

Oakbourne Station and its Environs

By Jonathan L. Hoppe

In the spring of 1848, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania granted a charter for the construction of a railroad from Philadelphia to the borough of West Chester via Media. It was a time of railroad fever in Chester County. The first railroads in the county had not yet been in operation even twenty years yet, but the symbolic possibilities of trade, prosperity, and a brighter future embodied by these ribbons of steel (to come to full realization as part of a Manifest Destiny in the 1870s) made the railroad a hot commodity.

In 1851, the Philadelphia & West Chester Railroad was officially organized, in part as competition to the West Chester Railroad that ran from West Chester to the Main Line of Public Works at West Chester Intersection (now Malvern) and the whole of the line surveyed and placed under contract in 1852. Construction began in earnest, and much of the heavy grading and construction was finished by 1854, though the section from Media to West Chester would not be opened until 1858.

In 1859, the railroad company established a small station on the Chester Creek, about two miles south of the Borough of West Chester, near the home of R. Coleman Hemphill, son of six-term Congressmen Joseph Hemphill. The American Republican, writing in July of that year, noted that "Our readers no doubt are familiar with this name [referring to the infamous Lecompton Constitution in Kansas, which featured prominently in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858], but they may not know that we have a celebrated picnic ground near West Chester which bears this cognomen. [...] A large platform has been laid down in a beautiful grove belonging to Mr. Coleman Hemphill, and a spring of water is near by. We always look pleasantly at Lecompton as we fly along the rail road..."

But the name didn't stick, possibly owing to the outbreak of the Civil War and the rather onerous associations of that name with Bleeding Kansas. For a time, the railroad flirted with the idea of calling the station Belmont, after the palatial country residence of Philadelphia industrialist John Hulme up the road (now Oakbourne Park). But that didn't take either, and the station soon became known as "Hemphill's Station" in R. Coleman's honor.

In July 1863, shortly after the Battle of Gettysburg, a number of Union soldiers, taken prisoner at the battle and unofficially paroled by the Confederacy, were sent to West Chester to recuperate while the paroles were made official. They were then sent on to Camp Elder, just across the creek from this station. The sight of hundreds of uniformed men scared one local farmhand that he --- thinking them the first of a Confederate invasion force --- scrambled up a tree. But the men were well-cared for, fed --- and in one instance, found the love of his life when he met a local woman. Pvt. Warren Freeman, of the 13th Massachusetts Infantry, one of the parolees, wrote in a letter to his father "We have moved camp since I wrote you last; we are now about a mile and a half from the town, on the West Chester and Phila. Railway; the cars run about as often as they do at West Cambridge, and I can lay in my tent and see them pass by--the prospect is quite pleasant."

In 1868, a young man named Chalkley Speakman, Jr. was appointed the station agent. Ten years later he married Ellen Jane Van Winkle. One senses a story here—Ellen Jane was a member of the illustrious Van Winkle family (the same Van Winkle family that had come over to the New World when New York was still New Amsterdam). But love, or so it would seem, conquered all, and together with her husband and two young children moved to the small station house in Westtown Township. It was to be a happy life—though it was set off to an inauspicious start. Soon after his appointment, Chalkley Speakman's father paid a visit to his son. Waiting on the porch for his train, he promptly dropped dead from a sudden and massive heart attack.

By the early 1870s, the station was handling the fewest passengers of any on the line—but that did not stop the company from investing in a number of improvements to the building and grounds.

For the next five years family settled into a nice routine; Chalkley worked as a carpenter and as the station agent, while Ellen tended to the children. But that year two benefactors would come into their lives. Wealthy Philadelphia industrialist James C. Smith and his wife Heloise Drexel Smith bought John Hulme's palatial country home after his death in 1874, and began to convert it and its grounds into a fashionable Victorian mansionhouse, complete with manicured grounds, artificial lake, lookout and watertowers, which they named "Oakbourne". They had no children of their own, and so they bestowed kindness upon the local community, including the Speakman family, for whom they provided for renovation and landscaping of their stationhouse.

Later that year, after petitioning from the surrounding community, the government established a post office at the station, with Mrs. Speakman appointed as postmistress on December 12, 1883. Before the days of rural free delivery, one can understand how beneficial such a stop would be. In 1885, the post office was officially named "Oakbourne," after the Smith's mansion.

The Smiths died in the 1890s, leaving their mansion to the Episcopal City Mission as a convalescent home for women. Shortly thereafter, an Epileptic Hospital and Colony Farm was established next door. Epilepsy was poorly understood at the time, and, thinking it a mental defect, and before the advent of medication for its control, those

afflicted were often placed in such institutions. With the increased business brought on by these institutions, the station saw its headiest days.

Of course, the Speakmans faced their own trials and travails during these years. One notable instance was in 1897, when Mrs. Speakman boldly faced an armed robber. A young man came into the station asking for change for a \$20 bill, which she refused to do. She did however have change for a \$5, which he handed to her. But as he did so he pulled out a revolver and demanded the contents of her cash drawer. Unfazed, she faced him down. "Shoot if you dare," she said stonily, and that his revolver was not loaded. The man balked, and Mrs. Speakman shouted to her daughter to grab the rifle. With that, the man took off down the track, Mrs. Speakman chasing after him. He was eventually caught in Willistown, and hauled off to prison.

The family lived in the station for the next thirty years. Chalkley Speakman died in 1926 at age 77. Ellen remained on, on the cusp of great changes. The Philadelphia Electric Company was building a series of pylons for a high-tension electric line directly along the railroad across from the station, and the railroad itself was in the process of electrifying the line. Electric commuter service began on December 2, 1928.

Just 10 days later, Ellen Jane Speakman officially resigned as the postmistress of the Station, having served in that capacity for 40 years exactly. Upon her retirement, the office was closed—its proximity to West Chester having rendered its services obsolete. Thus, Ellen Jane has the notable distinction of being the first and only postmistress of Oakbourne.

Ellen suffered a stroke that year, and moved in with her daughter in West Chester. She died 6 years later at a ripe old age and was buried next to her husband in Greenmount Cemetery.

The stationhouse itself survived until the 1960, when declining revenue necessitated its closure. The building was demolished shortly thereafter. Today, little serves to attest to it ever having been there, except a telephone pole, a retaining wall, and an overgrown driveway. In its honor, the West Chester Railroad has affixed a small sign to a nearby catenary pole, and "Oakbourne" once again graces the railroad.

