

The Population History of Schuylkill Township

By Dr. John Lukacs

(Part 6 of a series of Articles)

The native people of this region were a scatteration of Indians, most of them of the Lenni-Lenape tribe. The first English and Welsh explorers appeared soon after 1680. They may have been preceded by a few Swedes. The first permanent settler of the present Schuylkill Township was James Anderson who built his log cabin in 1713 (foundations of which still exist) at the present Anderson Place, where later many members of the township's most prominent historical family were born and lived. The population grew slowly, though sufficiently to the extent that in 1827 the township was established, separating itself from Charlestown. The establishment of this municipality preceded that of Phoenixville, even though the population of the latter soon became much larger.

During the 19th century both the extent and the habits of residents of the population of Schuylkill Township changed relatively little. The majority of the people were farmers. There was intermittent mining of tin and lead near Williams' Corner, but it is not ascertainable how many of the miners lived within the township. The only school in the township was that on the corner of what are now Valley Park and Clothier Spring Roads, deeded to the township by Isaac Anderson and functioning from 1840 to 1929. The Schuylkill Elementary Public School was built in 1930.

The relationship of the township to Phoenixville was close, and not only geographically. The inhabitants did their shopping and their professional business in Phoenixville. Several Phoenixville residents built houses in Schuylkill. There were two remarkable developments in the early decades of the 20th century. One was the Phoenixville-Valley Forge trolley line, operating from 1913 to 1924, whose terminal was an amusement park on Valley Park Road (whence the name of the latter). The other was a movie studio, cranking out silent films, mostly of a comic theme, in the Betzwood part of the township, directed by an ambitious and imaginative producer by the name of Isadore Lubin who for a time was a serious competitor of the then rising movie industrialists in Hollywood and Brooklyn.

The suburban transition of people which had begun as early as the 1870's west of Philadelphia (but which, unlike in other American cities, consisted for a long time mostly of wealthy people who desired to build their houses and estates in the English manner, in "the country") was made possible by the railroad. Schuylkill Township was unaffected by this, since the last stop of the Main Line in Paoli was several miles away. What changed the character and the history of the township - indeed, of the entire United States, more eventually of the world - was the mass availability of automobiles, beginning around 1920. A few years later a few prominent Philadelphians bought large lots of land in Schuylkill Township, attracted to its beautiful and rural nature, which appealed to them better than the increasing build-up on the Main Line. Here, among other things, they could pursue their favorite sport of fox-hunting. Even before the 1920s the Pickering Hunt existed, with its small headquarters and kennels in the township (first along Valley Park Road and then along Creek Road). Hunters rode across the fields of the uncluttered township, undisturbed, until about 1960. Meanwhile all around Philadelphia the movement of people to the suburbs increased after World War II; but in Schuylkill Township the rural character prevailed, with few or no marks of suburbanization. Many of the new residents, attracted by the charms of rural residence in this part of Pennsylvania, commuted daily to work in Philadelphia, by rail via Phoenixville or Paoli, or by automobile, even before the Schuylkill Expressway was completed in the late 1950s. (There may be some irony in the fact that soon after the Expressway came into existence the number of Schuylkill residents who worked in Philadelphia dwindled.)

The increase of the population in the 1950s was considerable, though less than in all of its neighboring suburbs to the east and south. Most of the needs and the services for the people of the township were still furnished by Phoenixville merchants and purveyors. (One small detail of interest: as late as 1954 many of the roads in the township were unmarked by road signs.) The first permanent township building was erected in 1932 by a stonemason (and supervisor) George Henzie, member of a family who had been living in the township for more than a century. The rising needs of the township led to the drafting and adoption

of the first Zoning Ordinance in 1955 (allowing in the present FR district no subdivision smaller than five acres). The first Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 1965. The first police officer was appointed in 1965.

By the 1960s the national suburban residential and commercial building boom produced echoes and tides washing around Schuylkill Township. The King of Prussia commercial and industrial complex was begun in 1965. Immediately afterwards some of the township officials allowed themselves to be convinced that “growth” was beneficial in every sense; that the time had come to attract not only people and buildings but industries and commerce of all kinds to the township; and that therefore, for public relations’ purposes, the name of the township should be changed to “Valley Forge Township”. In order to establish this a referendum was required. The proponents of the change (mostly interests outside the township) had vastly more funds and publicity at their disposal than had its opponents, who depended mostly on a personal telephone campaign. Yet in November 1966 the proposal for the name change was defeated by 58% of the voters.

Around that time the population characteristics of the township had begun to change. In 1965 there were about 4,600 inhabitants; in 1970 about 5,200. The rural prospect of the township was still apparent. A great asset for its protection was Valley Forge Park which acted as a green barrier between Schuylkill and the exploding suburbs, including the King of Prussia complex to the east. The relative prosperity and stability of the people of the township were also considerable. In 1964, the average size of families in Schuylkill was larger than almost everywhere in northern Chester County, 3.8 (the county average was 3.5 and the national average 3.3). A survey in the same year showed that only 4% of all the dwellings in the township were in poor shape. However, the younger working families were leaving the area. In 1950, people between 20 and 24 years of age comprised the largest population group in the township; fifteen years later the largest group was that of children, between the ages of 1 and 10. There was, too, a trend away from Phoenixville. Many of the newer residents were shopping and marketing and using professional services elsewhere. There was also some hidden but statistically apparent reluctance to depend on the Phoenixville junior and senior public schools. In 1980 the percentage of Schuylkill Township youngsters attending private schools was the highest in Northern Chester County. The percentage completing college was not.

Between 1970 and 1980 there was relatively little increase in the overall numbers of people in the township. In and after 1980 statistics were contradictory: the local numbers seemed to be more accurate than those of the national census. However, during the second half of the 1980s, the first large developments (at least three) were constructed in the eastern and formerly semi-rural portion of the township. The population kept on rising, at times rapidly (while the population of Phoenixville declined in the 1980s as well as in the 1990s.) During the 1990s there developed a startling rise of automobile traffic both within and through the township roads, and the green cushion of Valley Forge National Park lost its protective function. In the 1990s the township was among those municipalities of Chester County where more than 500 new residential building permits were issued during some years. According to the U. S. Census the population of Schuylkill rose from 5,538 in 1990 to 6,960 in 2000 which may be an undercount of at least 10%; however, the rate of increase (26%) is probably close to being accurate.

By 2001 the “build-up” of Schuylkill Township - in other words, its overall suburbanization - is almost complete. The preservation of open lands and the curbing of “sprawl” has been for long a priority of the township government, espoused only lately by the planners and authorities of Chester County itself. Unfortunately and lamentably the consideration of automobile traffic relevant to planning and building regulations has not yet been admitted by the courts of Pennsylvania (unlike in a few other states). Most of the people of the township are now employed in institutions and places south, west, and north of Schuylkill. There is some increase in commercial and professional establishments within the township, which is likely to continue. There are reasons to believe that, in accord with national demographic patterns, the number of inhabitants of the township may stabilize around 2020. There is no reason to believe that (a) the population will decrease, or (b) that their patterns of life and habitation would alter, unless some unforeseeable change would lead to a new kind of non-urban civilization less dependent on automobiles.