



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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Candlelight Tour

The candlelight walking tour scheduled for June 3rd was cancelled and will be rescheduled.

Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting was held on Monday, April 18th at the Court Inn. All members were invited, President Callahan updated those in attendance on the status of the association, reports were given by the various committees, and refreshments were served.

Annual Dues

The annual dues notices have been mailed to all active members. In an effort to continue our membership drive, members are encouraged to submit the names and addresses of potential new members to the Corresponding Secretary, Mary Callahan at dcnhh@comcast.net.

1886 Map for Sale

The Newtown Historic Association recently printed a limited quantity of reproduction 1886 railroad atlas maps of Newtown Borough. These maps are available for \$100 unframed and are on display at the Court Inn. Interested parties should contact David Callahan at dcnhh@comcast.net.

Old Photos Wanted

The NHA is asking anyone with old photos or postcards of Newtown to consider donating either the originals or copies to enhance our archives

Inn & About Newtown

The second annual Inn & About Newtown was held on Saturday, April 30th. Over 50 individuals participated in the rotating dinner that began and ended at the historic Court Inn with pre-dinner hors d'oeuvres and post-dinner dessert and coffee. Patrons wine & dined and enjoyed the warm hospitality in the following five homes: Ann Balderston, Mary & David Callahan, Christine & Kevin Edmonds, Teena & Bill Hanlon, and Linda & Skip Trowbridge.

5th Grade Walking Tour

The sixth annual 5th Grade Walking Tour was held on Wednesday, June 1, 2004. Over 430 students participated from three schools: Goodnoe Elementary, Newtown Elementary and Newtown Friends Elementary. The Court Inn and ten other historic sites were visited.

Annual Picnic

The annual picnic was held on Saturday, June 18th on a hot evening. The picnic was an informal affair, with ample servings of hot dogs, hamburgers, soft drinks and wine. Patrons brought their favorite salads and desserts. About 60 people registered and a few others joined us that day. The annual picnic is a good way for people to socialize and meet the new members and renew old friendships.

On the Trail of the Sunset Oak

- Compiled by Brian Rounsavill -

There's something captivating within the simplicity of an old black & white photo of a tree or blossoming flower. A simple subject, photographed in a simple manner, leaves a lot to one's imagination. Famed photographer and environmentalist, Ansel Adams made his mark by photographing subjects in a way that captured the emotions and elements that combined to convey nature's true beauty. Photos of the Sunset Oak seem to have this same effect.

While working on a forthcoming book, several old glass negatives were uncovered which caught the majestic beauty of a large tree known as the "Sunset Oak." The brief inscription on the envelope indicated that this magnificent white oak was a landmark standing on private property across the Neshaminy on the hill in back of Campbell's Bridge. Other envelopes were simply labeled "Hutchinson's Oak" and "Sunset Oak in the summer of 1904, a westward view from George School."

There was something that fascinated me about these photos. Was it the sheer size of the tree? The arching canopy of branches? Its noble and worldly posture? Its solitary location? Judging by its size, undoubtedly this tree had stood witness to many of the milestone events that shaped American history. Surely, a tree that was this large back in 1900 should still be visible today. Thus, the girls (daughters Nicole and Jacqueline) and I set out on our quest to find the "Sunset Oak".

We began our search at the George School, walking the grounds for several hours. Although we saw quite a few trees that resembled the Sunset Oak, we were unable to locate one that truly matched the photos. At the end of the day, we did find a bench in the Admissions Office in East Main, donated by the Class of 1921, that was crafted from its towering limbs. Above the bench is a framed series of three photographs that chronicle the Sunset Oak's gradual decline and valiant last stand.

Piecing together the physical geography today with the captions and photographs from over a century ago, we determined that this large white oak stood on a vista approximately 1 ½ miles south west of Newtown, just across the Neshaminy over in Northampton Township. The Sunset Oak was a favorite landmark at the turn of the century that defined George School's western horizon on property that was originally owned by William Smith Hutchinson, son of Thomas Hutchinson and Esther Smith, where today the Buck Hill Acres development now stands. Hence, the inscription, "Hutchinson's Oak."



Fig. 1 – 1895 Glass plate courtesy of the NHA Archives. Note the photographer leaning against the trunk at left.



Fig. 2 – 1909 Photo courtesy of the George School. Note the field has been plowed right up to the tree and also the loss of lower limbs and thinning of the crown.



Fig. 3 – 1918 Photo courtesy of the George School.



Fig. 4 – Postcard c. 1900 courtesy of the George School. Note there are seven ladies picnicking beneath the shade.

Although we knew the tree was destroyed in a storm just about a century ago, we were curious to see if we could locate the spot where it once stood. So as we looked to our right from outside East Main, we caught sight of the tree-lined horizon to the west in the general direction of Northampton. We ventured up to the hillside that is now in Buck Hill Acres, but unfortunately the girls and I could find no traces of the Sunset Oak that remain today.

The white oak is the most common tree species of the eastern half of the United States. These trees can grow from 80 to 100 feet tall, 3 to 4 feet in diameter around the trunk and can spread from 50 to 80 feet. The life span of the white oak, if undisturbed, is 500 to 800 years old. When growing in the open, they often have a widely spreading canopy of branches. These characteristics make white oaks excellent shade trees. The champion white oak is 107 feet tall and 11 feet in diameter.

The Sunset Oak fits this description perfectly. Judging from the 1895 and 1900 photos, using the people as reference points, we estimate the trunk of the Sunset Oak was 8 ½ to 9 feet in diameter, which would be about 27 feet in circumference. These measurements approximate the Sunset Oak to be well over 500 years old in 1900.

We suspect that farming damaged the root structure and lead to the loss of the lower limbs and thinning of the crown, which is evident in the contrast between the 1895 and 1909 photos. Root damage, lightning, limb loss, heat and drought are common contributors to tree die-back. Rainfall and temperature history for this region show that in 1913 we had above average temperatures and in 1914 we may have suffered a drought. The combination of these man-made and environmental factors we believe likely lead to the eventual demise of the Sunset Oak.

Our quest to locate the Sunset Oak ended in basement of the wood shop at the George School. Among the dusty stacks of wood was one last plank milled from the remnants of this mighty oak. This wood is available for special uses in the George School's second century.

Joseph Solomon Walton (1855-1912), a Quaker educator and the second principal (1901-1912) of the George School, seemed to share my interest in the Sunset Oak, as expressed by the following essay, which is quite a fine tribute, that was uncovered during the research for this article:

Notes By The Way *George School - 12/22/1902*
by J. S. Walton

It was the first day of our Christmas vacation. The Clan went to see the great oak. Behind its spreading limbs we have been accustomed to watch the winter sunsets burn down in the western sky. The old monarch stands alone well towards the summit of the hills that bend to Neshaminy.

The great ice storm tore down forest, and stripped limbs and tops from the hero's of many winters and storms; but the old oak defied the ice king. Its mighty arms held the crushing burden through many days and sweeping winds, and when the sun relieved them of the strain they raised up unbroken and filled out the perfect crown of the father of oaks.

We stood under those spreading branches and thought it were a good place to be. Here the little thoughts of a troubled mind faded away; here was a place to pray, to worship, and give thanks. From under these low spreading limbs which framed the outlook for us, we saw the Neshaminy come out of the northland and wind its way into the spruce shaded recesses of "dripping rocks"; we saw it pause by the spreading meadows of the George School, and then leisurely turn away into the birch fringed windings that led toward Langhorne hills; we saw acres of tree tops climbing up from Newtown Creek to screen the George School students from the keen winds from the North; we saw the railroad bend round the hills and disappear toward Philadelphia.

The outlook was impressive, but when we looked up into the giant tree itself, into those giant arms outstretched to the four winds, there came to us a feeling of awe and reverence akin to the sublime. Here alone in the solitary grandeur, this mighty monarch must have grown through the ages. It may have been a part grown tree when the primitive forest were removed, and by some hap it alone was left to stand.

More than a century has passed since its spreading arms were shaded by any neighboring tree. Stumps have been cleared away, and fires have raged on the hill side, while the oak has escaped unscathed.

[Special thanks to: Kingdon Swayne, George School Archivist; Carter Sio, George School Woodshop Instructor; and Jim Consolloy, Princeton University Grounds Manager.]

Open House Tour

The 43rd Annual Christmas Open House Tour will be held on Saturday, December 3, 2005 from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM. A partial list of featured private homes and public buildings include:

- O'Malley House (313 E. Washington Ave.)
- Malzone House (126 N. State St.)
- Anderson House (148 N. State St.)
- Godwin House (144 Liberty St.)
- The Brick Hotel
- St. Mark's AME Zion Church
- Newtown Movie Theatre
- Newtown Borough Council
- The Stocking Works
- The Court Inn

The Court Inn will feature open hearth cooking in the cellar kitchen, colonial music and re-enactors of the colonial period. Refreshments of mulled cider and cheese will be served throughout the day. Tickets are \$20.00 and will be sold the day of the tour at the Court Inn and at the Stocking Works. Parking is available at the Stocking Works with bus transportation to various locations. Advance ticket sales at Newtown Hardware House. Rest room facilities are located at the Court Inn and the Newtown Borough Council Chambers. No photos or high-heeled shoes allowed in the houses. For information, call (215) 968-4004.

New Members

We are pleased to welcome the following new members:

- Debra Gould, *Newtown, PA*
- Carolyn Havrilla, *Yardley, PA*
- Kevin and Becky Kerchner, *Newtown, PA*
- William Mahler, *Newtown, PA*
- Thomas and Carolyn Walrond, *Newtown, PA*

October Meeting

The October meeting of the Newtown Historic Association will be held on Monday, October 17th at 8:00 PM at the Court Inn. "The Delaware Canal - Commerce, Calamities, and Conservation" will be presented by Susan Traylor, Executive Director of Friends of the Delaware Canal. The slideshow will show the 60-mile-long Delaware Canal that runs from Easton to Bristol, PA. Historic photographs will illustrate stories of the era when teams of mules pulled canal boats laden with tons of coal to Philadelphia and New York. Calamities caused by structural failures and Mother Nature will be described and the challenges of maintaining and restoring the Canal will be related. The public is invited, refreshments will be served.

Recent Acquisitions

- Items Pertaining to the Newtown Youth and Community Center (Neshaminy Valley Youth Center) – *Robert Adams*
- Navy Training Course Certificates: 1941/2; A Pocket Reference Guide to Army, Navy, Marine Corps Insignia; Helpful Hints to Navy Recruits – *Fanny Burns*
- Two Brass Badges – *Grace Lauer*
- Research Notebook: "Verification of Construction Dates of Houses and Other Buildings in Newtown Borough & Township" by Jeff Marshall – *Jeffrey Marshall*
- Homestead Restaurant (Lavender Hall) Postcard and Several Items & Photos Relating to the Sunset Oak – *Brian & Maria Rounsavill*
- Various Items Related to Newtown – *Don Marshal, ESQ.*
- Research Paper: "The Pickering Story" by Jean Fabian Torongo – *Jean F. Torongo*

- Excelsior Bobbin & Spool Co. Blotter – *William & Teena Hanlon*
- Documents Relating to the Former Kershbaumer Enterprises, Ltd. – *Newtown Borough Council*
- Woman's Clothing; Alphabet & Picture Blocks; Elms-Savidge Wedding Needlepoint; Newtown Class of 1924 Photo; H.S. Diploma for Esther Hampton Morris; Blueprints for P.H. Morris Store; Morris/Savidge Family Photos; Newtown Photos – *Sarajane Dallas*
- Pickering, Corts & Summerson Sign – *Paul & Laurie Gouza*
- 48 Star U.S. Flag – *David Krewson*
- Stonehouses Book – *Harriet & Paul Beckert*
- Newtown Photos, Postcard and Advertisement – *Langhorne Historic Association*
- Stations, Shelters, Structures, Signs and Signals of the Philadelphia, Newtown & New York Railroad, Vol. I 1876-1906 & Vol. II 1906-1984 – *Richard Mansley*
- Research Notebook: "One Room School House: Prospect Hill School" – *Diana Barbera-Horowitz*
- 1911 U.S. Army Infantry Drill Regulations Book – *Harold & Fran Smith*

Upcoming Events

- **Summer Fest, July 24**
- **Market Day, September 17.**
10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
- **General Membership Meeting**
(*Susan Taylor - The Delaware Canal*), **October 17:**
- **General Membership Meeting,**
November 14
- **Open House Tour, December 3.**
10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

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