

H: Darlington Corners: Westtown's 'Main Street'

By Gail O. Guterl, Vice Chair, Westtown Township Historical Commission

I am a 21st century time traveler. My crudely crafted time machine has wheels for road travel and skis for water landings. I'm inviting you to join me on a trip through the ages. We'll make only one stop on limited fuel — the confluence of Rt. 926 (Street Road) and Rt. 202 (Wilmington Pike) in Westtown Township, what the U.S. Geological Survey calls Darlington Corners. In its heyday, this intersection was the equivalent of a main street for Westtown.

I did my homework in preparation for this trip, delving into old records, scrutinizing maps, and reading *A History of Westtown Township*, in anticipation of what to expect. I have set my coordinates for the township's latitude 39.92 and longitude 75.577, elevation 374 feet. Our first stop, September, 350 years ago, and many Septembers after that. So hold tight. Here we go!

1664

A dizzying, warp-speed ride later, I land facing north, scaring a deer in the process. Deer! Feels like I never left the 21st century. I am parked on a rudimentary, but well-worn path on the crest of a small hill that as far as I can see runs from north to south. It is so quiet here, just the rustling of leaves in the trees and tall grasses and the sound of corn stalks rubbing against each other. Corn stalks?

Oh yes, I remember reading that besides being hunter gatherers, the region's Lenni Lenape Indians adopted large-scale agriculture to augment their food supplies, planting the "three sisters" — corn, beans and squash. I do not see anyone around, but I do see a plot of corn and squash planted to the west of the rough path. Wish I had time to wait for the gardeners, but must move forward 23 years.

1687

Things have changed a great deal here — on paper. In 1681, William Penn received 25 million acres, about 40,000 miles of land in what is now Pennsylvania, from Charles II in payment for a debt to Penn's father. In 1684, Penn was approached by Welsh Quakers who asked for a tract of land where they could speak their own language and practice their religion. Part of what is now Westtown Township was incorporated into the Welsh Tract or Barony. It appears on a 1687 map marked "West.Town," the olde English spelling, and the area that will become Darlington Corners is owned by Richard Collet and Richard Whitpain. The area is still open fields and woods. On to another era!

1777

September 11. Now the rudimentary north/south trail is much more defined, showing ruts from horse-drawn wagons and foot traffic. A noise to the west startles me. In the distance, very tall soldiers in blue and red jackets with high conical hats are marching south at a clipped pace, weapons on their shoulders, appearing dusty and tired, but very vigilant. As they progress further south, I hear shots and muffled booms and see soldiers fall to the ground. I find myself in the midst of a battle and I am going to skedaddle. I know from my history, how this will turn out.

1820

Ah, that's better; no battles here in 1820 except those precipitated by the nascent Industrial Revolution. On the east side of what is now a bona fide road, I see a cloth factory, which employs 11 men, five women and sadly, five boys and girls. No child labor laws! From earlier research conducted before I entered my time machine, I know the building was called Westtown Factory, when in 1810 it was operated by Benedict Darlington and Jess Otley, who years later made and sold Beaty's "celebrated washing machines," according to their advertising. The cloth factory replaced a manufacturing plant and wooden clock works businesses that were in the same location. I know soon there will be a store near the factory, selling hats, shoes, groceries, liquor and DuPont's powder by keg! I wonder where they'll store the gunpowder on the shelves — possibly between the groceries and the liquor? (In 2014, Westtown Historical Commission continues to research this and many other historic aspects of the township.)

1830-31

As Wilmington Pike grows, I realize my time machine actually is not on the Wilmington road. I used 2014 coordinates, and realize the original road is slightly west of me. I think I'll stay here for now and observe. A log cabin tavern built in 1803 on the northwest corner of the intersection — named the Sign of Count Powlaskey in 1805 and then the Sign of The King of Prussia in 1805 (What is this fascination with the King of Prussia?) was replaced this year by a serpentine stone house owned by Thomas Darlington, who insisted the intersection be named Darlington's Corner. The structure will be run as a drover's inn for many years — at times a very lively place, if you catch my drift — under many names, including the Westtown Inn and Darlington's Corner Hotel.

One irony; for years the Thornbury Post Office will be in Westtown at this intersection, and the Westtown PO will be in Thornbury, east on Street Road (Rt. 926). By 1843, the PO will be in Darlington's Inn, the drover's hotel and tavern.

1854

Big changes on Wilmington Pike; it is now a plank road. Yes, a road made of long wooden boards to make it easier to transport goods via wagon across the region. Plank roads won't be around long. Within a few short years, the pike will be replaced with a surface of crushed stone. An 1873 map of the intersection will show Brinton's Store, Westtown Inn, and surrounding properties, both residential and commercial, owned by McClure (what is now Crebilly Farm), Woodward, Taylor, Darlington, Cobourn, Cannon and "the Misses Few," African American landowners in the area, which is apparently a rarity. (One sister, Elizabeth Few was the widow of the Jacob Few, so where did "Miss" come from?)

1890-1900

A whole new concept in transportation has come to Wilmington Pike. It's called a toll road. Even if I stood on the top of my time machine and craned my neck northward, I will not be able to see the tollgate building at West Chester Normal School, now West Chester University. Apparently the tollgate will be moved further south, close to where Parkway Center will one day be built. Many will not be able to afford to pay the toll, and will travel circuitous roads to avoid them. These routes will become known as "shun" pikes. Legislation will pass in 1893 to make the highway free. However, despite the eventual macadamizing of the road and it becoming a major

route from New England to the South, it is still quiet enough for the county commissioners and surveyors to walk down to Darlington Corners to inspect it before declaring it a public road.

A fixture for more than 50 years on the southeast corner of this intersection is Darwin R. Highfield's wheelwright and blacksmith shop, which also houses the Thornbury PO — an unusual combination, the records claim.

1909

Speeding is no recent invention on the now macadamized Wilmington Pike and Street Road. Imagine the Pike in 1909 with cars motoring along at the unheard of speed of 20 mph. (I am watching them whiz by from the protection of my time machine.) The problem is so pervasive in Delaware that three men have been stationed at the tollgate on the Kennett Turnpike in Greenville, DE, to “catch the speed maniacs,” according to a June 24, 1909 article in the *Wilmington News*.

1937

We must keep moving because my fuel is running short. I see G. Maurice (pronounced Morris) Bartram has opened a fruit stand at the southwest corner of Darlington Corners. It will be moved twice, in 1943 to the southeast corner of the intersection, when his son J. Hibberd Bartram will inherit the business and yet again in 1952 to the northeast corner, where it will remain, along with a second-hand book store, until the 1980s when an Acme supermarket will be built on the site.

1939

Oh my, I am going to have to push my time machine to the Old Wilmington Pike because big changes are happening to the road. First, it is being straightened, therefore moving right to the spot where my time machine is parked. Then it will be concreted and widened from two to four lanes along certain parts of the highway. Where I stand will remain two lanes for a few more years. Several buildings will be demolished to make way for the new, straighter highway. An old stone barn on the southeast corner — Highfield's old wheelwright shop — is among those that will be torn down once this portion of the pike is widened.

1957

Oh gosh, I have to move my machine again, because Rt. 202 is being widened from 22 feet to 48 feet with a four-foot concrete divider. More homes will be razed to accommodate the widening. By the way, I have seen state police cars patrolling the area, either from the Paoli or Coatesville substations.

My fuel is dangerously low; I'm going to end my visit and head back to 2014. Hopefully you will join me another time for another trip through Westtown's history in my time machine.