



The 1858 Franklinville One Room School

By *Russ Bellavance*, President, Wissahickon Valley Historical Society

Photos by Alex Lowy Photography, LLC And WVHS Collection

Last month we talked about the 1895 public school, which you can't miss as you drive along Skippack Pike. But there is another building along Morris Road that is even older, and which blends in so well, you may have missed it. I'm talking about the lovely white stucco one-room school known as the Franklinville School, which is on Morris Road between the entrances to the Normandy Farms Hotel and Conference Center and Windermere.

The Franklinville School was built in 1858 to serve the children of the village of Franklinville here in Whitpain. Why was it built? Because the residents of Franklinville demanded it! They felt that the Whitpain Township School Directors were ignoring their interests, so they showed up at meetings until the directors finally gave in. It was a good example to us all of the effectiveness of involved citizens in local politics. As a former



Marie Goldkamp spearheaded the restoration; shown here with the author, July 2015



Double Desks With Inkwells and Slate Boards

director of the Wissahickon School District, I can assure you that your voices are heard.

The Franklinville School survived the consolidations that occurred with the building of the 1895 public school. But it could not survive the consolidation in 1916 with the building of the multi-grade school next to the 1895 school, which is now the Blue Bell Korean Presbyterian Church. The old building was neglected and might have fallen to ruin, but in 1917, it was purchased by one of Whitpain's most notable citizens, Ralph Beaver Strassburger. Strassburger, the owner of the *Norristown Times Herald*, had recently purchased the property at Morris Road and DeKalb Pike, which he renamed Normandy Farms. Strassburger and his heiress wife May Bourne Strassburger, were passionate about preserving and documenting local history (yea!), and he wanted to preserve and repurpose the Franklinville School.

This began the second phase of the life of the building. The Strassburgers used the Franklinville School both for the private education of their son Peter and as a site for local social and cultural events.



Blue Bell's Finest – September 2016

Most notably, the Franklinville School in 1925 became the venue for the first annual outing of the 50 Year Club, a group dedicated to preserving local Montgomery County history. The 50 Year Club met there for many decades.

However, Ralph Strassburger died in 1959, and neither his widow nor their son Peter had the energy and funds to maintain the building. It fell into disrepair and was truly dilapidated by the early 1980s. The only question seemed to be whether it would fall down before someone bulldozed it. A group of Whitpain residents came to the rescue, forming the Historical Society of Whitpain (since merged into the WVHS), taking title to the building and putting their time,



Teacher's Platform, Complete with Dunce Cap!

money, energy and love into restoring it. Thanks to them, you can drive by the Franklinville School (now on the National Register of Historic Places) today. Today Franklinville School is a living museum. Children may try on period clothing, write on the slate boards and play with the many games that would have been used in the late 1800s - great photo-ops for families who visit. We open the Franklinville School to the public on occasion, and we hope to see you there. Next Open House is Sunday, September 20th, 2015. Please visit wvalleyhs.org for additional dates.



Pot Belly Stove To Keep Warm

This is the second in a series of articles about local history brought to you by the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society. If there is a topic you would like to propose for a future article, please contact me at rcbellavance67@gmail.com. Founded in 1975, The WVHS's purpose is to help preserve historically significant buildings, artifacts and folklore of the historic Wissahickon Valley. Membership to the WVHS is open to all. To learn more and see the Museum Collection online, please visit WValleyHS.org.