

ELECTION DAY IN OLD NEWTOWN SQUARE

As I write, we have five more days until Election Day 2016, one of the most contentious elections in my memory. By the time this article is published, we will have a new President-elect in a very divided country. And yet, we have survived contentious elections in the past. I fully expect that we will survive this year as well. But looking back, I wonder, what were elections like in Delaware County at the beginning of our independence, and for the next 100 years?

Up until 1789, there was no Delaware County. All of the townships that now form Delaware County were then part of Chester County, and the county seat was at the city of Chester, at the far southern border of the county, equally inconvenient to everyone in the huge county.

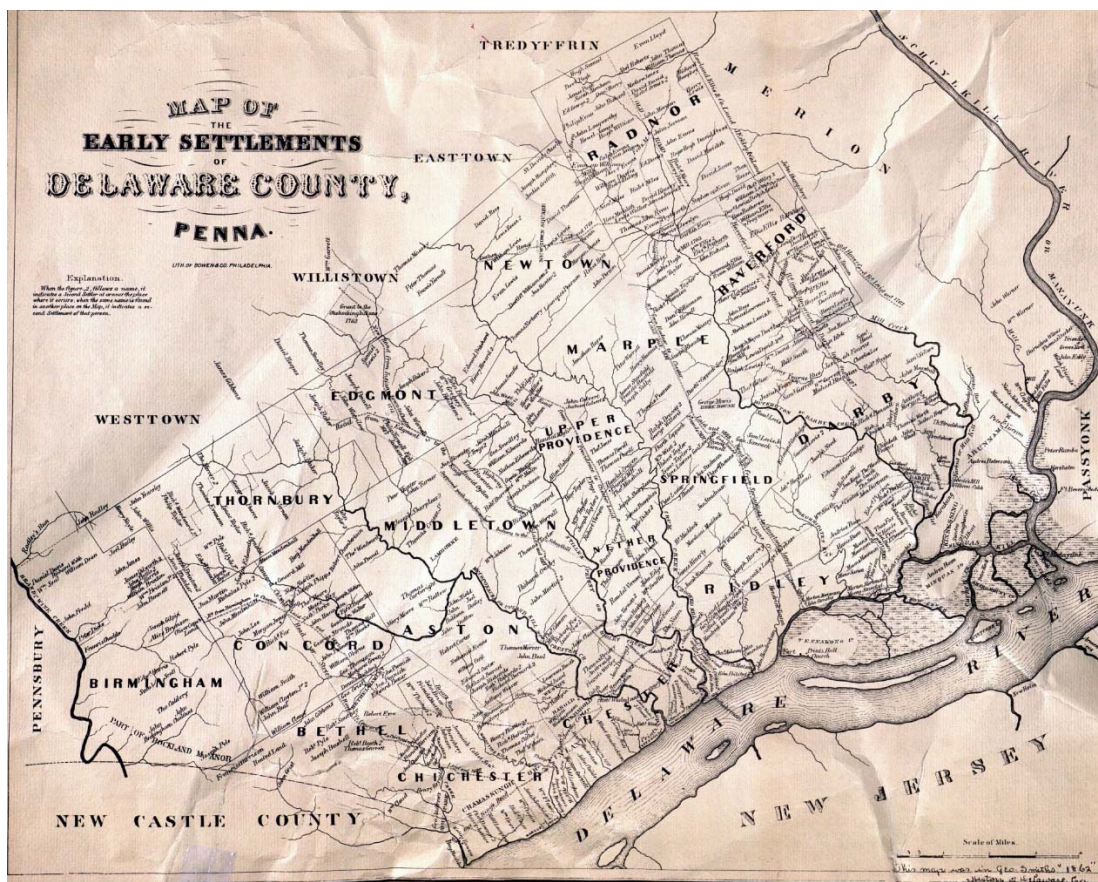


The courthouse was located in the city, voting took place in the city, and if you were a party to a lawsuit, a witness, or a juror, you had to come to the city. In the days of transportation by foot and horseback, this trip was a major investment of time for those who lived far from the city of Chester, such as those in Oxford, West Grove or Kennett Square. As Henry Ashmead noted in his 1884 "History of Delaware County": "It involved considerable labor to go and return in those days, and in winter time, when, in a warm spell, the roads would be wretched beyond expression, it was a journey such as no man of these modern times would contemplate calmly."

Of course traveling over this distance to vote was not a problem for the women of 18th and 19th century Pennsylvania: they didn't have the right to vote until 1920. However, all of the county offices were there as well, and so the distance had to be covered for the probate of wills, will challenges and the like. Imagine the trip for an elderly widow living in Oxford, Pennsylvania and having to travel the very hilly and muddy Baltimore road (today's Route 1) for 37 miles to get to the city of Chester to deal with the estate of her husband.

With the separation of the eastern townships of old Chester County into the new Delaware County in 1789, the legislature also took aim at making it more convenient to vote in the elections in the new country. George Smith's "History of Delaware County" gives a good account of the beginning of local elections:

"In early times the general election for the whole county of Chester, was held at the Court-house in Chester. Before the Revolution, Chester County was divided into three election districts, called Chester, Chatham, and Red Lion—the places at which the election was held. Chester district embraced nearly the same territory that is now included in Delaware County. After the division, the people of the whole county continued to vote at Chester till 1794, when an Act was passed dividing the County of Delaware into four election districts. This Act constituted the townships of Concord, Birmingham, Thornbury, Aston, Bethel, and Upper Chichester, the second election district—the election to be held at the house of Joshua Vernon, in Concord; the townships of Newtown, Edgmont, Upper Providence, Marple, and Radnor, the third election district—the election to be held at the house then occupied by William Beaumont, in Newtown; and the townships of Darby, Upper Darby, Haverford, Springfield, and Tinicum, the fourth election district—the election to be held at the house then occupied by Samuel Smith, in Darby. The people of the remaining townships still held their election at Chester, and those townships composed the first district."



In the first contested presidential election in 1796, voters in Newtown made the trek to the Farmer's Wagon tavern kept first by William Beaumont (until 1810), and then by his son Davis Beaumont, at the crossroads of the Newtown Street and West Chester Roads (now Rt 252 and West Chester Pike). The 439 voters in Delaware County that year, generally free white male property owners age 21 and older, preferred Federalist John Adams over Democratic Republican Thomas Jefferson, giving Adams, the ultimate winner, about 71% of their votes.



The Farmer's Wagon tavern where they cast their votes, and the adjacent general store, formed the commercial hub of the local community, as the stage coach from Philadelphia to West Chester stopped there as well, bringing mail, news and visitors to this small country crossroads. In 1838, Newtown became its own election district, and voting continued to occur at the tavern. In 1846, under new management, the tavern upgraded its image, changing its name from the Farmer's Wagon to the Newtown Square Inn. Davis Beaumont owned the Inn, inherited from his father, until 1868, two years prior to his death, when he sold it to William T. Davis. Davis, a former cattle drover, knew the needs of farmers traveling with their cattle to market, and made the Inn a destination for drovers and their cattle. Cattle auctions were held on the porch of what was then called the Newtown Square Hotel. The auctioneer? William T. Davis! As one of the few businessmen in Newtown, Davis was a political force, and so his Hotel remained the polling place in Newtown township for well into the 20th century.

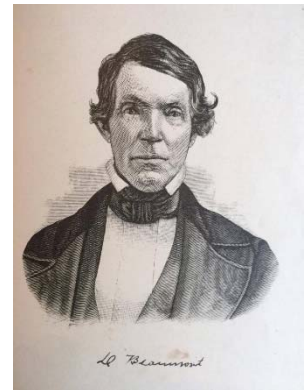
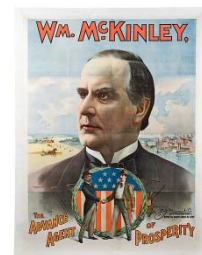


Figure 1 Davis Beaumont

In the last presidential election of the 19th century, Delaware County voters overwhelmingly turned out for Republican William McKinley, giving him 13,952 votes to 4,071 for his Democratic opponent, William Jennings Bryant. There were a number of 3rd party candidates that year, and the next highest vote total was 184, for the Prohibition Party candidate, Joshua Levering. Newtown was still largely a community of Quaker farmers, not particularly fond of strong drink, so I imagine they were well represented in that total.



Before we leave the center of election year politics in the Newtown Square of the 19th century, I want to share a description of the Hotel as it existed in 1891, when local author and travel writer Julius Sachse passed through:

“At the present day the old inn has degenerated to an ordinary country tavern, a mere stopping place for the few who still travel the almost deserted turnpike, while the outside benches and bar- room chairs offer a gathering place for the idle gossips of the vicinity—the only exception to the humdrum routine being the days when cattle sales are cried from the tavern porch, or in the winter when some merry sleighing party wakes up the nooks and crannies of the old hostleries for the time being . . .”



Sachse's eulogy was premature. The Hotel was rebuilt in 1905, and continued on as the watering hole and center of power and politics in the town until it was sadly demolished in 1969, bringing to a close about 170 years of service to the community.