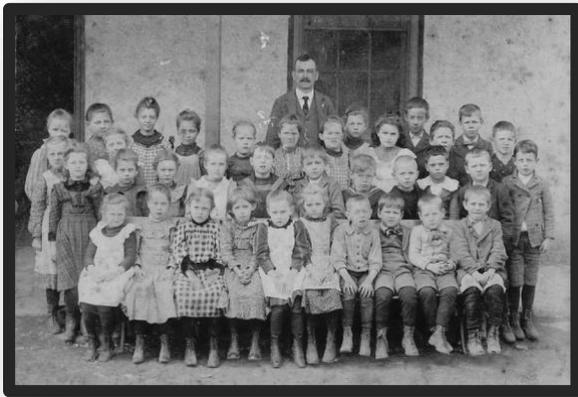


Schoolhouses of West Vincent Township

Travelling along Flowing Springs Road, through the roller coaster-like twists and hair-pin turns from Hilltop, winding down into “The Hollow”, can be quite an adventure in any season, but the scenic view of the village below is not only beautiful in every season of the year, but is a view of a landscape which encompasses more than 200 years of history as well. Along with the old General Store and creamery, one of the most recognizable buildings in the township is the Birchrunville Schoolhouse, with its bell cupola and spire visible above the treetops.



The currently existing Birchrunville building was the second schoolhouse in the village, the first being just downhill from this lot on the land of Margaret Templin, daughter of Jonah John. The first building was constructed in 1833 just as the Pennsylvania Legislature was in the process of passing the Free School Act,



mandating a free education for all. It served for 30 years, until 1863, when a new one-room, white stuccoed, stone building was constructed at the confluence of Flowing Springs Road and Schoolhouse Lane. The contractor for the Birchrunville Public School was C. F. Woodland, and the Board of Directors included Charles Scheib, Clifford Emery, Addison Wilson, J. Walley, H. Smith, and Isaac Evans. The 20 square foot stone foundation of the 1833 school was later reused for an ice house.

Even the 1833 Birchrunville School was not the oldest school building in the township. The current Highland School building on Birchrun Rd. was constructed a few years after the Birchrunville School, in 1866, but that white-washed stone building had replaced an earlier log structure dating back to 1792. The school house is mentioned in a 1796 deed from Thomas Willing to Abraham Davis, and again in a deed dated January 21, 1799, when Abraham Davis and his wife Abigail did convey “a certain lot or piece of land...whereon a School house is erected”, consisting of twenty perches, to Jacob Heffelfinger, John Smith, John Brownback and James Everhart, “for the encouragement of literature and for the sum of five shillings in hand”. The deed further stipulated that the conveyance was “for the purpose of establishing and continuing a school for the education of the children or youth of the neighborhood in perpetual succession forever and for no other use.”



Thus, at an early date, it was known as Heffelfinger's School, and was referred to alternately as Paul's School and Highland throughout the 19th century.

The current St. Andrew's schoolhouse building at Ludwig's Corner dates to 1878, but it also was preceded by a separate schoolhouse building which was set behind the old St. Andrew's church. A hand-drawn 1859 map clearly indicates the earlier site, and an 1836 deed references the conveyance to the West Vincent School Directors from David Potts, Jr. The lot size of 38 perches was bounded by the lands of Henry Miller and Potts' own land, and was sold for the consideration of \$1.00. In fact, there is evidence in an older deed that a church and a school existed at that spot as early as 1764.



The currently existing stone building was set on one acre of land which was purchased from Jacob Miller and his wife for \$200. The land now borders the Ludwig's Corner Horse Show grounds. The building, constructed in 1878, still retains the typical schoolhouse gable-end entrance with its full front porch. There had been no additions to the structure until the 1990s when a survey noted that "a two-window, shed-roofed dormer had been injected into the gable roof on each side within the past year", and at some point a small rear entry vestibule was added. The gothic-arched date stone was replaced by a small window above the front door, and the beautiful bell cupola and spire was removed sometime after 1949, based on a photograph in the collection of the Chester County Historical Society Library.

St. Matthew's School was constructed in 1864 and is a "simple gable-roofed building of traditional style with the entrance in the gable end." The bell housing remains with its wooden spire. The building is nestled on a level shelf cut into the hillside above Conestoga Rd., just outside of the stone wall which encloses the St. Matthew's Reformed Church cemetery. The traditional front porch has been enclosed, and no longer visible is a plaque that reads:



"Pike Seminary-1864" with the names of the School Directors: J.B. Caldwell, J. Walleigh, J. Mosteller, C.C. Mosteller, H. Hamer, and J. Moses. Contractor: Wm. Eachus."

Teachers' names were a reflection of the community, including many long-time family names such as Loomis, Lumis, Dolby, Dewees, Deery, Evans, Clevenstine, Knerr, Stiteler, and Wilson. Teachers were paid monthly, earning an average of \$37 in 1888, increasing to \$100 by 1936. They taught all subjects to first through eighth grade students, including art, music, and home economics, and kept the fire burning in the pot-bellied stove.

Chestnut Grove Schoolhouse was built in 1868 by J.M. Rourke. The West Vincent School Directors, Henry Hall, W. Mosteller, J.B. Swinehart, and Eachus, purchased the ¾ acre parcel from Isaac K. Root in June 1868 for the amount of \$55. It faces southeastward, away from St. Matthew's Road and is set in a small grove of trees which were Chestnuts, hence the name, but are now oak, maple, and hickory. The stucco has been removed from the gable end facing St. Matthew's Road, to expose beautiful blue and gray stonework.



In 1879, the "*Daily Local*" reported that the students of the Birchrunville School had taken a sleigh ride to visit the Union School in East Nantmeal, and also visited St. Andrew's, Pughtown and Bertolet's "returning home highly delighted with the sleigh ride." The next day, the Birchrunville students were "visited by Highland and St. Matthew's school of West Vincent, and Pughtown School of South Coventry. They were accompanied by the Franklin Cornet Band of Coventry; (and) they made quite a display as there were about 50 sleighs and sleds in the procession. All departed well pleased with their visit and the children very much enjoyed the sleigh ride."

As the village of Birchrunville grew, the need for a township high school became apparent. By 1898, attendance had more than doubled, from 30 to 64 students, so a second story was added to the one-room schoolhouse at that time, paid for by Thomas B. and Ida Dewees. This second story room would function as a high school, for grades nine, ten, and eleven, while the first floor room would continue to accommodate grades one through eight. Early principals of the Birchrunville High School were named in newspaper notices and included Ralph A. Steinruck, Professor Rettew in 1901, Professor Edgar Williams in 1904, Professor S. L. Shenaman in 1906, and in 1907, George G. Gayman. In 1923, the high school was discontinued in favor of sending students to Phoenixville High School.

At the close of the 1945-46 school term, the School Directors decided to close two of the township's five one-room buildings, in a move toward consolidation. It was determined that Birchrunville would contain four grades, with two grades each in Chestnut Grove and St. Matthews. St. Andrews and Highland were closed, with the latter being put up for public auction on November 30th, 1946.

In September 1946, the schools opened with Miss Irma Kochel teaching 1st and 2nd grades and Mrs. Anna G. Rice with 3rd and 4th grades in the Birchrunville schoolhouse. Miss Grace Gordon was the teacher of 5th and 6th at Chestnut Grove, and Mrs. Ruth Haines taught the 7th and 8th grades in St. Matthew's.

During the summer of 1948, the three remaining township schools had wells dug and running water installed. Sanitary conditions had steadily improved through the years, so that students no longer had to walk outside of the building to use an outhouse, and gone was the need to hand pump buckets of drinking water.

Primary grades continued to be taught until 1953, when the Birchrunville schoolhouse, Chestnut Grove and St. Matthew's were closed. By mid-September 1953, the newly constructed consolidated school, Vincent Townships Elementary, opened to serve the students of both East and West Vincent Townships. The dedication ceremony and open house were held on February 13th, 1954 with former U. S. Supreme Court Justice Owen J. Roberts, a member of the Vincent Townships School Authority and West Vincent resident, giving the dedicatory address. The West Vincent School Directors serving on the Joint School Board with their East Vincent counterparts, were Caroline H. Brown, Sarah Pyle, George Burnley, I. Newton Evans, and Lewis Weaver.

The *Daily Republican*, on 10.21.1953, reported:

“The furniture from all of the one-room schoolhouses in West Vincent Township is being assembled in preparation for an auction...Among the goods on sale will be 164 children's desks, five teacher's desks, four pianos, a cast iron school bell used many long years for calling children in from the playground for their lessons, 19 coal buckets which call to memory the old-style stoves that were so long used and kept fueled by the teacher and the boys; bookcases, tables, benches, chairs, and many other items that bring memories of old school days past.”

West Vincent is fortunate to have these five historic school buildings remaining as a visible reminder of earlier school days; they are an important part of our educational heritage.