



Prophecy Creek is a tributary to the Wissahickon Creek

The Mighty Wissahickon Creek

By Russ Bellavance, President of the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society – All photos by Jessica Yale Photography

By now, you have seen the name Wissahickon very extensively, especially if you have children or grandchildren in the Wissahickon School District. The next several articles will explore various aspects of the Wissahickon Creek, which flows through Whitpain, Lower Gwynedd, and Ambler - the three municipalities that comprise the WSD. This first article will focus on the entire creek, not just our section.

So where does the mighty Wissahickon start? Well, you really can't see it, because it has been all paved over, but it starts just north of Montgomery Mall, on the other side of North Wales Road. From there, it is joined by many tributaries, including Stony Creek and Prophecy Creek in Whitpain, flowing generally south for about 27 miles. Our portion of the creek is quite gentle, but as it flows south it enters the Wissahickon Gorge, which is distinguished by a more precipitous drop in elevation and by steep wooded hillsides. The creek empties into the Schuylkill River just below Manayunk. Geologically, the Wissahickon Creek watershed is fascinating. Rockhounds love the watershed for the distinctive and unique rock known as Wissahickon Schist. This rock sparkles with both mica and red-tinted garnets.

But what about the name itself? The early maps show the creek as Whitpain Creek, named for and by Richard Whitpain (much more on him in a later article). But the native Lenape Indians referred to it as the Wissahickon (many different spellings exist), which is usually translated as "river full of catfish."

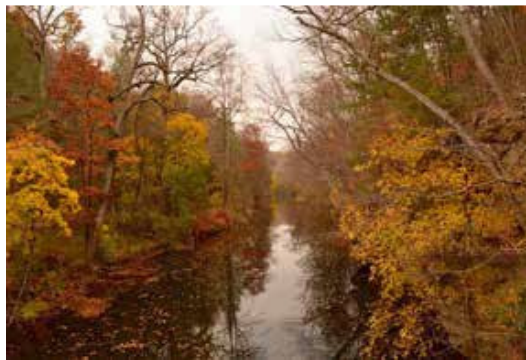
There are so many stories about the Wissahickon that is very difficult to separate fact from fiction. One little-known fact was its early history as a refuge for a German monastic community often called the Hermits or the Mystics of the Wissahickon. Led by Johannes Kelpius, this group of celibate Pietists believed that the world would end in 1694 and they decided the best place to celebrate the end of the world was across the Atlantic in caves along the Wissahickon. They moved there in 1694, but, as luck would have it, the world did not end. Kelpius and his followers continued to live there for a number of years, hoping for the end. Eventually, Kelpius died and the group disbanded.

There are many famous spots along the Wissahickon Creek, with names like Devil's Pool, Forbidden Drive, Lover's Leap and Mom Rinker's Rock. This last is also the site of the famous Toleration statue of a Quaker man. A bit further down the creek

is the dramatic 15-foot-high Indian statue, displaying a kneeling Lenape warrior. All of these are accessible on foot, and walking or hiking along the Wissahickon is a great family activity. For information on trail access, parking and activities, visit the Friends of the Wissahickon website at fow.org.

The Wissahickon Creek and its tributaries became the sites of many of the early mills in the area. The earliest of these date back to the 17th century, but the great growth was in the 18th century. One of the most famous of these was the first paper mill in America, built by William Rittenhouse on Paper Mill Creek. During the 19th century, many people in the area were swept up in the Romantic (back-to-nature) movement, and there was a concerted effort to clean up the waters of the Wissahickon Creek and cease the operation of the mills.

The great beauty of the Wissahickon Valley, gentle in some parts and fierce in others, was the subject of many works of art, especially during the Romantic period, but continuing even to this day. Perhaps Edgar Allan Poe captured it best in his 1844 essay, Morning on the Wissahiccon: "Now the Wissahiccon is of so remarkable a loveliness that, were it flowing in England, it would be the theme of every bard, and the common topic of every tongue, if, indeed, its banks were not parcelled off in lots, at an exorbitant price, as building sites for the villas of the opulent."



The path along Forbidden drive, adjacent to the Wissahickon Creek, is simply beautiful any time of year.

This is the twelfth in a series of articles about local history brought to you by the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society. Look for more articles in coming months about the various mills that once populated the world-famous Wissahickon Creek. 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. Please see our website at wvalleyhs.org for more information.



This statue of Chief Tedyuscung, a Lenape warrior, stands 15 feet high. The views from his perch are spectacular, and it's an invigorating hike - park at Bell's Mill and take the Orange Trail to the White Trail