



Wissahickon Valley

historical society

Ambler
Lower Gwynedd
Whitpain

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Happy Valentine's Day!!

From the President's Desk

January was certainly an exciting month for lovers of history. Whether or not you voted for Barack Obama, the election of an African-American to the Presidency, and the participation of women candidates for the highest offices, demonstrate historic changes in American society. I know you all join me in wishing President Obama good luck in office.

Our own changes are rather less dramatic. January saw us meeting at the Blue Bell branch of the Wissahickon Valley Public Library for the general meeting, and we will be there again in February. March will be even more of a change. Our meeting will be on a different date, and at a different time and venue. We will meet at the Bethlehem Baptist Church in Penllyn at 7:00 on Tuesday, March 10. We will be at the new church, at Dager Road and Penllyn-Blue Bell Pike – the former Beth Or location. Reverend Quann has been kind enough to invite us to see their new facility and to talk to us about the historic role of the Bethlehem Baptist Church in our community. I have wanted to see that lovely building for some time, and it is always a pleasure to listen to Reverend Quann. Please come and bring a friend.

The January meeting was wonderfully entertaining. Peg Johnston had researched the history of the Horticultural School that is now the basis for the Temple University Ambler Campus. She had a great collection of slides and interesting anecdotes. Her presentation was enriched by the active presence and participation of several members of the faculty, especially Jenny Rose Carey, Director of the Landscape Arboretum. It was a fascinating evening – even for those of us without a green thumb.

The February meeting should be really exciting. We are presenting the History of the Phillies. The speaker will be Rich Wescott, author of *The Phillies Encyclopedia*. We will once again be at the Blue Bell branch of the Wissahickon Valley Public Library, starting at 7:30 on Monday, February 9.

Finally, another change was that our long-time Treasurer, Bill Missfeldt, stepped down from that office and John Simon graciously agreed to serve as Treasurer. We appreciate all the work that Bill has done for the WVHS over the years. Please be sure to thank him personally when you see him.

Happy Groundhog Day and we'll see you soon.

Russell Bellavance, President

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The History of Valentine's Day



Every February, across the country, candy, flowers, and gifts are exchanged between loved ones, all in the name of St. Valentine. But who is this mysterious saint and why do we celebrate this holiday? The history of Valentine's Day — and its patron saint — is shrouded in mystery. But we do know that February has long been a month of romance. St. Valentine's Day, as we know it today, contains vestiges of both Christian and ancient Roman tradition. So, who was Saint Valentine and how did he become associated with this ancient rite? Today, the Catholic Church recognizes at least three different saints named Valentine or Valentinus, all of whom were martyred.

One legend contends that Valentine was a priest who served during the third century in Rome. When Emperor Claudius II decided that single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families, he outlawed marriage for young men — his crop of potential soldiers. Valentine, realizing the injustice of the decree, defied Claudius and continued to perform marriages for young lovers in secret. When Valentine's actions were discovered, Claudius ordered that he be put to death.

Other stories suggest that Valentine may have been killed for attempting to help Christians escape harsh Roman prisons where they were often beaten and tortured.

According to one legend, Valentine actually sent the first 'valentine' greeting himself. While in prison, it is believed that Valentine fell in love with a young girl — who may have been his jailor's daughter — who visited him during his confinement. Before his death, it is alleged that he wrote her a letter, which he signed 'From your Valentine,' an expression that is still in use today. Although the truth behind the Valentine legends is murky, the stories certainly emphasize his appeal as a sympathetic, heroic, and, most importantly, romantic figure. It's no surprise that by the Middle Ages, Valentine was one of the most popular saints in England and France.

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While some believe that Valentine's Day is celebrated in the middle of February to commemorate the anniversary of Valentine's death or burial — which probably occurred around 270 A.D — others claim that the Christian church may have decided to celebrate Valentine's feast day in the middle of February in an effort to 'christianize' celebrations of the pagan Lupercalia festival. In ancient Rome, February was the official beginning of spring and was considered a time for purification. Houses were ritually cleansed by sweeping them out and then sprinkling salt and a type of wheat called spelt throughout their interiors. Lupercalia, which began at the ides of February, February 15, was a fertility festival dedicated to Faunus, the Roman god of agriculture, as well as to the Roman founders Romulus and Remus.

Welcome New Members

New members Herman and Monica Ehret and Hillary Heckman have joined the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society!! We welcome you and hope that you enjoy all the benefits of being members of an interesting and active group of local historians. Our monthly meetings and dynamic programs will enable you to learn more of the history of Ambler, Whitpain and Lower Gwynedd. We look forward to seeing you at our monthly meetings and the other events sponsored by the Society.