

Skippack Pike. What a strange name for a road!

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What does Skippack mean, anyway?

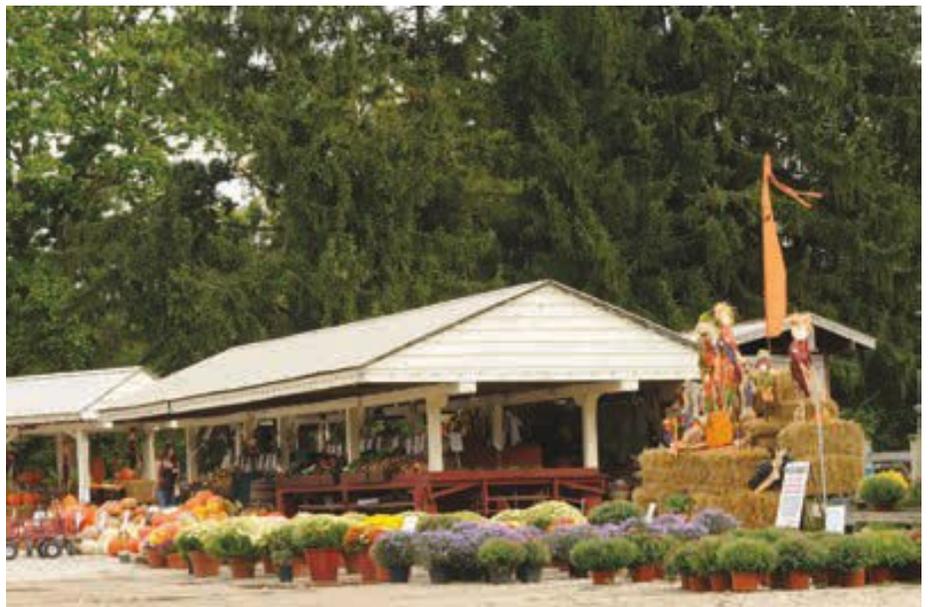
And why is it (and so many other major roads around here) called a pike? Well, this major southeast/northwest highway, which is one of the oldest roads in Montgomery County, wasn't always called that.

Last month, writing about Boehm's Church, we saw the migration of German immigrants from Germantown out to Whippain in the early 1700s. They did not all stop at Whippain. Some of them kept moving out to Skippack. Where did the name Skippack come from? Well, according to the Skippack Historical Society – no one really knows! There are theories that the name was derived from a German dialect or that it came from a Leni Lenape word. At any rate, Skippack soon became the common name both for the village out there and the creek flowing through it.

Once there was a line of towns out to Skippack, the farmers and merchants began to petition for a road. Their petition was granted in 1714 and the resulting road was then known as the Township Road or Skippack Road. Then how did it come to be called a pike? Colonial and early post-Revolution roads were generally not well maintained. After all, that costs money, and no one liked to pay taxes for road maintenance. In the mid-19th century, a group of Whippain citizens grew tired of the terrible conditions on the road and formed a joint stock company to operate the road as a turnpike. On a turnpike, a "pike" (similar to the long-handled medieval weapon) would be positioned across the road. If you wanted to use the road, you had to pay a toll in order for the pike to be lifted or turned aside. So all of those "pikes" around here were actually toll roads.

We know Skippack Pike as a major commercial road, and its role in commerce was always important. But is there some more exciting history associated with the road? Yes, there is. Most notably, in 1777, the road was one of the three major arteries for General Washington's maneuvers. He and his troops marched down Skippack to fight the Battle of Germantown, and used the road to retreat from the heartbreaking loss.

Today as we drive along Skippack, we can see a fascinating mix of the new and the old. There are many colonial era buildings, as well as structures from the revolution and the early days of the republic. Although most early



buildings have been lost, many of the most important have been saved and have been renovated and repurposed. But we can also see more modern buildings reflecting the great growth of commercial activity in Whitpain in the last half of the 20th century, and continuing to this day. Skippack Pike is still the main road through Whitpain, and the road that provides much of the identity of the region.

This is the fourth 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. If you enjoy these articles, you may want to consider membership in the Society. To learn more, please visit WValleyHS.org.