine if it was the schoolhouse or part of the schoolhouse, but did not find definitive evidence to prove or disprove this theory. Was the school torn down or was it incorporated into another building in the vicinity?

The answer may lie in the purchase of the house and 143 acres from Hulme in 1882 by James Charles Smith, a wealthy Philadelphia lawyer, and his wife Heloise Drexel Smith. A newspaper article published that year, recently found in the Chester County Historical Society library, provided the final proof that the Oakbourne Mansion gatehouse/tenant house was once the Mercer Schoolhouse. The article reads in part:

*"More Improvements: James Smith, of Philadelphia, who recently purchased the [Carter] farm in Westtown Township, besides improving the buildings which we have already noted, he is now cleaning out the decayed trees, underbrush, etc., from the woods, grading the grounds, and will make it a beautiful grove, and is also widening the public road in front of the grounds. Mr. Smith will also put an English clock on his stable, and is fitting up the old school house on the property, which is one of the oldest in this section, in elegant style for a tenant house."*

This was the beginning of the beautiful Oakbourne Park that we all enjoy today.



The Oakbourne Park gatehouse/tenant house, formerly Jesse Mercer's schoolhouse, c. 1807. The stone section is likely part of the original school.