



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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Half Moon Inn Sign

Come see the new "Half Moon Inn" sign in front of the Court Inn (see image above). The design was created by Rosemary Tottoroto and the handsome metal work was fabricated by Ray Mathis.

Recognition Dinner

On Sunday, January 28th, 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 Dottie Soden and Heinz Heinemann for their many years 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.

New Members

We are pleased to welcome the following new members:

- Richard & Bette Nan Green, *Newtown*
- John & Joan Johnston, *Newtown*
- William & Sara Larsen, *Newtown*
- Anne Marie McKernan, *Newtown*
- Jim & Karen Waitkus, *Newtown*

Clean-Up Day

The annual Court Inn Clean-up Day will be held on Saturday, March 24th. Volunteers are needed to help restore some luster to the many historical items and furnishings in the Court Inn. No experience is necessary! Join us at 8:30 AM. Roll up your sleeves and give us a helping hand.

Colonial Tavern Night

The fifth annual Tavern Night will be held on Saturday, March 3rd at the Court Inn. The Tavern Night Committee is hoping you will 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 games along with delicious food catered by the Brick Hotel accompanied by colonial side dishes prepared by the Tavern Night Committee. Come 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 26th 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 19th at 8 PM at the Court Inn. A presentation entitled, "The Underground Railroad in Bucks County" will be given by Millard C. Mitchell. The public is invited, refreshments will be served.

The Cocoonery: A Craze That Swept Through Newtown

- Compiled by Brian Rounsavill -

During the 1830's, a short-lived 'morus multicaulus' (Chinese mulberry) craze swept the country and thousands of mulberry trees were planted, from which leaves were obtained for feeding silkworms. Many cocooneries were built during the [silk] mania that raged from Maine to Georgia.¹

Newtown, along with Doylestown, became a 'morus multicaulus' center, and in both areas buildings were erected to raise silkworms. A cocoonery was located near Newtown in 1840, with Dr. Phineas Jenks, James Worth, farmer-owner of the Worth House, and the Rev. Greenberry W. Ridgley, of St. Luke's Church and son-in-law of James Worth, acting as principal backers.² These men planned to make their fortune in this manner and a cocoonery was built between George School and Buck Road near the Campbell Bridge.³ A century ago, "many still remember[ed] the low shackling building long known as the 'cocoonery'."⁴

The building was of frame construction, and two stories in height. The "cocoonery", as the building was known, was built double, the smaller section of both floors being a residence for the caretaker and the larger part for the silk business. The latter section was equipped with paraphernalia peculiar to the work in charge. There were many narrow aisles between a network of horizontal wooden frames ["hurdles"] with strings criss-crossed, one frame above another, and with the cocoons resting on the frame. The hurdles were light wooden frames with strings across each way, affording a resting place for worms and leaves. They were supported on rough tables, with space below serving for ventilation and cleaning. The room was carefully kept at the proper and required temperature. At other points about the building were shelves upon which were more cocoons. These cocoons did not

show much variety in color, practically all of them being either of a lemon or orange color. The food provided for the worms consisted of leaves from mulberry trees, of which there were many on the property. The Newtown cocoonery was doubtless started at the time the "morus multicaulis fever" broke out.⁵

The largely agricultural Newtown community quickly made efforts to capitalize on the new industrial craze, but it required learning a completely new trade and developing the necessary tools. In order to make silk, the pupa inside the cocoon must be killed properly and dried, or the cocoons spoil before they can be unreeled. Each cocoon contains about 500 yards of filament and sixteen pounds of cocoons are required to produce one pound of raw silk. A woman with the assistance of a child and simple machinery could reel no more than one pound of raw silk in a day.⁶

The following is an excellent example of the intensity of the craze; from a paper describing the attempts to introduce silk culture into Pennsylvania. This was written in May 1875. "Everybody raised worms and everybody had his cocoons. Everyone had reeled off his little or his large skein of silk. Some went two or three miles in the early morning with baskets on arms, to bring leaves to the worms. The girls raised them and had shelves erected in their parlors, and this all helped to swell the number of cocoons raised. Some devoted their barns to the precious worms, and finally some gave all their possessions for them."⁷ During the height of the excitement, considerable money was made and lost in Newtown. In some instances, family farms were mortgaged to raise money to get into this new trade, based solely upon speculation.

¹ *Eight Years Experience and Observations in the Culture of the Mulberry Tree and in the Care of the Silk Worm* by Samuel Whitmarsh, 1839.

² *George School Bulletin*, March 1978.

³ The cocoonery can be seen on the 1849 Dripps Map.

⁴ "A Collection of Papers Read Before the Bucks County Historical Society," Volume 2, p. 369. Based on Miss Belle Van Sant, Newtown, Pa., read at the meeting at "Sharon" near Newtown, Pa., October 4, 1904.

⁵ "Recollections of Earlier Newtown: The Cocoonery" by Franceanna Girton Ellis, date unknown.

⁶ "Silk Growing in the Georgia Colony" by James C. Bonner, *Agriculture History*, 43:143-147. January 1969.

⁷ "The Early Days of the Pennsylvania Silk Industry" by George M. Hart, *Delaware Valley Advance*, March 14, 1935.

The speculation grew to incredible proportions during the decade until it was close to collapsing under its own weight. Unfortunately, the farming community was unable to reap their fortunes from the silk craze, and the entire silk industry failed for several reasons. First, the silkworms were neglected; as area residents did not learn the proper silkworm cultivation techniques because they were farmers by trade and were too busy buying, planting, selling or speculating trees. Second, thousands of speculators and private buyers were ruined with the United States' financial disaster of 1837. Third, the severe winter of 1839-40 disproved the claims of hardiness for mulberry trees and brought on an inevitable decline. Finally, with the collapse of the mulberry tree market, the silk culture in the northeast was dead, not to be revived.⁸

The bubble burst and left those who had a stock of trees on hand high and dry. Had the speculation lasted a year or two longer, the panic would have been widespread. In 1843, the trees had become a worthless membrane to the ground, and were cut out and cut up. Quiet, modest Newtown became a victim to the mulberry fever. It was the opinion of all interested in the Newtown cocoonery that they could not fail to be millionaires, but the bubble burst and many worse off than before.⁹

After the silk industry collapsed, the Newtown cocoonery building was used as a residence which was leveled by a cyclone in 1860. "The large cocoonery on the Worth property was blown down, the inmates barely escaping with their lives."¹⁰ Over 170 years have passed since Newtown abandoned the silk-culture business, and naught but a memory remains that there ever was such an industry in the community. No vestige of the building remains, the trees are gone, and the land once utilized for the purpose long ago became part of the adjoining farm owned in the 1840s by Dr. David Hutchinson. Isaac Vanartsdalen said his father moved to their newly

⁸ "Bombyx Mori and Americans: Or, Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush" by Alma Burner Creek, University of Rochester Library Bulletin, Volume XXXIX, 1986.

⁹ Newtown Years Ago. Reminiscences written by Miss Mary Goodman, and read at the meeting of the New Century Club, November 15, 1911, by Mrs. Harriet Cary.

¹⁰ *Bucks County Intelligencer*, May 15, 1860. Reprinted article on the great thunder storm of May 7, 1860 that was published in the May 9, 1940 issue of the *Newtown Enterprise*.

purchased farm in 1859, and about two years later a cyclone demolished the old cocoonery building. As a boy he remembers well the walls left standing after the storm, the cellar and the well. What remained of the structure was subsequently razed and the ground leveled off by his father.¹¹

In 1934, a George School history "hobby group" led by Walter Mohr (1889-1978), head of the history department, took an interest in the old cocoonery and attempted to locate the foundation walls. "Members of the local history hobby group, continued their excavations on the site of the old cocoonery in the field north of the woods across the Newtown Creek, on Sunday, April 15 (1934). Two walls, the cornerstone between them, nails, the bowl of an iron spoon, part of an iron pot, and broken glass were unearthed."¹² The group erected a brownstone marker commemorating this discovery and pointing to the site of the famous local cocoonery. Over the 70 years since the marker was put in place, it has been threatened by the building of the Newtown Bypass and the later development of the surrounding farm land.

Today, in need of repair, the marker can be found on the edge of the George School property, a short distance into the woods behind the Crowne Pointe development. Although the landscape has changed dramatically, and no visible evidence remains, the marker indicates that the Newtown cocoonery was located on the area now encompassed by the retention basin located behind Opal Court. Fittingly, the remains of the Newtown cocoonery were swept away just as fast as the silk craze swept through Newtown a little over 150 years ago.



Brownstone Marker: "Site of Cocoonery, 120 Feet North →, 1840-1860."

¹¹ "Recollections of Earlier Newtown: The Cocoonery" by Franceanna Girton Ellis, date unknown.

¹² *Newtown Enterprise*, Thursday, April 26, 1934.

Open House Tour

The 44th Annual Holiday Open House Tour was held on Saturday, December 2nd from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM. Over 790 people enjoyed the beautiful weather to tour the following private homes and public buildings that were open for touring:

- Balderston House
(232 S. Chancellor St.)
- Ettinger/Bauman House
(309 Washington Ave.)
- Linkenheimer House
(101 S. Chancellor St.)
- Sturgis House (23 S. Chancellor St.)
- Edmonds House (117 N. Lincoln Ave.)
- St. Luke's Episcopal Church
- Temperance House
- Newtown Fire Association
- Newtown Library Company
- Newtown Borough Hall
- The Stocking Works
- The Court Inn

The weather was ideal for strolling the streets of Newtown to visit the sites on this year's tour. The Court 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.

Spring Cocktail Party

The NHA will be holding its spring cocktail party on April 21st from 5-8 PM at the Court Inn. Take this opportunity to catch up with acquaintances, old and new. Tickets are \$35 per person. Invitations will be mailed in the spring. Join us for this wonderful event. For more information, contact Mary Callahan at (215) 968-3914 or dcnhh@comast.net.



Court Inn Ash Table

This limited edition coffee table, designed by Ru Amagasu, grandson of George Nakashima, the internationally acclaimed furniture designer, was crafted from materials harvested from the Court Inn Ash tree. The historic Ash was planted around the turn of the 18th Century, likely at the time that Josiah Ferguson built the rear addition to the Court Inn in 1792. With a lifetime spanning close to two centuries, the tree finally succumbed to decay last winter. Carefully milling, drying and then crafting furniture from this tree is Willard Fine Furniture's best effort in preserving this symbol of the past. The one-of-a-kind table is available off-the-floor for \$995. Contact David Callahan for more information at (215) 968-3914. The NHA will receive a percentage of the proceeds from the sale of this furniture.

Elizabeth Mayer - Founding Member

Elizabeth Mayer recently passed away in Kennebunk, Maine after a long illness. Mrs. Mayer was one of the founding members of the Newtown Historic Association. She was on the restoration committee for the south side of the Half Moon (Court Inn) and was the chairman of the Market Day committee for over 20 years. She also did extensive work in the research area on a weekly basis.

Corporate Members

We are proud to highlight our corporate members:

- Anthony Petsis & Associates, Inc.
- David J. Witchell Salon & Spa
- DeFrehn Corporation
- Dragonfly, Ltd.
- First National Bank of Newtown
- Gemmi Construction, Inc.
- Johnson, Kendall & Johnson, Inc.
- Mom's Bake at Home Pizza
- Newtown Hardware House
- Newtown-Jamison Physical Therapy
- Newtown Roofing Company
- One Ten South Salon
- Peruzzi Automotive Group
- Pickering Corts & Summerson, Inc.
- ReMax Properties, Ltd.
- St. Mary Medical Center
- Stuckert & Yates
- The Law Office of Paul R. Beckert, Jr.
- The Temperance House
- The Township House
- Thomas-Guy Design, Ltd.
- Tyrol Agency, Inc.
- Wells Fargo Home Mortgage
- YellowHouse Antiques

Upcoming Events

- **Volunteer Recognition Dinner**, January 28, 6:00 p.m. @ the Temp
- **General Membership Meeting**, "Underground Railroad in Bucks County," February 19. 8:00 p.m.
- **Tavern Night**, March 3. 7:00 p.m.
- **General Membership Meeting**, "The Newtown Railroad Revisited," March 19. 8:00 p.m.
- **Clean-Up**, March 24. 8:30 a.m.
- **Annual Meeting**, April 16. 8:00 p.m.
- **Cocktail Party**, April 21. 5:00 p.m.
- **Historic Walking Tour & Flower Show**, May 4. 6:30 p.m.
- **5th Grade Historic Walking Tour**, June 6. 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.
- **Annual Picnic**, June 23, 5:00 p.m.
- **Market Day**, September 15.

The Half Moon is published quarterly by the Newtown Historic Association, Inc., P.O. Box 303, Centre Avenue & Court Street, Newtown, PA 18940



Printed on Recycled Paper.