



# The Half Moon

- The Newsletter of the Newtown Historic Association -

## Welcome

The Newtown Historic Association presents this newsletter to the Newtown community with the goal of providing news and information on related historic and preservation events in our area. We welcome any suggestions for future articles.

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## Newtown Historic Association

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## Recognition Dinner

On Sunday, January 25<sup>th</sup>, the annual Volunteer Recognition Dinner will be held beginning at 6:00 PM at the Temperance House. The Open House Tour Homeowners and Public Building Stewards will be recognized for their work in opening their homes for this year's tour. Also, two special presentations will be made to Sarah Jane Dallas and Rik Booraem for their many hours of volunteer work on behalf of the Newtown Historic Association. We expect over 60 community members to attend this event and to help us celebrate the contributions that these many individuals have made toward the advancement of the Newtown Historic Association over the past year. Tickets are \$35 per person.

## Colonial Tavern Night

The seventh annual Tavern Night will be held on Saturday, March 7<sup>th</sup> at the Half-Moon Inn. Join us for this wonderful colonial event, which promises to have even more colonial cheer. Some will be toasting King George, while others to George Washington. The evening will feature 18th century music, dancing and an introduction to colonial beer making, along with delicious food catered by Joseph's Garden Grille accompanied by colonial side dishes. Join us for an evening that will take you back to a time when our country was new and exciting. Invitations will be mailed shortly. Please RSVP by February 22<sup>nd</sup> to Jeanne Haeckel at (215) 860-0921. Tickets are \$50 per person.

## February Meeting

The February meeting of the Newtown Historic Association will be held on Monday, February 16<sup>th</sup> at 8 PM at the Half-Moon Inn. To commemorate President's Day, the Newtown Historic Association has invited Rik Booraem to present a lecture entitled, "*The Latest on Lincoln.*" Mr. Booraem is an Associate Professor of Social Sciences at Bucks County Community College and a historian who's published three books and numerous articles on American presidents. He has spent time at the Lincoln Forum in Gettysburg discussing Lincoln's legacy with some of the country's major Civil War and Lincoln scholars. The public is invited, refreshments will be served.

## 2008 Garden Award

We are pleased to announce that the Countryside Gardeners were selected as one of the 2008 Bucks Beautiful Garden Award Winners for their work on the grounds and gardens behind the Half Moon Inn. They were awarded third prize in the Community Gardens category. If you have visited the Half Moon Inn recently, you will undoubtedly notice the results of their skills, as the grounds look magnificent. We thank the Countryside Gardeners for all their hard work and congratulate them on their recent award!



Grand View Driving Park, 1914. From the NHA Archives.

## Newtown Goes Off to the Races

- by Brian Rounsavill -

The vast bucolic fields of Newtown have long been a place for farming, horse breeding and stables.<sup>1</sup> In keeping with this deep agrarian past, it was commonplace beginning at the turn of the century to see working farm horses from Kansas being unloaded from railcars at Newtown Station and sold at the Brick Hotel, most notably by the Higgins Brothers.<sup>2,3</sup> However, a little known, and very popular, use for horses in Newtown has been that of horse racing.

The competitive racing of horses is one of [the] most ancient sports, having its origins among the prehistoric nomadic tribesmen of Central Asia who first domesticated the horse [in] about 4500 BC. For thousands of years, horse racing flourished as the sport of kings and the nobility. Modern racing, however, exists primarily because it is a major venue for legalized gambling. By the time humans began to keep written records, horse racing was an organized sport in all major civilizations from Central Asia to the Mediterranean. Both chariot and mounted horse racing were events in the ancient Greek Olympics by 638 BC, and the sport became a public obsession in the Roman Empire. The racing of horses in harness [as was the most common type of horse racing in Bucks County] dates back to ancient times, but the sport virtually disappeared with the fall of the Roman Empire.<sup>4</sup>

Harness racing is a form of horse-racing where horses race in a specified gait and pull two-wheeled carts called sulkeys. Races can be conducted in two differing gaits; trotting and pacing. The difference is that a trotter moves its legs forward in diagonal pairs, right front and left hind, then left front and right hind striking the ground simultaneously; whereas, a pacer moves its legs laterally, right front and right hind together, then left front and left hind.<sup>5</sup>

The history of modern Harness Racing begins in America, where racing trotting horses over country roads became a popular rural pastime by the end of the 18th century. Although there has been very little actually documented about the origins and history of horse racing in Newtown, there are stories of horse races taking place on State Street, but they cannot be confirmed.

In the mid 1700s, there is a brief mention of horse racing on the land of Amos Strickland, Newtown's first sheriff and one of the wealthiest men in town. Strickland owned land that ran along Washington Avenue (then called Strickland's Lane) from State Street east, which also included a well-known race course when the courts and elections were held at Newtown (1726-1813).<sup>6</sup>

By 1825 harness racing had become an institution at hundreds of country fairs across the nation.<sup>7</sup> County fairs provided an ideal venue for friends and neighbors to race their horses against one another. In a more agrarian time, when the fair was the highlight of the summer, people would bring their fastest road horse for racing just as they brought their prize livestock or produce for judging.<sup>8</sup> These fairs, a great feature of social life of that day, were attended by all classes, the great majority bent on having a frolic. Horse-racing, drinking, gambling and stealing prevailed to an alarming extent.<sup>9</sup>

Newtown was no different, as it hosted many fairs during this period. The Bucks County Agricultural Society was founded in 1811 in Newtown by Dr. Phineas Jenks and became a showplace and main event for local farmers. The Society's first fair was held in 1812 and was very well attended, with the best livestock on display on the grounds and the best horses competing on the race track.<sup>10</sup> It is believed that this track was located in the vicinity of Washington Avenue and Chancellor Street on what was originally Amos Strickland's land, and later the grounds of

<sup>1</sup> Numerous articles published in the *Doylestown Democrat* and the *Bucks County Intelligencer* in the early to mid 1800s advertised thoroughbred horses available for breeding in Newtown.

<sup>2</sup> *Newtown Enterprise*, June 7, 1934.

<sup>3</sup> *Bucks County Courier Times*, February 11, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> The History of Horse Racing website:  
<http://www.mrmike.com/explore/hrhist.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia.

<sup>6</sup> *The History of Bucks County, Pennsylvania*, Chapter XV, Newtown, 1703 by W.W.H. Davis, 1905, p. 217.

<sup>7</sup> The History of Horse Racing website:  
<http://www.mrmike.com/explore/hrhist.htm>

<sup>8</sup> *Harness the Excitement*, Your Guide to the Sport of Harness Racing, U.S. Trotting Association, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Early History of Bristol*, Papers Read Before the Bucks County Historical Society, p. 550.

<sup>10</sup> *Newtown: 1684-1984*, Tricentennial Publication, p. 17.

the Bucks County Agricultural Society. We know this because, in 1872, it was documented that there was a track for horse racing, and sheds for the protection of horses, but racing then was not the popular feature it was later.<sup>11</sup> By 1874, the Bucks County Agricultural Society sold the land.

In 1896, Sipron Keith, proprietor of the White Hall Hotel, in conjunction with Thomas Buckman, erected a half mile race track and a number of stalls to house the race horses before and after the races on the German Tract.<sup>12</sup> The German Tract was bounded by Sycamore Street and Green Lane, and Swamp Road and Richboro Road. The track was located near the intersection of Route 413 and Richboro Road, where the Newtown Middle School now sits.

The inaugural meeting of the half-mile course of the Newtown Driving Park Association was held in August, 1896 and was a great success, with over 1,500 in attendance, including men, women and children. The track [was] fast despite a stiff grade near the quarter pole. The home stretch is all downhill, with a sharp turn just after leaving the starting stand. The racing was for blood in the four events on the program, and while the “ringers” in some cases carried off the money, they had to go some to get there. They even contested a half-mile bicycle race at this grand opening.<sup>13</sup>

At some point after the turn of the century, Sipron Keith and Thomas Buckman sold their track to J.A. Johns. It is documented in 1911, that J.A. Johns sold his farm in Newtown Township, adjoining the Boro, to Mahlon B. Fretz, known as the “Race Track Farm”.<sup>14</sup> Fretz, a druggist by trade,<sup>15</sup> operated the track, which became known as the Grand View Driving Park. From advertisements for Grand View Driving Park, it is known that both trotting and pacing races were held there.<sup>16</sup> Many locals raised their horses and brought them to the Grand View Racing Park to race. Although there is very little history of the Grand View Driving Park, it is thought to have faded by the 1930s. There were several training tracks in the Newtown area, no stands or seating areas, one on the Headley farm on Yardley Pike where the Headley development was built and the other in Langhorne on the Buena Vista Farm where St. Mary’s Hospital now sits.

On the outskirts of Newtown, a more popular track was developed in 1927 by Gage B. Ellis, called Village Farm. It was opened on Memorial Day in 1932, which may have contributed to the demise of Grand View Driving Park. The

story of The Village Farm can be traced through the stud career of Abbedale who arrived at the farm in 1930, only three years after it was established by Philadelphia sportsman Gage B. Ellis. Abbedale lived to a ripe old age of 33 and died at the farm in the summer of 1950<sup>17</sup> and was buried in the flower garden just outside the farm office in the main barn. Fifteen months later, the entire stock of the farm went under the auctioneer’s hammer with a total of 126 head selling for \$158,000. Everything was sold from the stallions down to the weanlings.<sup>18</sup>

Today, the Village Farm sits peacefully on the outskirts of Newtown and the barns are still full of boarders, but the last Standardbred is long gone.<sup>19</sup> So are most of the flowing pastures, which are now tree covered or flooded by damming up Core Creek for the park.<sup>20</sup> The sands of time have buried much of the open farmland around Newtown. All that is left are memories... and perhaps the distant thunder of hooves that once raced across these fertile fields.

**Newtown Driving Park ASSOCIATION**  
ON SEPTEMBER 12th, 1896.

THE above Association will give its SECOND RACE MEETING, consisting of FOUR RACES, as follows:

No. 1—Purse, \$50; free-for-all, pacing and trotting; \$25 to first, \$12 to second, \$5 to third, and \$5 to fourth; best 3 in 5.

No. 2—Purse, \$10; will be a race between horses owned by members of the Association. Only seven horses are already entered for this class, and as the horses are very evenly matched it ought to make a rattling race. Best 2 in 3.

No. 3—Purse, \$15; 2:35 class, pacing and trotting; best 2 in 3. In this class such horses as the Richboro pacing crack “Baldy”; the fast trotting horse “Pat,” of Hatboro; “Eagle Bird,” of Fox Chase, that showed lots of speed at our last meeting, and “Jenny Dawn,” the fleet daughter of “King Red,” and others, will come together. It is hinted that a side bet is on between the two first-named horses. This ought to make the greatest race that will be seen on our track this season.

No. 4—Purse, \$10.00; 2:50 class; best 2 in 3. Pacing and trotting.

Also, a Bicycle Race for prizes same as given at our last meeting.

Ten per cent. entrance fee on all races, and must accompany nominations. 5 to enter, 3 to start.

Right reserved to change program or postpone on account of weather.

ADMISSION TO PARK, 25 cts.; LADIES FREE. Extensive improvements in the way of sun shades, &c., are being made to the grand stand, and everything will be in readiness by the 12th. Hacks will run continuously between Newtown and the Park. Races will be called promptly at 12:30 P. M.

All communications and entries should be sent to the Secretary,  
Aug. 29—31 HARRY F. CHURCH.

Ad from the August 29, 1896 Newtown Enterprise.

<sup>11</sup> *Historic Newtown* by E.R. Barnsley, 1934, p. 99.

<sup>12</sup> Undated clipping entitled, “Historic German Tract at Newtown”.

<sup>13</sup> *Bucks County Intelligencer*, August 8, 1896.

<sup>14</sup> *Newtown Enterprise*, March 18, 1911.

<sup>15</sup> Obituary published in the *Newtown Enterprise*, June 14, 1928.

<sup>16</sup> *Newtown Enterprise*, August 1, 1914. Advertisement for Matinee Races benefiting the Newtown Fire Association.

<sup>17</sup> Village Farm Website: <http://bestofhorses.com/go.php?id=2587>

<sup>18</sup> “What ever happened to . . . The Village Farm” by Bruce Stearns, April 1982, *Hoof Beats*.

<sup>19</sup> The main house is currently used by Today, Inc. and the nucleus of the farm is now occupied by a local horse trainer.

<sup>20</sup> “What ever happened to . . . The Village Farm” by Bruce Stearns, April 1982, *Hoof Beats*.

## Open House Tour

The 46<sup>th</sup> Annual Holiday Open House Tour was held on Saturday, December 6<sup>th</sup> from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM. Over 900 people enjoyed the beautiful weather to tour the following private homes and public buildings that were open for touring:

- **The Bird in Hand** - 111 South State Street (c. 1686)
- **Barnsley House** - 125 North Chancellor Street (1902)
- **Hartman House** - 101 Madison Street (2007)
- **Watson House** - 322 East Washington Avenue (1906)
- **Whitehead House** - 155 North State Street (1810)
- **Anthony Petsis & Associates** - 401 South State Street (1822)
- **Macedonia Baptist Church** - 218 North State Street (1953)
- **Newtown Fire Association** - 14 Liberty Street (1901)
- **Newtown Library Company** - 114 East Centre Avenue (1912)
- **Newtown Borough Hall** - 23 North State Street (1858)
- **Half-Moon Inn** - Court Street & Centre Avenue (1733)
- **The Stocking Works** - 301 South State Street (1889)

The weather was ideal for strolling the streets of Newtown to visit the sites on this year's tour. The Half-Moon Inn was beautifully appointed by the Countryside Gardeners and had an open hearth cooking demonstration, re-enactors portraying original proprietors Joseph and Margaret Thornton, and music was provided by the "Out of Tuners". The homeowners and volunteers did a wonderful job decorating their homes and hosting the visitors. The Open House Tour Committee wishes to thank everyone who helped make the day a great success.

## March Meeting

The March meeting of the Newtown Historic Association will be held on Monday, March 16<sup>th</sup> at 8:00 PM at American Legion Post 440, 41 Linden Avenue, Newtown, PA. Ample parking is available on site. (Note this meeting is not at the usual Half Moon Inn location!) His name appears on some monuments and our local American Legion post bears his name, but who really was Morell Smith, and why is his story still relevant eighty years after his death? According to Post 440 historian and life-long Newtonian, Michael Donovan, "*The Story of Morell Smith*" would make a fascinating movie – there's a handsome and well-educated young man, a budding love interest, doses of patriotic idealism and heroism under fire, a forensic detective story, and even a haunting tragedy in the end. Join Mr. Donovan and fellow Legionnaire, Jon Guy, as they explain the life, untimely death, and final return of a true Newtown hero, placed in a context of what was happening in the world back in 1918. Although the battlefields and tactics have changed, many of the words spoken will sound very familiar to us in our current turbulent times. The public is invited and refreshments will be served. This will prove to be a very interesting and informative meeting. For further information call 215-968-3914.

## Clean-Up Day

The annual Half-Moon Inn Clean-up Day will be held on Saturday, March 28<sup>th</sup>. Volunteers are needed to help restore some luster to the many historical items and furnishings in the Half-Moon Inn. No experience is necessary! Join us at 8:30 AM. Roll up your sleeves and give us a helping hand if you can spare the time.

## Corporate Members

We are proud to highlight our corporate members:

- Anthony Petsis & Associates, Inc.
- Carriage House Collection
- David J. Witchell Salon & Spa
- DeFrehn Corporation
- First National Bank of Newtown
- Gemmi Construction, Inc.
- Harold Beck & Sons, Inc.
- Johnson, Kendall & Johnson, Inc.
- Newtown Hardware House
- Newtown-Jamison Physical Therapy
- Peruzzi Automotive Group
- ReMax Properties, Ltd.
- Stockburger Chevrolet & Chrysler
- Stuckert and Yates
- The Law Office of Paul R. Beckert, Jr.
- Thomas-Guy Design, Ltd.
- Waitkus Design Landscape Architects
- Wright Realty Solutions LLC

## Upcoming Events

- **Volunteer Recognition Dinner**, January 27, 6:00 p.m. @ the Temp
- **General Membership Meeting**, "*The Latest on Lincoln*," February 16. 8:00 p.m. @ the Half Moon Inn.
- **Tavern Night**, March 7. 7:00 p.m.
- **General Membership Meeting**, "*The Story of Morell Smith*," March 16. 8:00 p.m. @ the American Legion.
- **Clean-Up**, March 28. 8:30 a.m.
- **Cocktail Party**, April 18. 5:00 p.m.
- **Annual Meeting**, April 20. 8:00 p.m.
- **Raid at the Bird in Hand Reenactment**, May. TBD.
- **5<sup>th</sup> Grade Historic Walking Tour**, June 3. 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.
- **Historic Walking Tour**, June 19. 6:30 p.m.
- **Market Day**, September 19.
- **General Membership Meeting**, October 19. 8:00 p.m.
- **General Membership Meeting**, November 16. 8:00 p.m.
- **Open House Tour**, December 5.

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