

A Brief History of East Nantmeal

In 1682, William Penn landed in the New World at what is now New Castle, Delaware. Within a month, he and cartographers had delineated three large geographic areas which became Philadelphia, Chester, and Bucks counties. In 1789, when Delaware County was split off, Chester County's present boundaries were established.

The history of East Nantmeal, Chester County, began when Welsh Quakers settled in the area. Nantmeal, or Nantmel, first noted on County tax lists in 1717, was named after a village in Radnorshire, Wales, from where emigrated many of its earliest residents, such as the Merediths, Stephens and Griffiths. Similarities between the two towns are striking even today. Nantmel is Welsh for "sweet spring" or "honey brook."

Other residents on the tax rolls as early as 1722 included John Morre, Daniel Morre, William Trego, William Iddings, David Thomas, Edward Thomas, Howell Powel, John Broomal and Thomas Callowhill.

A Friends Meeting House was established in the village of Nantmeal in 1739. Irish Quakers such as the Kirks, Reas and Wynns also joined. Fires destroyed two early log structures and the Meeting closed in strife in 1838. The third Meeting House, made of stone, was demolished in 1890.

The Meeting's walled-in cemetery on Fairview Road remains next to the Meetinghouse lot to its east. A building, originally next to the Meeting House lot, was the Meeting's seminary and became the township's first school. Eight more formal or public schools were to follow, all south of French Creek.

Nantmeal was split into East Nantmeal and West Nantmeal in 1742, with East Nantmeal retaining what is currently Warwick Township. Having the French Creek watershed, vast amounts of hardwood timber, lime and iron ore deposits, East Nantmeal became an important site for the iron industry in the colonies, and was the only agricultural community to support the iron industry before 1830. The Rutters, Savages, Nutts, Graces, Bransons, Van Leers, Bulls and Potts were some of the industry's prominent families who lived in East Nantmeal during this period.

Roads were integral to these ironmasters who had to maintain large plantations. Early court records show that property owners were required to extend passable roads adjacent to or passing through their properties. They were also directed to build bridges wherever necessary. The earliest municipal function was the construction and interconnection of roadways to mills, taverns, shops, forges and furnaces. One such road was the "Road from the Coventry Forge to

Uwchlan Meeting,” opened in court in 1727. In 1737, the “road from Lancaster to Philadelphia’s southern branch” intersected with the “Coventry Road” in Nantmeal Village. The Conestoga Road (Route 401) was an important toll road of the early 1800’s as a major east-west route to Philadelphia. It intersected with major routes to Hopewell, Warwick Furnace, Coventry Forge and Isabella Furnace (West Nantmeal) at the villages of Bulltown and Marsh in East Nantmeal and at Ludwig’s Corner in West Vincent Township.

After 1830, when the furnaces were reducing production, land was converted to agricultural use. Farmer to town roadways and bridges set up by state legislation and controlled by the state were established as The Pinchot road system in the 1930s. Fairview Road is a Pinchot road.

In 1842, as the charcoal blast furnaces decreased output, the portion of East Nantmeal north of French Creek was split off to become Warwick Township. The Redding Furnace, which remained within East Nantmeal, turned to forging. The Morris Tilt-Hammer, on present Route 100, produced scythes and nails.

In 1860 the borders between East and West Nantmeal and Wallace Townships were shifted and the current township boundaries created. This resulted in East Nantmeal being 10,490 acres or 16.4 square miles and bordering the townships of Warwick, South Coventry, West Vincent, Upper Uwchlan, Wallace and West Nantmeal.

After the “Age of Iron” came enlightenment and farming. Six schools and two churches were built from 1840-1880. Land cleared for charcoal production became agricultural, along with milling industries. Today, there exist a few “century” farms still in operation by long time families, including the McAfees and the Philips. The Guest’s Century Oaks farm on Prizer Road has been in their family, by way of the Stephens, since 1735 and is still being farmed by a Guest.

East Nantmeal has changed little since 1900. Its children attended one room schoolhouses up to the 1950’s. In the 1920’s before the Depression, many large tracts were brought by prominent Philadelphia families. Some of these properties are intact and preserved. Everett and Grace Rodebaugh’s “Welkinweir” (the Edwin Morris property of the 1800’s) is open to the public and is a prime example of what East Nantmeal is trying to preserve and safeguard. The stores, mills and schools are gone, but their structures have continued in use more than a century. One of the township’s most valuable resources is that many descendants of the early residents still live in the township. /

The East Nantmeal Historical Commission was established in 1983 as a part of the township government. The Commission’s purpose, in conjunction with the East Nantmeal History Society, is to compile, classify and maintain information of historical significance, as well as to promote an understanding and appreciation of the township’s rich cultural and historical heritage.