

## The History of Pennsburg

The borough of Pennsburg, located in the northern part of Montgomery County, adjoins the borough of East Greenville on the north and the borough of Red Hill on the south. All three boroughs are surrounded by Upper Hanover Township.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century Henry Heilig and his two sons owned most of the land that comprises present-day Pennsburg. Their holdings were a rectangular tract of 305 acres. About 1750, Heilig built his first house, the oldest in Pennsburg. The house contains many features reflecting its age and importance for the heritage of Pennsburg and the Upper Perkiomen Valley.

Until 1840, the settlement was called Heiligville, although it could barely be called a village. The hamlet consisted of several houses and barns, a tavern, and a store built closely together, gave the appearance of a village.

In 1843, the residents of the area met in Jacob Hillegass' store to agree on a permanent name for the village. Family members wanted to retain the name of Heiligville. Another faction wanted to call it Buchananville, in honor of President James Buchanan. A heated decision ensued with the conclusion being to meet in one week's time to select a name. Still, an agreement could not be reached. Someone then suggested naming the village in honor of William Penn, so Pennsburg was chosen as a compromise.

Pennsburg's Main Street is Route 29, which was the Green Lane and Goschenhoppen Turnpike, opened in 1851. The intersection of Route 663, in the center of town, is the main artery from Pottstown to Quakertown.

On March 7, 1887, the 75 residents of Pennsburg petitioned the court of Montgomery County to incorporate as "The Borough of Pennsburg." The petition stated that the boundaries contained 370 acres and 50 perches of land. On November 19, 1887, the court confirmed that the village of Pennsburg is now incorporated into a borough. On April 9, 1888 the court declared that the first election of officers will be held on May 8, 1888. By the summer of 1889, gas street lamps had been installed, and a lamp lighter was hired for \$55.00 a year, to be paid quarterly.

The main crossroads of the community, the intersection of Routes 29 and 663 today, witnessed a long time center of commerce with the erection of the general store at this location in 1852. Other retail establishments opened in the vicinity of this commercial district. A Wagon and Carriage business began in 1888 on nearby Fourth street. Across the Main Street (Route 29) Dr. Mensch opened a pharmacy in 1871. By the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, clothing and dry good's stores, millinery and ladies' dress shops, grocery stores, butchers and electric appliance businesses thrived on this important community corridor.

Cigar manufacturing held a significant role in the growth of Pennsburg as well as the Upper Perkiomen Valley as a whole. As the cigar industry declined, other industries took advantage of a ready and willing work force: Clothing manufacturing, silk mills and a Trunk and Bag Factory were among some of the factories moving into the area.

Into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, cattle sales were held near the center of town, behind the Pennsburg Hotel once at the corner of Routes 29 and 663. Brickyards on either side of Eighth Street produced the building material for many local homes and businesses. Automobile sales and servicing began in the early teens with Steckel's on Third Street and the Jackson Motor Co. on Main Street. As the automobile industry in town prospered, the cattle sales and brick-making wound down.

Additional business and services began and grew in Pennsburg because of its central location in the Upper Perkiomen Valley. Banking, insurance, funeral parlors, etc. can still be seen in downtown as they have been located for generations. This tour of Pennsburg introduces history and architecture important for the Borough. While taking this tour, Pennsburg's change from a rural community to a center for commerce and industry will become apparent.

# Pennsburg Borough



## Self-guided Tour

### Tour #1

*of a series of 7 tours*



#### Cover Artwork

*"Back-A-Ways", Watercolor*  
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*Schwenkfelder Library & Heritage Center*  
*Pennsburg, Pennsylvania*

## Pennsburg Self-Guided Tour

WE ASK THAT YOU RESPECT THE PRIVACY OF THE OWNERS OF THE TOUR SITES BY REMAINING ON SIDEWALKS OR ROADWAYS WHEN VIEWING THE SITES, UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED.

**The walking/driving tour of Pennsburg may be started at the St. Marks's Lutheran Church parking lot at Front and Main St. in the town of Pennsburg.**

**Proceed south on Main Street.**

### 1. 81 Main Street

St Mark's Lutheran church was built in 1898 of light-colored stone. The original cost was \$16,000. The ornate stonework, symmetrical appearance, substantial use of stone and



large corner tower are characteristics of Gothic Revival architectural style. A classroom and office addition were added in the early 1960s. This church began as a Union Church with Pennsburg Reformed (now UCC), meaning two congregations sharing one building, a rather common practice. In 1898, the congregations reached an agreement to separate. Pennsburg stayed in the building and the Lutheran congregation built St. Mark's.

### 2. 218 Main Street

Note the bright paint of the shingles and wood trim. The picturesque, asymmetrical plan and the variety of wall textures suggest a Queen Anne style home. Note the many different textures found on this home built in 1890.

### 3. 304 Main Street

Built in 1890, this also is considered a Queen Anne style home. Looking at the two shows considerable differences. Try to find similarities and differences in style between the two houses.

### 4. 369 Main Street

Now an Italian restaurant, the Aurora movie theater was built in 1919. Looking closely, note the stucco siding, lack of overhanging eaves and the use of arches: all reflecting the Spanish Mission architectural style, very popular in America from 1915-1940. Located in the center of Pennsburg, the theater was also used by the Pennsburg High School for plays and productions.

### 5. 400 Main Street

Reigner's store, built in 1852, is the oldest store in the town. With its symmetrical, vertical emphasis, flat roof and bold eave supports (brackets), and brick exterior, this architectural style is called Italianate. For over 100 years the building was a typical dry goods store, or small-town department store and the center of community life in Pennsburg. Note the various additions to the building, both in front and in back, reflecting the changing needs of the store over the years.



### 6. 405 Main Street

The Farmers National Bank, now Wachovia Bank, was built in 1926. The building is a modern Classical design which has brick and cast stone construction. The bank was formed in 1876 and originally located at the corner of Fourth and Main Streets, in the Odd Fellows Hall, a tall brick building torn down in 1967. The original name is spelled out on the building.



### 7. 504 Main Street

The original Pennsburg Fire company organized in 1895. Their first equipment was a hose carriage and a ladder wagon. By 1919, they purchased their first motorized fire truck. Then, in 1924, this 3-bay fire hall was built. It had a large hall on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor and a basement social room. A Fife and Drum Corps was organized in 1905 and played/marched in all local parades until 1950. In the 1980s, a new Fire Hall was built off Main Street, behind the original building. 504 then came under private ownership.



**Turn right onto Sixth Street.**

### 8. Sixth and Dotts Streets

In 1951 the Pennsburg Borough Council built a multi-purpose building. It was to serve as a gymnasium for the nearby Pennsburg High School, a new borough hall, and space for the Police Department. With the merger of the small school districts of the 1950s and construction of the consolidated High School, the Civic Building became a community center.

**Turn around, go back to Main Street, turn right.**

### 9. 643 Main Street

Pennsburg Public School, a one story building, was built about 1890. A fire in 1907 required the town to rebuild and at this time, they slightly enlarged the school. The public education system required attendance to the eighth grade. Students seeking a four year high school degree often attended Perkiomen Seminary, now Perkiomen School. By 1924, more space was required and the third building was built. The Pennsburg High School then became a full four year high school and classes were held here through 1952.

### 10. 772 Main Street

This home, the birthplace of Dr. Frank Buchman, is a Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Historic Site. The brick twin home was built in 1863. Dr. Buchman was born in this house in 1878. His parents operated a grocery store in the house. He started his education in Pennsburg at a small local school, and attended Perkiomen Seminary. At 16 years of age, his family moved to Allentown, where he graduated from Muhlenberg College and later, from Mount Airy Seminary in Philadelphia.



An ordained Lutheran minister, he served a parish in Philadelphia before launching his worldwide program, which he called Moral Re-Armament. Known earlier as the Oxford Group, it proclaimed "World changing through life-changing." His group advocated (1) absolute honesty; (2) absolute purity; (3) absolute unselfishness; (4) absolute love among men and nations. Dr. Buchman did much of his work in Europe, mainly in England, France, and Germany, although he traveled throughout the world in his efforts to achieve peace.

He established a world headquarters in Caux, Switzerland, and an office in Washington, D.C., among others. A college on Mackinac Island, Michigan, was another of his accomplishments. He was nominated twice for the Nobel Prize. Dr. Buchman died in 1961 in Germany, where the Moral Re-Armament Movement was conceived in 1938. He is buried in Allentown.

The centennial of Dr. Buchman's birth was marked with ceremonies held in the church across the street from his birthplace. (The Pennsburg United Church of Christ). The actor Joel McCrea donated a plaque, which was placed on the site in May 1977. Gov Milton Shapp declared June 4, 1978 as Frank Buchman Day, "in honor of the centennial of the birth of this great humanitarian."

### **11. 775 Main Street**

The Pennsburg United Church of Christ is the oldest active congregation in the borough. It was built in 1855 and expanded in 1902. The stairs to the sanctuary and the corner bell tower were added at that time. Tall windows and doors with Gothic arches were also used in this renovation. The cemetery is directly behind the church. St. Mark's Lutheran Church shared this building as part of a Union Church until 1898.

***Proceed south, through the traffic light, for about one block, and on the right is a large parking lot area. Turn around here and head north on Main Street (route 29), back to the center of Pennsburg at the intersection with Route 663. Turn left onto Route 663. The next site is the building that has a street on either side. After turning keep to the left of the building on Route 663.***

### **12. 10 Fourth Street**

In this building, built in 1912, the weekly *Town & Country* newspaper was published from 1912 to the early 1990s. It is a 2 ½ story brick building on a cast stone base built to match its wedge shaped lot. The paper was started in 1899 by Dr. Charles Hillegass. While other early newspapers used the German language, the *Town and Country*, using English language only, soon dominated as the regional newspaper. Still printed today, the *Town & Country* editorial offices are in the neighboring town of Red Hill.

***Turn right onto Seminary Street.***

### **13. 401 Seminary Street**

The Buffalo Woven silk Mill was built in 1895 and was the first silk mill in Pennsburg. Silk was manufactured here until about 1980. The building now houses apartments. While coming to the community about the time cigar making was still dominant, Silk mills and other clothing manufacturing facilities became a prominent employer in the late 1920s when the cigar making industry collapsed.

***Across Fourth Street from mill at a 45 degree angle is the next site.***

### **14. 313 Fourth Street**

This is the Henry Heilig house, the oldest house in Pennsburg. It was built in 1750 and renovated in 1827. It is a 2 ½ story stone Germanic house which has wood trim. Half-moon-shaped attic windows are an 18<sup>th</sup> century identifying trait. When it was a farmhouse, all the land behind the house was farmland. The front porch is a much later addition.

***Turn right on Fourth Street to stop sign.***

### **15. Fourth and Railroad Streets**

On the right is a large long metal building. Built in 1910 as a Livery Stable for the American House Hotel across the street, it was remodeled about 1931 as Bernhard's Bowling Alley. Bowling flourished here until 1970 when the business was sold. The building is currently storage for a local auction company.

### **16. 222 Fourth Street**

The former American Hotel, was built in 1875. When the railroad station was completed, Captain Henry Dotts, a local developer, saw the need for accommodations near the station. In 1900, Horace Harley bought it and renamed it the Harley House. Now an apartment building, the grandeur of the old hotel can be recognized in surviving photographs.



***Continue straight and cross the railroad tracks.***

### **17. 220 Fourth Street**

The Pennsburg Railroad Station was built in 1875. Rail service from Philadelphia through Pennsburg to Allentown was completed by 1874. In 1876 daily service began, continuing until July 11, 1955, when passenger service was discontinued. Today, limited freight service from Emmaus ends here in Pennsburg.



***Turn around and proceed to the right, on Seminary Street.***

### **18. Second and Seminary Street**

On the corner is the Carnegie Library built in 1912. Andrew Carnegie donated a portion of the cost which was matched by donations from Perkiomen School and the community. This library was built for use by the residents of Pennsburg, Perkiomen School students and as a repository for the Schwenkfelder Historical Library collection. It is the only Carnegie Library on a private school campus. The three story brick façade with rows of arched windows, identifies this as Renaissance revival architectural style. This style of architecture is commonly used with public buildings, such as a library.

### **19. Seminary Street, Perkiomen School Campus**

Founded in 1875 by Rev. and Mrs. Charles Wieand, ownership of the Perkiomen Seminary changed hands several times during the 1880s until finally closing its doors in 1888. In 1891, the Schwenkfelder Church purchased the four year college preparatory school, opening for its first class of students in October, 1892. The school was founded to supplement the 8<sup>th</sup> grade education provided by public schools.

When the school re-opened under Schwenkelder ownership, the Reverend Dr. O. S. Kriebel, Pastor of Palm Schwenkfelder Church, was the principal. The first year there was a faculty of 4 and a student body of 19. On its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary the school had a total enrollment of 302, a graduating class of 34 and a faculty of 30. Today, the enrollment is about 275 with a faculty of over 30. Since 1892, the school served not only the youth of the Schwenkfelder families, but also the youth of the Perkiomen Valley and surrounding communities. Today, about half the students attending commute and about half board at the school. Students come from throughout the United States and from many different countries worldwide.

Besides education, Perkiomen School had its impact on the community in other ways. During the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was a cultural center. Its programs in music, theater, and art benefitted the general public as well as the students.

Kriebel Hall is the principle landmark of the Perkiomen School. A tragic fire gutted the structure in 1994. Supporting the outside brick walls, the internal structure was rebuilt and re-opened in 1996. Several modifications including the massive entry steps and addition of the cupola were done at this time.

### **20. 105 Seminary Street**

The Schwenkfelder Library & Heritage Center was built in 1951 and divided its collections between the Carnegie Library, second floor and the new building. In 2001 the Heritage Center tripled its space with additional storage and exhibit galleries. The Heritage Center tells the story of the Schwenkfelders and the Upper Perkiomen Valley through exhibitions, research and programs.

***THIS CONCLUDES THE TOUR***

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*Upper Perk Downtown supports these series of tours.*

