

# Bus Tour No. 1

*The following is the text of a brochure that accompanied this tour beginning at the Township Building, going up over Sampsons Hill, over Huckleberry Hill to Masons Mill, then to Yerkesville and back to Fraziers Hill and the center of Willow Grove. . Points of interest not explained in this text were covered by the narrator on the tour. If you wish to have a copy of the brochure, ask one of the staff.*

**Round Meadow.** The original name 'Roundmeadow' was lost when in 1792 Reading Howell, a cartographer, in passing through noted a man planting willow trees. Willow trees were used by farmers to stabilize and dry out the swampy soil. Howell designated the area as Willow Grove and the name was adopted permanently.

The large stones used in the base of York Road kept sinking deeper into their marshy beds due to weight, springs and the thawings and freezings of winter. It has been estimated that the stone road bed is at least twenty two feet thick in places (as high as a two-story house).

The marshy character of the site caused an intersecting road to be laid upon planks. The 'Plank Road' is now known as Easton Road.

According to T. Bean: *"At one time the Willow Grove Swamp must have contained nearly one hundred and fifty acres. To avoid its mirey grip, Old York Road was laid out in the shape of an 'S'."* This configuration is still discernable today. The swamp has been completely drained and the Round Meadow Run laid into sewer pipes. *"Aside from the clumps of tussock and calamus, several kinds of course sedge and carex also grew. There was a bog of black peat of from four to six feet thick lying on a substratum of white clay. From the abundance and variety of beautiful wild flowers found growing here, young ladies collected bouquets for the magnificent parlor vases of the city. Hunters came for snipe and woodcock. Sour gums and alders dotted the watery landscape. About the only thing that remains of that large sunlit meadow are the black birds."*

**The Manor House.** The first house built in this area, in 1706, according to available records, was a two-room, two-story and attic dwelling and was located where the township building now sits. Some 1200 acres of land were sold by William Sluby and his wife Sarah Moore, to Thomas Shute and Nicholas Waln. The property was Sarah's inheritance from her father, Nicholas Moore, who bought the land from William Penn. The house was enlarged in 1710 by James and Jacob Dubree, father and son who found the first industry in Willow Grove – a sythe factory. The original manor house was a perfect example of early colonial architecture.

## **Site of a Store and the Original Post Office. Late 1700's.**

**The Red Lion Inn** The original inn on this site was operated under the sign of the 'Wagon' by John Paul, a tin smithy in 1732. At the time of the Revolution, the inn was operated by Joseph Butler and was known as the 'Red Lion' until 1842 when it ceased to be a public inn. According to M. Whitehead of the Willow Grove Spirit, *"Just prior to the Civil War, no less than five stage coach lines made this their 'change of horses' stop at Willow Grove. The farmer traffic to Philadelphia markets was also very heavy. It is estimated that 300 horses could be given overnight livery accommodation, and in the tavern, blankets were laid upon the floor for the weary farmers while the stage travellers enjoyed room and bed. The Red Lion frequently housed a hundred men who slept upon her floors. This famous old tavern was burned about 1880."* The field behind the tavern was used as a rifle range by some Virginia Volunteers encamped

there. The tavern itself was at one time used as a hospital for wounded Revolutionary soldiers. It was destroyed by a fire in 1906.

**Scythe Factory.** The first industry was a scythe factory built in 1736 by James and Jacob Dubree and was located where the Holiday Spa is now situated.

**Mineral Springs Inn.** Built in 1803, the owner, George Rex, capitalized on the abundant spring water which had a high concentrate of iron. Not only was it used for drinking, but Rex constructed bath houses for bathers for immersion in the mineral water. His property included all of the hill up to present day Summit Avenue. Prohibition spelled doom for the hotel and it was torn down in 1937.

**Site of the J. E. Buck Hotel, 1857.**

**Old 1800's Farm House with Graveyard.** 701 Ellis Avenue.

**Sampson's Hill.** In 1720, a Welshman named Sampson Davis built a log cabin on the crest of this hill. He is reported to be the second resident of the area. Local tales of the ghost of a drunken Indian haunting this section of Old York Road, having been denied shelter at one of the travelers cabins during a blizzard and freezing to death, has no basis in fact.

**Dr. Schiffendecker's Hydropathic Institute.** The mineral waters of Willow Grove had long been credited with curative powers, hence the establishment of the 'Water Cure Institute.' The wife of James Gordon Bennett, Jr., founder and owner of the New York Herald Tribune came to the Institute for several years for the healing waters. Mr. Bennett spent his summers roaming the Pennypack valley and living at the Red lion Inn. It was from here that he sent a young reporter, Henry Stanley, to Africa in search of a missing humanitarian and explorer, Dr. David Livingstone.

**Morgans Mill, 1731.** Operated by Thomas Parry as a grist mill on Round Meadow Run and later sold to Benj. Morgan. Wm. Morgan is known to have run an ice business from this same mill. A typical mill village, Morgansville at one time consisted of ten houses around the intersection of Parry's Road (Newtown, then Davisville) and Mill Road (Terwood).

**Wynkoop Homestead, 1861.**

**Blaker's Corner, 1731.**

**Frazier's Hill; 'Horse Heaven'; Site of Geodetic Marker.** By 1898, small family farms were being bought up by wealthy Philadelphians and consolidated into summer estates. One such land owner, Wm. West Frazier, had made his fortune in sugar refining and bought three properties in Abington along Meetinghouse Road. Being an entrepreneur at heart he also purchased as much of the land as he could between the Pennypack Creek and Old Welsh Road and Easton Road to Papermill Road.

Upon this land he created 'Overlook Farm', which took its name from the vista over the Terwood Valley from the east promontory of Frazier's Hill. Nine of the buildings from this development still exist. The Manor House exists as an apartment house at Frazier and Manor Roads. Here Frazier entertained the remnants of his Civil War Unit, 'Rush's Lancers' each year preceding the units return to Gettysburg for 'Remembrance Day.'

A single farmhouse on Old Welsh Road was the home of the caretaker for Frazier's Settlement House Summer Campers whom he brought out from the city each summer.

The present Roychester building was Frazier's turkey farm barn turned into a youth center by his grandson, then a clergyman from St. Annes Church. St Annes was built on land originally donated by Frazier for the building of a chapel.

A double farmhouse can still be found on east Moreland Road near Division Avenue.

*Horse Heaven:* Roads were extremely bad in those days and travel was difficult for both passengers and horses. Many horses became injured or could not make the steep hills in the area. As a result, a stop at the intersection of Easton and York Roads was necessary. There horses had a chance to rest or were changed. It was here also that dead horses were buried on the east side of the road near the base of the hill.

*Geodetic Survey Marker:* In 1836, F. R. Hassler was appointed by President Thomas Jefferson to conduct the nation's first coastal survey. In 1839, that survey brought Hassler to Willow Grove's Frazier's Hill, being the highest point in Montgomery County. Here a clay earthenware cone was buried. The cone was not located again until 1978 and replaced with a concrete post. These markers are used by everyone from utility companies to highway departments to bridge contractors.

**Frazier House, 1895.** Part of the Overlook Farms complex.

**Newtown Road School, 1895.** This is Willow Grove's third school building, the first having been a log cabin in the vicinity of Park Avenue and Easton Road and the second built in 1839 on land donated by George Rex on the south side of Davisville (Newtown) Road. The second building was demolished to make way for new housing. The 1895 structure was designed by Horace Trumbaur who had designed 'Gray Towers' for Beaver College and was built on land donated by Mr. C. Ehrenpfort. The building today cannot be distinguished from the original.

**Fire House, 1924.** The fire company was first organized in 1906 after a fire leveled a general store at the intersection of York and Easton Roads owned by David Nolan. A hand drawn hose cart and hose were finally purchased after much effort and were housed in the Knights of Columbus Hall. In July of 1924, ground on Davisville Road was purchased for a new fire house which was completed in August of that year. The first motorized fire apparatus, a 1924 American La France Pumper fire truck, affectionately known as 'Bertha' was put into service in September. Eventually this building was outgrown and is now a commercial property.

**Blacksmith Shop, 1857.**

**Wheelwright Shop, 1857.**

**Shot Tower.** One of the more difficult old buildings to identify is the shot tower which later became part of the building once occupied by Slom's Clothing Store at York and Davisville Roads. The building in question did not appear to be high enough to serve as a shot tower ( 3 \_ floors including the cellar). There were odd circular masonry tanks in the cellar of the Slom's building which bore a strong resemblance to those used in the generation of illumination gas during the Victorian era. A next door resident attested to the use of gas in the bakery adjoining Sloms, but could not verify the use of gas in the Slom building. This location was later occupied by Rothwell's Drug Store for many years.

**Post Office circa 1812.** This was the fourth location for the Willow Grove Post Office. In November, 1700, the first pioneer post office was established in colonial Pennsylvania by an act of the

British Parliament. In 1789, Congress established a postal system in the U.S. and arranged for the transportation of mail. Stage coach taverns were both official and unofficial post offices. Unlike small post offices where profits were minimal, post offices at taverns promoted the interests of the tavern keepers. Mails were often opened in barrooms by curiosity seekers and newspapers were frequently carried away by travelers to whom they were not addressed. It was therefore very logical that the first Willow Grove Post Office was to be found in the Red Lion Inn.

**Fountain House Inn, 1717.** The run-off of the Fountain House's '100 Horse Spring' lies in the driveway between the fire house and the first block east of York Road. Crossing Davisville Road it is still cold, crystal clear and supports a growth of watercress in its crannies. The spring at the Fountain House was said to be able to water 100 horses a day.

The Old York Road was built through Willow Grove in 1711 (the date given by the state for the founding of Willow Grove). Since this location was 'one good set of horses from Philadelphia' it was the logical place for a tavern and livery. The ample supply of spring water flowing into the 'Willow Grove Swamp' gave the first inn its name.

**Methodist Church.** The first church in Willow Grove was founded in 1889. The congregation first met in the Farmer's Cooperative Creamery on Davisville Road prior to building a wooden church in 1891 on the present site which later was destroyed by fire.

**Oldest house in Willow Grove, 1725.** According to County Records.

**Newport's Rectified Phosphate Works.** Phosphorus is an essential plant nutrient and most phosphate is used in the production of fertilizer. Other uses include animal feed supplements, detergent, insecticides and medicines.

**Boarding House.** One of the last of the large Victorian boarding houses of the Willow Grove Park era built around 1910. It is now an apartment building.