

Newtown & Willistown in 1860

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The year 1860, when the Bartram Bridge was built, was a year that would forever change America and the world. The political disputes that had been fought for the previous forty years, over slavery and its expansion into new territories and states had come to a full boil. North faced off against South, arguing largely about the West – the vast open lands that when eventually admitted as states, would upset the existing balance of power. The two major political parties, the Whigs and Democrats, began to fracture along sectional lines; and Northerners and Midwesterners flocked to a new party, the Republican Party, dedicated to opposition to the expansion of slavery. At each extreme, voices clamored for the same result. Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison argued that the Union should be annulled: “The compact which exists between the North and the South is a covenant with death and an agreement with hell.”

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A Bloody Divorce

After the election of Abraham Lincoln in November, the South accommodated Garrison. On December 20, the South Carolina legislature unanimously declared "We, the people of the State of South Carolina in convention assembled, do declare and ordain... that the Union now subsisting between South Carolina and other States, under the name of 'the United States of America,' is hereby dissolved." Over the next six weeks, six other states in the South seceded as well. In February, 1861, South Carolina diarist Mary Boykin Chestnut wrote, "We are divorced, North and South, because we have hated each other so." It would be a bloody divorce: over the next four years of the war, over 620,000 men would die, and thousands more would come home crippled, without arms, legs, and eyes. At war's end, 3.5 million Southern men, women and children, born enslaved for life simply for the color of their skin, were freed from the bonds of slavery. As Lincoln noted in his second inaugural address, "every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword". The price had been paid. It would take a much longer time to bind up the Nation's wounds.

Newtown and Willistown Townships

That wave of violence that would engulf the country seemed a long way off to the farming communities of Newtown and Willistown. Each township had been settled in the 17th and 18th century by English and Welsh Quakers, and to a large degree the residents of 1860 were the descendants of those early settlers. We have some special insight into the residents of 1860, as that year, besides being an election year, was also a census year. At the beginning of the year, census workers began fanning out across the country, paper forms in hand, to

tackle the arduous process of counting every man, woman and child in the country. The census form called for the names of each person, their age, sex, color, profession, the value of real estate and personal property they owned, their place of birth, whether they were married within the year, whether they attended school, whether they were a person over 20 who could not read and write, and whether they were “deaf, dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper or convict”. The man who entered Newtown on Thursday, July 19th of that year to perform the count was William B. Flounders, a 54 year old farmer from Springfield, Delaware County, with the official title of Assistant Marshal for the census.

Taking the Census

Marshal Flounders went house to house, farm to farm, and completed the census of Newtown by Friday, July 27th. Over nine days, he made his way through the community, and counted 410 white males, 392 white females, 16 colored males, and 19 colored females, for a total of 841 people living in 141 dwelling houses. Most the residents listed their occupations as farmer or farm laborer. The farmer and his family lived under the same roof with the laborers that worked in the fields and the domestic help that helped the wife with her chores. In the far northeastern corner of the township, there was as thriving industrial community of about 100, centered around the I. & R.S. Griffith Woolen Factory, and the Cedar Hill Factory, a cotton mill. There the workers lived in small homes perched on the banks of the Darby Creek and worked in the textile mills, producing clothes and blankets. Sprinkled throughout the community were a handful of skilled craftsman who provide the goods that farm communities needed: blacksmiths, carpenters, a wheelwright, saddle and harness makers, a shoemaker, stone masons, a tailor.

The "Turnpike" and the Village

There was one crossroads village, Newtown Square, at the intersection of the West Chester Turnpike and Newtown Street Road. The Turnpike was relatively new at the time – beginning in 1848 it had been paved at first with wooden planks, and later crushed stones, and so was a big improvement over the local dirt roads, dry and dusty in the summers, and muddy and rutted in bad weather. Travelers on the Turnpike had to pass through toll gates every mile or so, and pay a toll of one cent per mile for each horse or mule, with heavy wagons and stage coaches with 3 or more horses charged one and a half cents per horse per mile. The Turnpike ran from Philadelphia, through Newtown Square, on the way to West Chester. Two daily stage coaches ran along the road, bringing the news of the world and the mail out to the country villages along the way. They stopped at the

The Turnpike ran from Philadelphia, through Newtown Square, on the way to West Chester.



An example of a mail wagon that would have traveled on West Chester Pike.

Newtown Square Inn and the adjacent general store and post office, all on the northwest corner of the main intersection. When area farmers needed to “go to town” to get supplies, this is where they would congregate, to pick up their mail, socialize at the tavern, read the news of the day, and sit on the large front porch of the Inn to wait on the stage coach and discuss farming ... and politics.

Willistown Township

Willistown Township, with an area of 18.2 square miles, almost twice the size of Newtown, was a larger census project. Asst. Marshal Hugh B. Mooney began the census work in Willistown on June 9, 1860, and concluded on July 13, 1860, counting 1521 residents. The area he covered was largely farms and farm families, but also included the four crossroads villages of the township: Sugartown, White Horse, Green Tree and Willistown Inn. The village of Sugartown was the most active of the four, containing the Spread Eagle Tavern, the Sharpless Worrall general store, a blacksmith and wheelwright, cabinetmaker, saddler, shoemaker and a doctor. White Horse, at the intersection of Goshen and Providence roads, also had a general store, a tavern, schoolhouse, blacksmith and wheelwright shops. Willistown Inn had an inn and tavern of the same name, with post office, at the corner of the West Chester Turnpike and Dutton Mill Road. The village of Green Tree formed around the Green Tree Inn, one mile west of Paoli near the 19th milestone on the Lancaster Turnpike. The Green Tree inn was a wagon stand serving stage coaches, drovers and other travelers heading east and west on the Lancaster Turnpike.



A sketch of Bartram Covered Bridge by Alice Lindborg

Willistown, like Newtown, was primarily a farm community, with large farm families supplemented by recent Irish immigrants helping as farm laborers and domestic help. They had as well the basic complement of skilled services – the carpenters, wheelwrights, blacksmiths who supplied products needed around the farm, each with apprentices who typically lived under the same roof while learning their trades. But Willistown, with a larger population and four villages to Newtown’s one, had a far more diverse assortment of occupations and skilled craftsmen: edge tool makers (axes, mauls, hatchets, etc.), a large community of paper makers in the Willistown Inn section; plasterers, butchers, cabinet makers, masons, painters, a tobacconist, a nurse, a stove tender (foundry), a switch tender (railroad), a milliner, quarrymen, a lime business, and an optician.

The Railroads

The cutting edge of 19th century technology had reached Willistown as well: the first railroad in Pennsylvania, the Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad, had been constructed through Willistown in 1834. The Pennsylvania Railroad bought the line in 1857, and began making improvements that would make passenger commuting to Philadelphia practical, opening the development of the “Main Line” in the post Civil War period. (In 1887 when the company straightened the line in Chester County, the new line was laid out directly through the Green Tree inn property, and so the old inn was demolished.) As a result, in 1860 Willistown had several railroad-related workers living in the Paoli area: the Irish railroad laborers, who would be instrumental in building the transcontinental railroad between 1863 and 1869. While the countryside was sprinkled with good Quaker families who had been there for generations, the 1860 census showed that close to 10% of the population of the township was foreign born.

Crum Creek

Crum Creek divided the townships of Newtown and Willistown, and the counties of Delaware and Chester, and the ancient Goshen

Crum Creek divided the townships of Newtown and Willistown ... Goshen Road connected them.

Road connected them. The road passed through a ford through the creek. If you were using the most popular form of transportation at the time, you were going to get your feet wet crossing through the creek. And that was on a good day. After storms, the current would swell and the water level would rise, and the ford might be impassable for days.

Construction of the Bridge

The farmers on both sides petitioned the counties to build a bridge, so that this link between the townships would remain open, in good weather and bad, come hell or high water. Over the course of that year, construction was authorized, the contract was let, the bridge was designed, the roadway was straightened, the bridge was built, using local labor and timber and the nearby sawmill, then inspected, and paid for. This bridge was just one of many covered bridges being built in the area at the time. It stands today, the last covered bridge in Delaware County, still connecting the two townships and the two counties.

At 50 miles per hour, the bridge is simply an anomaly on the road from here to there. But for those with the time and curiosity to stop, park and look around, to touch the arches and appreciate the workmanship, to read the names carved in the beams over 150 years, to imagine the clip clop of horses pulling creaking wagons through the bridge, this bridge makes another connection. It bridges time as well as space, connecting our politically divided, technology driven world of today with the politically divided and technology driven world of 1860, when they built a simple sturdy bridge that still stands - connecting our world with theirs.

Note on Preservation: *Many of the 19th century structures that dotted the landscape of 1860 remain in place today in Newtown and Willistown. Newtown boasts five listings on the National Register, including the 1715 St. David's church and graveyard, the 1742 Square Tavern, the 1775/1845 Crosley-Garrett Mill Workers' Housing, Store and Mill Site, the 1841 Hood Octagonal School, and the 1860 Bartram Bridge. The Newtown Square Historical Preservation Society has identified over 100 other 18th and 19th century homes, barns and other structures deemed worthy of preservation. In Willistown, the villages of White Horse and Sugartown have been preserved and restored, and are listed as National Register Historic Districts, as is the Okehocking Historic District, an early Native American site. Aggressive preservation efforts by the people of Willistown, landowners, township supervisors, and the Willistown Conservation Trust, have resulted in the permanent protection of many other historic homes, barns, bridges and other sites throughout the township. In Newtown, the preservation efforts have been less successful, with the loss of several historic structures to development, and many more threatened. The effort to preserve these old structures will only bear fruit when the people of the community demand a voice in the future of their community, and have leaders who share their concerns. When those voices are heard, when that leadership is in place, then the community may adopt the legal tools that are authorized under the state constitution to help protect and preserve historic sites. Until that time, the continued existence of each historic site and structure dangles by a thread.*