

# Boehm's Church, Part II

How its founder inspired U.S. voting rights

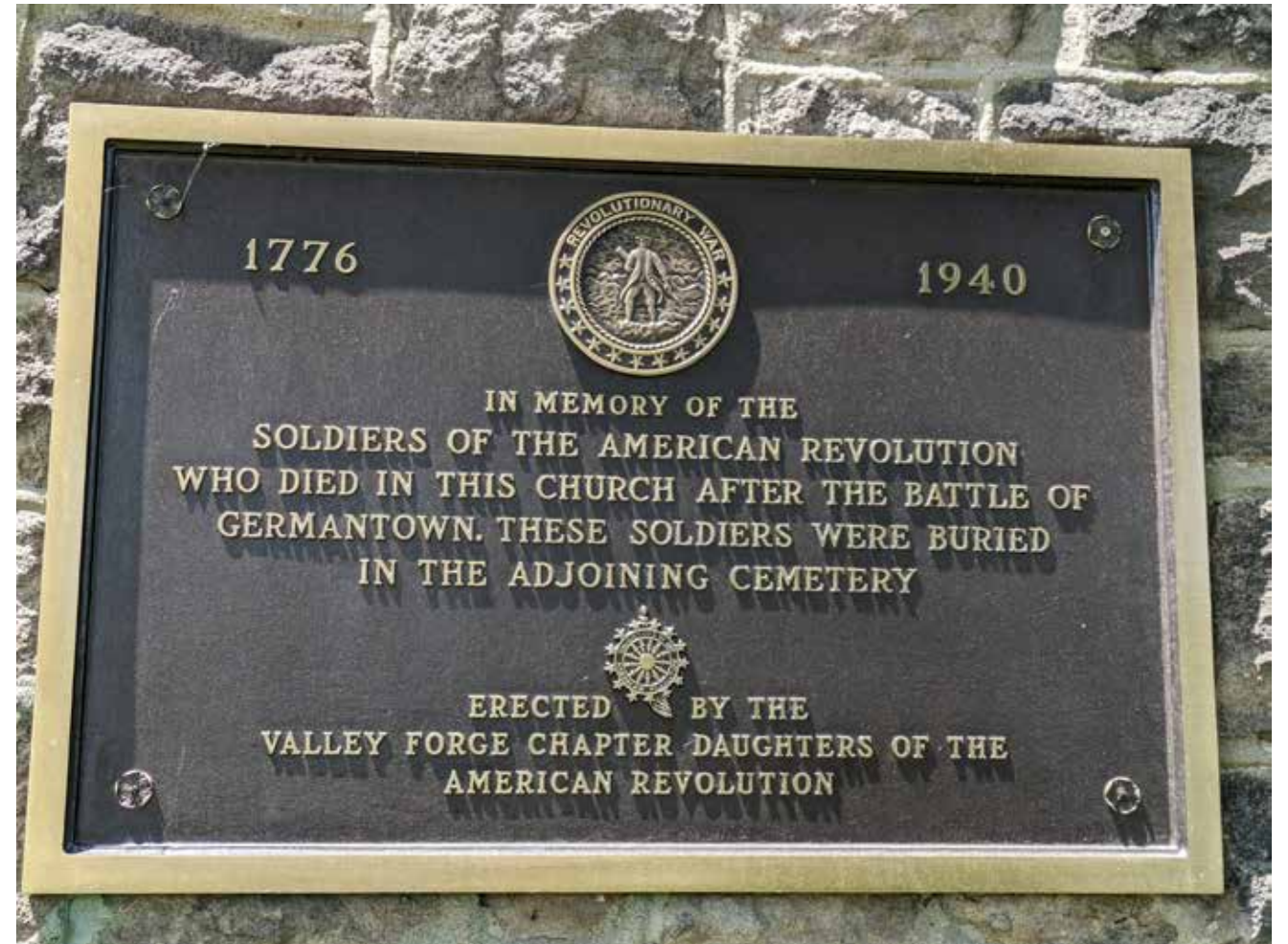
BY CAROL KALOS, PRESIDENT, WISSAHICKON VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Last month's *Stroll* introduced Boehm's Church (pronounced Beam's), located on Penllyn-Blue Bell Pike. Its congregation, originally German settlers, began in 1740, and the church building dates to 1817. Because the church served as an American Revolutionary War hospital, in its graveyard rest many Patriot veterans. Today the property appears on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) for its rich history; for the achievements of its founder, John Philip Boehm (1683-1749); and for how the church's values inspired Benjamin Franklin as he wrote Pennsylvania's first constitution.

The Reverend Boehm organized the German Reformed Church in Pennsylvania, starting as a lay leader, but becoming a minister with 24 churches. In his last years, his final congregation was in Blue Bell, and his congregants honored him by burying him under the church's altar.

His political ideas influenced Benjamin Franklin. First, Boehm worked with Franklin in his printing business as a German translator. The church's NRHP nomination states that in 1725, Boehm, as a church founder, created a constitutional church government,

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allowing all men who participated in Pennsylvania's German Reformed congregations to vote on church matters. Then he hired Franklin to print this principle as a church document, so Boehm introduced to Franklin the idea of universal male suffrage. Decades later, in 1776, Franklin wrote the Pennsylvania Constitution, considered revolutionary because it established that all men who paid taxes were eligible to vote. As a result, a concept that developed at a Blue Bell church was reflected later in the United States Constitution!

*Carol Kalos is president of the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society. With its museum and headquarters on Skippack Pike at the 1895 School, it offers a monthly speakers' series. It also owns the one-room Franklinville School on Morris Road, and both locations are open by appointment. The society's mission is to promote and preserve the history and historic resources of Ambler Borough, Whitpain Township, and Lower Gwynedd Township. Please feel free to contact the society: info@WValleyHS.org.*