

Schuylkill School

By Sandy Momyer

(Part 9 in a series of Articles regarding the history of Schuylkill Township)

The Daily Republican, Phoenixville's daily newspaper, reported on September 6, 1930, that "the new \$100,000 Consolidated School, located on the A. W. Kley tract at Williams Corner, which was dedicated with appropriate ceremonies...was completed on scheduled time, does away with the old-style one-room buildings...will be used for the first on Monday morning when the 1930-31 term begins." Thus the Schuylkill Township Consolidated School opened housing grades 1-8.

Schuylkill Township, founded in 1826, has had a series of one-room schools. These included Williams Corner/Pickering, Pawling, Society, Morgan's Imgrim's, Valley Forge School, Oak Grove, Schuylkill #1 and then the new Consolidated School.

Following a national trend toward school consolidation, construction of the Schuylkill Township School in 1930 signaled the end of a century old tradition of one and two room schoolhouses for this rural community. When opened, the Schuylkill Township Consolidated School became a distinctive landmark in the Township and shared its heritage with East Pikeland School in East Pikeland Township and Charlestown School in Charlestown Township.

The original part of the current Schuylkill School is all stone construction (as are the other two buildings which all are similar in appearance) with a bell tower with original bell still there. Mr. Frank B. Foster, a local entrepreneur who substantially financed construction, felt all the schools needed thick stone walls. He felt stone walls meant permanence. (His daughter is "Miss Betty" Stonorov whom we all know at the Charlestown Playschool.) It was he who conceived the idea of modernizing the township schools. He even improved the country roads so that busses could travel them and transport the children to school. To be at the dedication ceremony you would have met a series of people who provided the backbone for the Township such as Joseph Ewing, William J. Clothier, Thomas B. McAvoy, Howard Taylor, A. W. Kley, Truman Wade, David Midgley, Jr. and L.B. Schofeld and many others.

With Schuylkill School completed in 1930, the 1931 records show that the three consolidated schools, Charlestown, East Pikeland and Schuylkill, competed for the Foster Trophy (a silver statuette of "Victory" donated by Mr. Foster) in competitions of play, dances and songs. There were also annual contests with neighboring schools in athletics. The 8th grade classes could look forward to the annual three-day trip to Washington, D.C. as guests of Mr. Foster. All grades enjoyed the Barnum and Bailey and Ringling Bros. Circus in Philadelphia planned by Mr. Foster.

At Schuylkill, an old mill stone from the Pennypacker Mill on the Pickering Creek was brought in and served as the base for the May Pole. The community tradition was the annual May Day celebration with the May Queen and the dances taking place. Today residents still talk of this day and many of the women still have their May Day dresses.

The first addition to Schuylkill Township School was in 1954 when four classrooms, a kitchen, teachers' room, principal's office, medical room and toilet facilities were added. The addition was stone quarried from the same quarry that provided the stone for the original building. A library was set up in the basement. In a congratulatory letter to the school in 1954, Superintendent of Schools for Chester County Clyde T. Saylor stated, "The Board of School Directors of Schuylkill Township have rendered a great and important service to the children and adults of Schuylkill Township in providing this fine school with its modern design and its functional features. It makes Schuylkill Township a better place in which to live and to bring up children. Schuylkill Township becomes a stronger component in the life and security of the Nation." A subsequent addition of eight new classrooms was added in 1961. In 1966, a new upper Schuylkill School

was built for grades 4-6 and the Schuylkill Lower School was connected to the Schuylkill Upper School by a covered walkway. Currently buildings on the site house grades 1-5 and support special needs classes and a Spanish immersion program. A Kindergarten Center houses all district kindergarten children.

Schuylkill Township is (was!) a rural area with mostly farms. The school was source of activity with the May Day event, the Christmas programs, athletic events, the Country Fair, Field Day, the P.T.A., science fairs and other class projects and trips. It is a part of our heritage and a part of the fabric of what our community and Schuylkill Township is about.

Today the Phoenixville Area School District is in need of additional elementary space once again. The proposed plan calls for utilizing the land at the Schuylkill School site. The upper Schuylkill School and the wing additions to the original school are proposed for demolition with construction to be phased in so as to alleviate disruption of the school year with classes in session. Adaptive reuse of the structure is being considered by the PASD.

The original Schuylkill School structure has received its Designation of Eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. This highly recognized and honored designation awarded by a team of architects and preservationists from the Bureau of Historic Preservation in Harrisburg, PA, places this structure as a valued building and one that deserves saving. It represents an important movement in educational history when schools were being consolidated; it represents the important work of a significant individual in the area – Mr. Foster; it represents a sense of people, time and place in the rural communities of our country.

We trust that this proposed PASD plan will command the same accolades given to Schuylkill School by County Superintendent Saylor in 1954. The Phoenixville Area School District is working to make our district a better place in which to live and to bring up children.

Keeping the past and sharing it with our children while living in the present and preparing them for the future is a legacy to strive for as the Phoenixville Area School District and Schuylkill Township work together.

Sandra S. Momyer has been a resident of Schuylkill Township for 34 years. Mrs. Momyer received her B.A. summa cum laude from Cabrini College in Radnor, PA majoring in American Studies, English/Communications and Arts Administration. She recently retired having worked 18 years as Executive Director at Historic Yellow Springs, Inc., an historic village in Chester Springs, PA. While Executive Director she oversaw the daily operations, secured grants for projects, initiated new programs and events and managed the restoration and preservation of many of the buildings at the site. Born and raised in the farming family in Kimberton, she strives to preserve the history of the people and places of our area. Early in her career she worked at the Schuylkill School where her husband, Robert, was a teacher and principal.