

The History and Changing Landscape of Franklin Township

Officially created in 1852, Franklin Township was named in honor of Benjamin Franklin, who during the late 1760s and early 1770s owned land adjoining what is now the Village of Kemblesville. Like many other Chester County communities, Franklin Township's development is closely intertwined with the success of agriculture, the gradual construction and improvement of roadways, and more recently, suburban growth in Chester County and the Wilmington-Newark metropolitan area.

Original Settlers

The earliest known inhabitants of what is now Franklin Township were members of the Lenni Lenape, an Algonquian tribe that had many settlements throughout the Delaware River Valley region. Called the Delaware by the English, the Lenni Lenape were joined as a confederacy, but their settlements were largely independent and governed by their own chiefs. The Lenape cultivated a variety of crops especially beans, corn, and pumpkins and squash, which were grown together in their fields, and gathered wild fruits and nuts. They practiced slash-and-burn farming and also burned off the forest underbrush to encourage the growth of grasses favored by the game animals they hunted, creating a parklike environment in the woodlands. The only documented site associated with the Lenni Lenape in the area is the village called Minguannan on the White Clay Creek in adjoining London Britain Township. A number of Algonquian-speaking tribes in the eastern United States considered the Lenni Lenape their "grandfathers," the tribe from which they were descended. The comparatively peaceful Lenni Lenape were often in conflict with the Susquehannocks (to their west) and the Iroquois (to their north). By the time of the Swedish settlement in the area, the Lenni Lenape had become a tributary tribe of the Susquehannocks. The Susquehannocks subsequently were defeated by the Iroquois, and their dominion over the Lenni Lenape had passed to the Iroquois by the time William Penn arrived in America.

European Settlement

What is now Chester County was claimed by the Dutch as part of the colony of New Netherlands in 1609. From 1638 to 1655 the area was part of New Sweden; it then reverted to Dutch rule (as part of the colony of New Amstel from 1656 to 1664). The area was largely under English control from 1664, originally as part of the colony of New York. Called Upland County by the Swedes, the area became Chester County and part of Pennsylvania in 1682. At that time, Chester County was much larger than its present size, extending into W

Pennsylvania; more than 20 counties were later formed, either wholly or partly, from lands that at the time were part of Chester.

Much of what is today Franklin Township was part of lands once owned by the London Company. Its holdings in Pennsylvania amounted to more than 60,000 acres, roughly one quarter of which were in what is now Chester County. The lands were granted by William Penn, the colonial proprietor of Pennsylvania, in 1699 to four Quakers of London, England, who with other partners established the Pennsylvania Land Company, known informally as the London Company or London Land Company. Originally, the company was to control its lands for 124 years and lease the lands to settlers. The London Tract, a large parcel belonging to the company, included more than 17,000 acres, most of which were located in present-day London Grove, London Britain, and Franklin (the last two were originally part of New London). That portion of the London Tract in Franklin was in the northeastern section of the township. Much of this land was originally leased with stipulations that a certain number of acres be cleared and plowed yearly. According to an advertisement circulated in the 1720s, the leases generally comprised 50 acres per person with 10 families required to settle together on every 5,000 acres for the purpose of promoting "good neighborhood convenience." The remainder of Franklin Township to the south and west was originally located in a number of smaller grants of land that originated with the Penns, with some exceptions (see below).

Futhey and Cope, in writing about London Britain in their *History of Chester County, Pennsylvania* (1881), described the boundaries of the London Company lands in southeastern Chester County as follows: "A considerable part of this township was included in the survey made for the London Company. If the reader will take up the map of Chester County, and extend the east and west lines of Londongrove township about as far south as Kimbleville, and connect them by an east-and-west line, he will have the east, west, and south lines of the London Company's tract...." (The southern boundary of the London Tract was in fact somewhat farther south than this passage indicates.) In writing about London Grove, they state: "This tract was rectangular, being over three miles wide, and about eight and six-tenths miles long. That part of Londongrove which lies directly north of New Garden, containing 718 acres, was subsequently added to the former survey, so that the London Company owned, altogether, 17,218 acres in this county, for which a patent was granted June 25, 1718." There was also other land in Franklin that was initially surveyed for the London Company; it was part of a large parcel that began at the southwest corner of the London Tract and extended west and south of the Tract.

Although some settlers received land grants from the Penns in New London as early as 1704, most settlement occurred later than that. Settlers within the London Tract began to obtain deeds to their lands from the London Company in 1722 and 1723. These deeds were prepared in England using the metes and bounds technique, and many individual parcels were irregular in shape due to the random settlement of the London Tract. Farmers cleared

the old growth forests, and the prime agricultural soils they had produced were plowed and planted with crops.

In a portion of the area now south of Strickersville Road, the first European settlers obtained their land from a grant that originated with the Calverts, the proprietors of the Maryland colony. This was due to competing claims over the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania, which were not settled until the 1760s. Many details can be found in *The History of Cecil County, Maryland . . .* by George Johnston (1881). It devotes a chapter to New Munster, as the tract of land was called. New Munster encompassed roughly 10 sq. mi. of land, some 5 mi long (north to south) by 2 mi wide (west to east). The warrant for the property was issued in 1683, and in the 1710s the land now in Franklin was deeded to members of the Alexander family, who had apparently already settled and farmed the land many years before that, suggesting that they were — or were among — the earliest European settlers of Franklin.

During the early part of the 18th century, southeastern Chester County was divided into individual townships to provide more effective political representation. New London, of which Franklin was part at the time, was chartered in 1723. The eastern border of what would become Franklin was established two years later when London Britain was separated from New London. Municipal boundaries often followed parcel lines, resulting in irregularly shaped townships. This is apparent in the northern and eastern borders of Franklin. The southern boundary of the Township, with Maryland, is part of the Mason-Dixon Line, which was surveyed in the 1760s by Englishmen Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon as part of the settlement of a boundary dispute between the Calverts and the Penns.

Throughout the 18th century, the land now contained in Franklin was the location of large farms with widely dispersed farmsteads. Most of the first residences were one-story buildings with a single interior room, sometimes with a loft. Though few exist today, some examples remain, such as the rear portion of the Susan Fury House on Den Road. The "Widow Fury" (presumably Elizabeth Fury, an ancestor) is listed on the tax rolls of 1753, and Fury's, an early tavern, is a landmark on Reading Howell's 1792 map of Pennsylvania. The intersection of modern-day Routes 896 and 841 is marked "Fureys X Roads" as late as T. J. Kennedy's 1856 map of Chester County. Other early 18th century houses were log buildings, which were often enlarged and added onto in subsequent years. The Cornelius Lynch House on North Creek Road, demolished in 2005, was possibly the last example of this early colonial architecture in Franklin.

One of the early settlers in Franklin Township was Susannah McKean (pronounced "McCane"). The McKean Farmhouse, constructed c.1720, has a side-hall plan; though this plan was common at the time in Philadelphia, the McKean house is one of the earliest examples of it in rural Pennsylvania. Her grandson Thomas McKean (1734–1817), born on Franklin township land, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence (as a Delaware representative) and the only continuous member of the Continental Congress. He served as

president (governor) of Delaware for a brief time, as chief justice of Pennsylvania, and as the second governor of Pennsylvania under the 1790 Constitution. He also was President of Congress under the Articles of Confederation for five months during 1781.

During the 18th century, milling grew in prominence in the township, and it would remain important through the 19th century. At that time, farmers would transport grain to mills to be ground into flour. While most mills were grist mills, many were equipped with a saw or paper mill. As early as Painter Bowen's 1847 map of Chester County, six different mills in Franklin are situated on the West and Middle Branches of the White Clay Creek and on Big Elk Creek. Today, three of Franklin's former mills remain standing, one of which, the John K. Steele Mill on Hess Mill Road, was built c.1749. Ruins of other mills and their races are still visible.

By 1750, the road from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to Newark, Delaware, was laid out. Now called New London Road (Route 896), it became a major route for the transportation of agricultural products from Chester County farms to markets in Delaware, though in those early years goods were typically transported to Newport or Christiana, Delaware, where there was accessible to a navigable stream. Roadway improvements led to the establishment of inns and stagecoach stops, including the the Furey family's Plow and Harrow Inn (c.1758, also the site of a surviving blacksmith's shop) and the McCleave tavern (1763, the predecessor of the Kemblesville Hotel), as well as Franklin's villages, Kemblesville and Chesterville.

In 1760 Britain's Parliament ordered the dissolution of the London Company, and in the early 1760s its lands were sold off and the proceeds distributed to the stockholders. Leaseholders were forced to buy their lands, or move. George McCleave, who established his tavern in what had been the London Tract in 1763 near where Appleton Road now intersects Route 896, was also a post rider, and he was forced by his debts to sell his 215 acres to William Dunlap, a printer and Philadelphia postmaster, and the nephew of Benjamin Franklin's wife. McCleave retained the right to live there, and continued to run a tavern. Franklin acquired that land in 1764, as part of the settlement of Dunlap's post office debts. Franklin and the British North American post office (of which Franklin was one of two deputy postmasters) retained control of the property until at least 1776.

Nineteenth Century

In the early 1800s, the village that was to become Kemblesville was prosperous and busy, due to its location along the road from Newark to Lancaster; the neighborhood boasted three mills, a hotel, and later a nearby pottery works (Darlington Cope's pottery, after 1840). In 1816, Fox Chase, as the Kemblesville area is said to have been originally called, first shows up on a map, as Kimble (after the tavern there, run by Samuel Kimble). It later was known as Kimbleville, after the same family, which was descended from John J. Kimble, who settled in the area in 1793 on former McKean land. John's youngest son, George, was a storekeeper who opened the village's first post office in his shop in 1823. He served as postmaster for 34

years. (Later in the century Dr. J. G. West [see below] served two terms as postmaster, for 20 years in all — and from 1862 to 1918, members of the West family were postmasters for all but 11 years. That stretch of service was rivaled by the Richards family, who served in the office from 1934 to 1973; for 28 of those years Gertrude Richards was in charge.) George Kimble's brother Samuel operated the Kemblesville Hotel and tavern, which became the local polling place. Samuel Kimble applied for his first tavern license in 1808. Family members spelled the name "Kimble" or "Kemble," and throughout the 19th century the name of the village vacillated between "Kimbleville" and "Kemblesville." In late 1800s the village had a population of about 200 people.

Franklin Township was separated from New London Township in 1852 as a result of a petition from the residents, who complained about the difficulties that arose as a result of their distance from New London village (this was when travel was largely by foot or horse). A three-man commission reviewed the petition and a majority approved the division, established the township's northwestern boundary, and suggested the name Franklin for the new township. The Presbyterian Church in Kemblesville was constructed that same year under the sponsorship of the New London Presbyterian Church. One acre of ground was purchased from Samuel Kimble, Sr. and his wife for \$50.00 for the church's construction. The original building burned in 1990 and was replaced by the current structure. On December 6, 1868, permission was given to the Flint Hill Methodist Church — which had a church and cemetery in southeastern Franklin on Flint Hill Road and had been established prior to 1829 — to hold services at the Presbyterian Church on the second and fourth Sunday of each month. The Flint Hill congregation became increasingly strong throughout the latter half of the 19th century and in 1899 it acquired the Presbyterian property in Kemblesville. The original Flint Hill Methodist Church and cemetery remain as ruins.

Ruins of the Mt. Olivet Church and cemetery (Free Christians, also known as Plummerites) are visible today along Walker Road. The Mt. Olivet congregation dates to the late 1840s, and the church was dedicated in 1848. The church later served other congregations and as a school. The Auburn Baptist Church (south side of Auburn Road in northeast Franklin) was also built in the mid-1800s. This church remains active today, and though its core is historic, it has undergone alterations and additions.

Chesterville, the other main settlement in Franklin, was a compact village with several buildings; both it and "Kimbleville" appear on Bowen's 1847 map as two of the three settlements in New London Township. A post office opened in Chesterville in 1848 in a store operated by Samuel Byles; Milton Shortlidge served as the first postmaster. On the opposite corner was the William Missimer Farm. Missimer, whose house remains standing on the corner today, operated a wheelwright and blacksmith shop. Chesterville, which had a population roughly half of Kemblesville's in the late 1800s, was never as large or important to the Township's economy as Kemblesville. Its post office closed in 1901.

In general, buildings erected in the 19th century in Franklin were constructed in a manner that

reflected the prevailing styles throughout Chester County. The Federal Style was a refinement of earlier architectural trends. Perhaps the best example of the Federal Style in Franklin is the Thomas Hindman House on Flint Hill Road, with its three stories, shallow roof slopes, and double brick chimneys. By the mid-19th century, the prevailing architectural style for new construction in Franklin became Gothic Revival. These residences are characterized by a centered cross-gable on the main elevation which lights the third floor/garret space.

Agriculture continued to be a profitable enterprise throughout the 19th century in Franklin, and farming remained economically important into the mid-20th century. Increasing output of grain in the early decades of the century, and a shift from family farming to commercial farming made possible by the railroads led to the construction of larger barns. (Chester County became an important supplier of dairy products to Philadelphia and elsewhere.) A variety of historic farm outbuildings, including springhouses, corncribs, and sheds, may also be found on 19th-century farmsteads. Franklin's Connecticut-style corncribs are unique among other Chester County corncribs because of the extended gables found on the end wall where the doors are located. The development of railroad lines skirted Franklin Township; the closest line in Pennsylvania was the Pennsylvania and Delaware Railroad, which followed the East Branch of the White Clay Creek through neighboring London Britain and New Garden to Landenberg and beyond, cutting through a small corner of northeastern Franklin Township.

In the autumn of 1876, William Nesbit began publishing a paper in Kemblesville called *The Item*, which ran for about two years. Nesbit then started *The Register*, which was for a time a semimonthly and then became a weekly. Its publication ceased some time in 1879, and Nesbit removed to Philadelphia.

Schools became more common throughout Pennsylvania in the mid-19th century. Before the 1830s, most schools were subscription organizations funded by parents. In the 1830s, however, the "Common School System" was introduced, which required municipalities to be divided into local school districts, each served by its own schoolhouse. Franklin was divided into seven school districts, with the majority of districts building one-room schoolhouses. Of the first round of schoolhouses, only the Spencer School House on Old School House Road remains. A number of one-room schoolhouses were in operation between 1875 and 1956, when the Kemblesville Elementary School was built and the system was fully absorbed into the Avon Grove School District (est. 1953). One of the surviving schoolhouses from this second period is the Franklin School, on Route 896 north of Scotts Glen Road.

Twentieth Century to the Present

As the 19th century ended, Kemblesville had become increasingly important as a commercial center. Dr. J .G. West had become one of the leading citizens of the village. A medical doctor and a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania who moved to the Township in 1860, West lived in a brick house facing New London Road that was the subject of an illustration in Futhey and Cope's *History of Chester County*. He added a wing to his house in the late 1800s

where he operated a drug store and post office, and after retiring from his practice served in the Pennsylvania legislature. His son Frederick succeeded him in his practice. Another leading citizen, C. T. Richards, opened a saddlery shop and owned a half interest in the village's blacksmith shop.

Modern conveniences of the early 20th century became available in Franklin Township at this time. Gas lines and steam heat were installed in the Kemblesville Hotel in 1905 and electricity arrived in the village in 1908. Telephone lines had already come to Kemblesville in 1895, and the first exchange was established in the West drug store. In subsequent decades, phone lines and electricity were extended throughout the Township. In 1911, a stagecoach service carried mail and passengers between Kemblesville and Newark twice a day.

In 1920, the Franklin Township Board of Supervisors adopted a resolution to borrow \$30,000 for improving New London Road (Route 896) from London Britain to New London. This was completed in the spring of 1922. Residents petitioned and voted to have Franklin Township declared "dry" in 1933, the same year that Congress adopted, and the states ratified, the 21st amendment to the U.S. Constitution repealing the national prohibition on liquor. It has been implied that before Prohibition, Cecil County was "dry" and workers from Elk Mills found Kemblesville to be a lively spot on Saturday nights.

The earliest residences in the 20th century reflected the American Foursquare Style. This low-cost building type was made possible in part by mail-order businesses, which shipped a kit of materials and directions for its construction. An example of this type is found in Kemblesville, a two-and-a-half story, two-bay building with a pyramidal roof, sleeping porch, and typical hipped-roof dormers. A second Foursquare house constructed on Strickersville Road came with a special machine used to produce "cast stone," a concrete block with a molded face for the exterior wall.

The widespread use of the automobile beginning in the 20th century left an indelible mark upon Franklin Township, as elsewhere. Historic roads were upgraded and widened to accommodate growing traffic. Unlike earlier decades, new residential construction reflected the one-story tract housing of the time; the most common styles were Ranch and Minimal Traditional. Many of the residents of these smaller houses did not work in nearby fields but drove to work elsewhere. The nature of shopping also changed, as it became possible for consumers to drive to Newark or Wilmington for a greater selection of consumer goods. This movement had a negative impact on Kemblesville. As its traditional but now obsolescent businesses, such as the saddlery and blacksmith shop, closed with the times, other businesses also ceased operating, such as the general store (1955) and the hotel (1969). In the mid-1980s — more than 100 years after it was established — the Township moved into an official township building, converting a former farm machine shop to offices and meeting space.

As the 21st century began, Franklin Township had changed from an agricultural township to a bedroom community. Corporations in Delaware and the nearby University of Delaware had

become large employers, and the demand for housing had spilled into Franklin. Beginning in the latter part of the 20th century, many of the farms throughout the Township became residential developments. A new wave of large-scale conversion of township land occurred: The longstanding farmlands that had been created by the Township's early settlement were now in many cases developed into relatively dense residential developments. As traditional agriculture diminished in importance, however, Franklin Township, like other neighboring townships, saw some growth in small horse farms, wineries and vineyards, and the like.

The Kemblesville Elementary School closed in 2003 as part of the reorganization of the Avon Grove School District, but in 2008 the building reopened as the Early Learning Center for the Avon Grove Charter School. The Township developed a township park and acquired preserve land, and state and trust preserve lands also were established in Franklin. In 2004 a survey of the surviving historic buildings in the Township was completed, and the Kemblesville Historic District, a National Register of Historic Places–eligible district that encompasses the Village of Kemblesville, also was established. Nearly all of the properties in the Historic District contain houses and/or outbuildings that can be found on Breou's map of 1883.

The primary sources for this history are the Comprehensive Plans prepared by Franklin Township. The History of Chester County, Pennsylvania, with Genealogical and Biographical Sketches, by J. Smith Futhey and Gilbert Cope (1881, Louis H. Everts, Philadelphia) was also used extensively. Other sources include History of Cecil County, Maryland, and the Early Settlements around the Head of Chesapeake Bay and on the Delaware River, with Sketches of Some of the Old Families of Cecil County, by George Johnson (1881, published by the author, Elkton), Lenape Archaeology, History, and Ethnography, by Herbert C. Kraft (1988, New Jersey Historical Society, Newark), the house history compiled for the Kemblesville Hotel, the USPS Postmaster Finder (<http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postmasterfinder/welcome.htm>), the Digitized US Postal Bulletins and PL&Rs 1880-2013 (<http://www.uspostalbulletins.com/uspostoffices.aspx>), and Rootsweb at Ancestry.com (www.rootsweb.ancestry.com).