

From the Historic Commission:

Over the past few months our Commission has been working to improve the signage in Historic Downtown Thornton. Our goal is to bring back the quaint feeling of the historic town while strongly promoting the businesses within it.

There are some very old trees (300 years plus) in our township and we want help identifying them. Detailed information will be in our Spring article. If you feel you have an old tree, contact us anytime. Call the township or 610 637 2016 or email emiller@thornbury.org

In keeping with our efforts to educate and bring some of our past into your present we have included a brief history of the Christmas tradition. As always we hope this inspires you to dig deeper into the historical resources surrounding your every day lives and to recognize them for the importance they hold.

Christmas in Early West Chester from the 1987 book by Paul A. Rodenbaugh
Chester County Notebook:

“With the holiday season fast approaching and the Old Fashioned Christmas in West Chester scheduled for the seventh and eighth of December (1985), many have raised the question “what was Christmas like in West Chester in 1800?” The answer might surprise some people. We have evolved a secular Christmas complete with symbols and traditions which were unknown to the residents of the borough at the turn of the nineteenth century. I doubt whether even one Christmas Tree was found in the village in 1800. Santa Claus or Kris Kringle also was absent and would not appear on the scene for another twenty-five years or more.

The reason for the absence of the Christmas celebration at the time was most of the residents of West Chester were of the denominations which did not accept Christmas as a church holiday. The denominations were the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and the Society of Friends. The only church located within the borough of West Chester in 1800 was the Catholic Chapel on West Gay Street which was erected in 1793. The congregation was small in 1800. The Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran and Moravian churches had a Church calendar which generally celebrated Christmas. The other groups ignored it. The groups which failed to accept Christmas in 1800 held off for another eighty years before accepting it into the church program.

The largest denomination in West Chester in 1800 was the Society of Friends (Quakers) who worshipped at Bradford, Birmingham or Goshen until their meeting house on North High Street was erected in 1812. The Friends ignored the celebration of what they called “the day called Christmas” or “Christmas Day so called by the world’s people.” Every day was Holy to them. The stores and schools run by the Friends were open on Christmas until nearly the end of the nineteenth century and

they only gave up business then out of a concern for their non-Friend employees. The Quaker First Day School at the Norristown Meeting held the earliest Christmas festival held by Friends I could find record of and that event occurred on December 27, 1876.

The other Protestant denominations, such as Baptists and the Methodists, also ignored the holiday until late in the century. The “*American Republican*,” a West Chester newspaper, reported in its December 31, 1867 issue “that neither the Methodist, Baptist or Presbyterian congregations held religious services in their churches on that day’ (Christmas).

Public schools were open in Pennsylvania on Christmas and the State Legislature met on Christmas until 1808. The *American Republican* attacked the State Legislature on December 29, 1812 for taking a two week recess for the holidays. Christmas came to West Chester after the Civil War.

By the 1880’s many of the local churches were having Christmas celebrations in their Sunday Schools for the children. The Christmas Tree was beginning to gain popularity and the use of greens was catching on among the residents.

Clement Moore wrote *A Visit from Saint Nicholas* in 1824 and by 1880 it was a popular Christmas story nationally. The last century has seen the introduction of various traditions.

Now one of the most enjoyable local activities during the holiday season has become a tradition of its own. The evening walking tours, during Old Fashioned Christmas in West Chester, are looked forward to each year. They combine Christmas and the history of three sections of our borough. Try to take advantage of this opportunity for seeing our old neighborhoods by lantern light.”

Please remember within a few miles of our township in every direction, is a wealth of historical resources...Visit www.thornbury.org and go into the links, click on Brandywine Conference and Visitors Bureaus. You will find as much information as you like.

Remember the Frazer Ruins in Bonner Park..... a good walk on a snowy day. While at the ruins, try to envision living there in 1776..... less our modern conveniences and all the surrounding houses.

Lastly, please support our local area history teaching gems..... Colonial Plantation Farm www.colonialplantation.org and Brandywine Battlefield www.brandywinebattlefield.org They are both great learning resources.

Our Commission wishes you all the best of holidays and a safe and prosperous New Year.

"When the well is dry we will know the worth of water"
-Ben Franklin