

The Garrett Hill Tour

Janita Mahoney, Radnor Methodist Church Historian, led the Tour of Historic Garrett Hill. She related how Garrett Hill's land was originally part of William Penn's Welsh Tract, which in the 1700's became part of Chester County.

Ms. Mahoney said that the first Publick Meeting House in this area was built in 1784, a 25 by 30 foot hewn log cabin that stood on one of the most beautiful hills in Radnor, first called James' Hill, later Methodist Hill. During its early years, the church was served by circuit rider preachers. One of these was Richard Allen, the first Black Methodist Bishop. A Radnor park is named for him.



In 1833, the old log cabin was replaced by the present stone church, now in its 176th year. Its early pews could be reversed to allow students to face each other; now they are permanently fastened to prevent pinched fingers. The burial ground contains soldiers from the Revolutionary War, with tombstones for the Humphreys of Humphreysville (now Bryn Mawr), and for families whose names appear on neighborhood streets, with markers for those who were ministers, a state senator, neighborhood doctors, lawyers, an elocutionist, and military men from almost every war our nation has fought.

The one-room School House No. 5, first known as the Mount Airy School and later the Garrettville School, built in the 1870's along with horse and buggy sheds, stood on the church property. The school served some 151 children and four female teachers who were paid 84 cents per pupil per month. All sat in the one room with different classes held in each corner by a different teacher. After the school closed, the building was used by the Boy Scouts for their meetings until the 1940's.

Located on Conestoga Road, once the Conestoga Indian trail west, the early church saw 12 to 20 pack trains daily transporting produce from Lancaster farms. By 1780, Conestoga Road, known as the Old Lancaster Road and the Pennsylvania Road, became the main artery west. Some 7000 to 8000 Conestoga wagons pulled by 4 and 6-horse teams plowed through the mud which was, they said, "chin deep in Hasty Pudding" on wet days and on dry days just dust from head to foot with visibility down to twenty feet.

As traffic increased, log cabins and then stone homes were built to form this neighborhood. Farmers, carpenters, saddle makers, masons, wheelwrights, a tailor, and even a doctor were early residents of the Hill. As travel increased, inns were built at convenient intervals to accommodate travelers and their animals. An inn at the corner of Conestoga and Haverford Avenues was licensed in 1765 (the latest being Yang Ming).

As the years passed, traffic on Conestoga Road became so heavy that the Pennsylvania Legislature authorized the construction of the Lancaster Turnpike in 1792. Its straight and leveled route cut through the local farmland much to the distress of the farmers, but it reduced the time for the trip. It was the first macadam road and the costliest public works project in the nation at the time, \$465,000.

The monument across the road from the church states that the Continental Army marched down the Road on September 15, 1777 following the Battle of Brandywine. They were heading for their new headquarters in Paoli where they hoped to engage the “British Invaders” again. The Road was also the escape route for the U.S. Congress on its way to Lancaster the following day. The British troops, who also passed this way, raided the barns of the James family plantation. The log home of Griffith James was plundered by General Cornwallis’ men. Records of the items he lost included fabric, clothing, twenty-five pounds of pork, two cows, thirteen sheep, twenty pounds of butter, fourteen pounds of sugar, fifty fowl and some spirits. Given the hardship such loss entailed, is it any wonder that the local government provided a tax break for the James family. In December of 1778, eight Conestoga wagons, driven by women, took clothes sent by the “Ladies Association” to the encampment at Valley Forge via the Road.

Directly behind the monument, where the business campus is today, was the Rosemont Elementary School built in 1919. D. Knickerbacker Boyd, a well-known local architect, designed the school on land originally part of the Converse Estate. It was closed in June 1980. In 1798, this property had two log houses, one of which cost forty dollars. There was also a springhouse on the site.

On the west side of the original Converse property, is Norcini’s white stucco home built of stone between 1811 and 1814, at 916 Conestoga Road. It is believed to be among the oldest homes in Garrett Hill. It was originally one room with a well in one corner and a ladder leading to a loft. Additions and renovations have been made over the years to give it a contemporary look.

Meredith Avenue is named for David Meredith, a weaver from Radnorshire, England, who, in 1682, bought 100 acres at this site.

Lowry's Lane is named after Phillip Lowry, a farmer and Innkeeper, who purchased 86 acres between Lancaster and Conestoga in 1837.

Between Lancaster Avenue and the former Pennsylvania and Western Railroad is land that was part of the estate of John H. Converse, a partner in the Baldwin Locomotive Company. He purchased some 60 acres of the once Lowry land and built one of the best-known mansions along the Main Line named after Mary Chetwynd, an English ancestor. The property ran from Conestoga Road to Lancaster Turnpike with the mansion set high on a hill with lawns sweeping down to the Pike.

The architects for Chetwynd were the Wilson Brothers and Company. Finished in 1883 and built from gray stone quarried from the grounds, it featured timber gables and turrets with a commanding view in all directions. Mr. Converse was a civic-minded gentleman who, with other railroad officers, helped establish and led the Bryn Mawr Fire Company.

The only surviving building from the Chetwynd Estate is the Tudor Revival Coach House built in 1903 for the estate's carriages and horses. It eventually became the garage for the touring cars. It is now an art gallery.



Converse's Chetwynd Estate grounds are now occupied by the Radnor House, formerly The Chetwynd Apartments.

In 1910, Converse built the white stucco Neoclassical Colonial Revival mansion on Garrett Road for Mary Converse, his only daughter. It contains 26 rooms.



Facing the front door are two formal curved staircases rising to the second floor. Interesting friezes are tucked into the walls and brass sconces and chandeliers here were originally found throughout the house. The half-dozen fireplaces, some with inlaid tiles, are quite remarkable. Mary Converse never married. Our retired florist John Connelly remembers satisfying her passion for flowers by bringing truckloads of fresh flowers to her home every week.

In 1962, Powers, Craft, Parker and Beard, Inc., insurance brokers and risk management analysts purchased this property and converted many of the spaces for office use.

The upper field of the Converse Estate, used by him for his flock of sheep, is now called Tunnell Field.

Emlen Lewis Tunnell was the first African American to play for the New York Giants. Tunnell played in the National Football League (NFL) for the Giants and Green Bay Packers. He was honored as an All-NFL player for six years and played in nine Pro Bowls. In 1966 Tunnell wrote *Footsteps of a Giant*.

Tunnell was inducted into the Professional Football Hall of Fame in 1967. In 1969, he was named the NFL's all-time safety. Tunnell died of a heart attack on July 22, 1975. In 1999, Tunnell was ranked number 70 on *The Sporting News*' list of 100 Greatest Football Players.

Garrett Avenue is named after Dr. Louis Garrett, a Philadelphia doctor who was one of the first to see the potential for real estate development. His home, at the foot of Garrett Avenue, is a large white stucco Victorian style house.



In 1866 Dr. Garrett purchased 19 acres between Lancaster and Conestoga Roads for \$10,500. His subdivision plan was among the first in Radnor. It included 104 lots with long narrow backyards suitable for single or double homes built close to the street as you see today. Since they predate the zoning laws of 1928, many small, noncompliant configurations exist.

Garrett Avenue was devoted to workingmen's houses made of wood frame in several styles with ample yards. Number 26 is reminiscent of an English cottage of Tudor Revival style while No. 28 Garrett is a Colonial Revival.