

TriCentennial 1682-1982 chester county

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Community of the Week
HONEY BROOK TOWNSHIP
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By Margaret R. Eppihimer

The Headwaters of the Brandywine

When Chester County was founded in 1682, one of the last areas for settlement was the farthest northwestern part which was wilderness bounded by mountains and barren hills.

The intrepid Welsh were the first settlers. They named the area Nantmeal for their birthplace in Radnorshire, Wales. The name is said to mean "sweet water"; nant is Welsh for brook and mel is Latin for honey, or honeybrook; the mountains to the north and west received their name 'Welsh'.

First came Nantmel in 1719; in 1740 the township was divided into East Nantmeal and West Nantmeal. Subsequent divisions resulted in the formation of Warwick, Wallace and in 1789 Honey Brook Township.

Honey Brook Township is one of the largest townships in Chester County, comprising 16,000 acres and reaching the highest elevation in the county which is over 1,000 feet high and located west of Honey Brook Borough.

The Scotch-Irish emigrated by the thousands between 1720 - 1740 landing at Newcastle and journeying by foot, followed the Nanticoke Trail, which today corresponds to Route 10, through Compass and Honey Brook. Distinguished for their thrift, industry and endurance, yet a poor sect financially, their spirit had a strong influence upon the settlement in this wilderness where Indians were well established.

The township extends from the crest of the Welsh Mountains on the north and west to the crest of the Barren Hill on the south. These

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mountains provided resources in timber, charcoal for nearby iron furnaces, and a fine grade of sand which was marketed all over the United States.

The historic Brandywine rises from numerous springs at the foothills of the Welsh Mountains and follows several courses. The Eastern Brandywine flows through Cupola to Downingtown, while the Western Brandywine with two main branches flows through Icedale and Coatesville to meet Eastern branch at Lenape. Together they flow as one Brandywine Creek to Christiana and empty into the Delaware River. The entire course from springs to outlet is approximately 60 miles.

By the springs at the foothills of the mountains and on farms along the streams great numbers of Indian artifacts - arrows, spears, clubs - have been discovered and are evidence of Indian encampments.

The Brandywine Creek has been a great influence on life and industry in Honey Brook Township. Early mills used its power; two remain, one at Cupola, now the residence of the Walter Bartos and the other near Cambridge which is no longer in use.

On the East Brandywine a 146-acre Struble Lake was constructed in 1950 as a flood impoundment, designed to reduce the threat of floods and to supply water for cities and towns.

Early development was stimulated by the Horseshoe Pike or Downingtown and Harrisburg Turnpike, known as Route 322. Along this road many inns (public houses) were built to provide rest and refreshment for the teamsters and cattle drovers on their arduous journey.

Among these inns was Bulls Head Tavern, later known as General Wayne Inn around which the village of Waynesburg (changed to Honey Brook in 1876) developed. Since prior to the Revolution there has been a tavern on that corner in Honey Brook. The present building built in 1866 with a fourth floor addition in 1883 is being restored and remodeled.

The Wilmington and Reading Railroad was completed in 1870; the Pennsylvania Railroad passed through Honey Brook to Lancaster in 1854. This stimulated development to the extent that the village of Honey Brook petitioned for incorporation as a Borough in 1891. Shortly thereafter the Fire Company was organized, and since have been ever updating their equipment and training to keep it a first-class efficient volunteer Fire Company.

Agriculture has always been the dominant activity of the township. Sweeping changes have occurred in the types of crops and methods of harvest

as is described in the forth coming book by this author entitled "Headwaters of the Brandywine" - the story of Honey Brook Township.

First family settlers were names such as Gibbons, Gardner, Irwin, Talbot, Trego, Hanna, Hunter, Piersol, Barr, Buchanan, Darlington, Jones, Emery, Morton, McCamant, Graham, etc.

These settlers were influential in founding strong churches, schools, businesses and social institutions.

In 1915 the Old Order Amish, who were expanding in Conestoga Valley (over the Welsh Mountains), began arriving and buying up the farms in the township. It has continued ever since so that today the Amish possess 90% of the acreage and own 81 farms. The former generations of English families have vacated the farms since World War I, until there are only three farms in the tax lists owned by descendents of the original settlers. They are Emery, Jones and Levengood.

Laying idle for fifty years was a 952-acre tract known as the Henry W. LeBoutillier Estate. For three years developers hovered over the vast block of land with an intent to erect high density housing. Finally after the township had spent \$7,000 in court fees, the LeBoutillier heirs recognized their plan was futile and agreed to sell the tract to the Amish who needed more land for their sons to farm.

In 1980 the Old Order Amish, through the Farm Credit Union at West Chester, arranged the necessary financing to purchase the tract for \$2,246,814. This action pleased the Honey Brook residents for now they knew the township would remain an agricultural one.

Immediately upon settlement barn raisings began and within two years ten new farms with buildings were established, and no money had exchanged hands among laborers for construction.

Barns were stocked with at least 40 milk cows (Holstein) and the township today has changed from diversified agriculture to principally dairy farming, with crops, such as hay and corn, raised to feed the animals, with tobacco as a cash crop.

Religion played a vital part in the lives of the early settlers and the two churches, the Methodist founded in 1823 and the Presbyterian founded in 1835 remain as the oldest institutions in the community.

Education was first provided by private schools and academies, of which there were many. One known as Howard Academy was founded in Rockville in 1848 and attracted students not only from Chester County

but from Reading, Lancaster and Philadelphia. Professor James McClune, L.D. was its first principal. Many students who began their careers there became local doctors, ministers and teachers.

The Free Public School Act of 1834 stimulated educational opportunities. Prior to that date, the poor children had overseers and the Commissioners paid for their education. There were 80 listed for Honey Brook in 1835. From 1860 the township erected a number of one (sometimes two) room country schools where one teacher taught all eight grades. These have now become residences with the exception of two.

In 1918 the Joint Vocational High School was established and the township and borough high school united.

In 1955 the age of school jointures dawned. Twin Valley School District was established comprised of six districts: the boroughs of Honey Brook and Elverson; West Nantmeal, Caernarvon, Honey Brook and Robeson Townships. This merged Honey Brook with Berks County for educational purposes. The children in K-6 grades attend the Honey Brook Elementary School in the east end of the borough.

The Amish were granted permission by the Commonwealth in late 1950s to provide their own schools and they have established two one-room school buildings taught by an Amish teacher and have approval for a third school.

Only a few light industries have been established west of the borough along Route 322.

Many people are attracted to the area because of three fine camping grounds; others by two modern, well-run nursing homes at Hickory House and Tel Hai Retirement Center.

The Federated Medical Center along Beaver Dam Road is a unique enterprise and aiding medical research.

Since the Township's incorporation 194 years ago incredible changes have occurred yet it retains its natural assets of beauty in its surrounding mountains and fertile farms. It is an area of tranquil beauty with a rural flavor in close proximity to urban centers through fine highways and close access to regional highways of I-95 and the Pennsylvania Turnpike at Morgantown.