

Westtown's Unusual Turnpike

By Stephen Wahrhaftig, Westtown Historical Commission

In 1854, Charles Dickens published his novel about the Industrial Revolution, "Hard Times." This was also the year of the Crimean War, where Florence Nightingale attended the wounded and established modern nursing practices. Here in Westtown, we saw the completion of a highway that was once common, but seems strange to us today.

What we know now as Wilmington Pike, or Route 202, was called the Wilmington and West Chester Turnpike. Running through the center of Westtown, local businesses were interested in upgrading the avenue from a dirt road to a more modern path. A better road would make traveling easier with a solid surface clear of ruts and holes. As with most rural roads, water would collect in holes, making traveling difficult and messy.

Westtown was a major producer of agricultural products, with dairies, grain mills, corn processors, and other businesses that needed easy access to both Wilmington and West Chester. The 'modern' surface that would be constructed along these miles of turnpike would be made entirely out of wood.

While this idea appears strange to us today, building roads out of wooden planks was relatively common in the past. The practice began with the Roman Empire. Their army and officials needed to travel over marshy areas to reach the corners of the empire. The easiest way to accomplish this was to use stretches of logs covered with gravel or earth. This idea was revived in the 19th century, as municipalities like Westtown needed better quality roadways.

The new road surface stretched through Painter's Crossing, Dilworthtown, and our busy village of Darlington's Corner. It began on Union Street in West Chester and ended at the Concord Turnpike in Delaware. Being a turnpike, the road was constructed by a private enterprise, the West Chester and Delaware Plank Road Company. The firm was authorized by the Pennsylvania General Assembly in 1853. Westtown investors, if they could afford the risk, could purchase a share of the company for \$25. Two thousand shares were available.

As an investor, you could expect a healthy return because anyone using the turnpike would have to pay a fee to travel on the planks. Fees varied by distance and transport type. For example, if you were going from West Chester to Pleasant Grove (called Hannum's at the time) your fees were:

1 horse and sleigh	2 cents
1 horse with wheeled vehicle	3 cents
1 horse and sled	1 cent

If you had a vehicle pulled by more than one horse, oxen, or mule, you multiplied the toll by the number of animals pulling the cart or sled. Amazingly, there was only a single tollbooth in West Chester. Road users were expected to pay the correct charge based on the honor system. Getting caught evading the fare could result in being hauled before a magistrate. As an article in a contemporary newspaper pointed out, the miscreant could be fined \$10 for trying to avoid a charge of a few cents! West Chester Pike (Route 3) was also a wooden plank road for a time, built by a different consortium.

Plank roads were usually made of white oak, yellow pine, cedar, or hemlock. Troughs were dug on either side of the street to try to collect water runoff. To this day, paved roads are slightly lower on the sides to promote water runoff. Even with this precaution, the wood was susceptible to damage and decay, particularly in the wetter months. The public liked the planks when the roadway was new and smooth, but broken timber could make a plank road worse than the original dirt path.

The wooded highway on Wilmington Pike lasted only a few years. In 1858, the planks were removed and replaced with crushed stone. The tolls would continue to be collected, although just as unpopular as road fees are today. The local toll collector in 1886 complained that he was disliked for his job, even though he had nothing to do with the creation or ownership of the turnpike. His name was Reese Pratt and he talked about his mistreatment by the public. Reese was quoted saying, "Some parties whom you would suppose were intelligent gentlemen have called me all sorts of names, as if I could help it."



Plank Road from Grand Rapids, 1905

Good Stewardship Award 2024

Soliciting Nominations for Historic Commission's Good Stewardship Award 2024

Do you know someone in the Township who has been a good steward of their historic property? Someone who has made efforts to maintain, repair, or restore their historic home? The Westtown Historical Commission is soliciting nominations for our Good Stewardship Award. The winner will receive recognition from the Historical Commission and be awarded a plaque on Westtown Day. Please send your nominations, including the name of the owner and the address of the property, to historical@westtown.org.

History Lecture

SEPTEMBER 7 | 10:00 A.M. | TOWNSHIP BUILDING

Author and historian Bruce Mowday will talk about "Gen. Lafayette at the Battle of Brandywine." The young Lafayette got his first taste of battle, and a wound, at the Battle of Brandywine, Sept. 11, 1777 in nearby Thornbury Township. Learn how the battle informed Lafayette's character and usefulness to General George Washington and contributed to his heroic status in the fight for American Independence.

Parks & Recreation (P&R) News

The improvement project at Oakbourne Park is nearing completion. Park users have been enjoying the new paved loop around the mansion, as well as trail improvements and a new play structure between the soccer and baseball fields at the athletic complex. At this writing, the basketball, tennis, and pickleball courts are awaiting final leveling surface and painting after the necessary curing period for the asphalt base. Extensive landscaping was planted, and the battle against the deer browsing has begun! Remaining items include the conversion of a stormwater basin, final paving and line painting of the driveway and parking lot, and various punch list items. We're looking forward to opening the new facilities in August.

Parks and Rec kicked off the summer with a free concert at Oakbourne Park on June 12. It was a gorgeous evening, made even better by the sounds of the West Chester Swing Kings, who covered songs from Patsy Cline to Glenn Miller.



2023 photo contest entry by Stephen M. Costa - 1950 Ford

PHOTO CONTEST - Enter Now!

P&R is once again holding an amateur photography contest. Entrants may submit one photo, which must have been taken in Westtown Township. The winners will be recognized at Westtown Day on October 6. Email your photo to parkrec@westtown.org. Contest rules are on the Township website.

MOVIE NIGHT - August 21 | 8:00 P.M.

Wrap up the summer and get in the "back to school" mode with **School of Rock (PG-13)**! at Oakbourne Park. Free popcorn will be provided!