

A TOWN IS BORN



A Brief History of Lansdale's Early Years

The stories contained in this booklet were prepared for a special Aug. 26, 2011 supplement to *The Reporter* newspaper in preparation for Lansdale's first Founders Day celebration, scheduled for Saturday, Aug. 27. Unfortunately, a hurricane, Irene by name, forced postponement of the day's festivities, but there is hope that Founders Day will become an annual event that promotes Lansdale's history.

We believe the story of Lansdale's unique early years is worth sharing with today's residents of the borough as well as future generations who want to better understand how this 1850s railroad town set down roots among dozens of other Colonial-era communities in this region.

There are many tales to tell about Lansdale's early years, and we hope to share more of them in the coming years. Until then, we hope you will enjoy this time trip back to the days when Lansdale's growth was only limited by the vision of the people who founded it.

I want to express my thanks to intern researcher Marcy Weber who contributed considerable time and expertise to this effort. And I invite those who seek more information about Lansdale's growth and development to contact me or any of our volunteers at the Lansdale Historical Society.

DICK SHEARER, president

LANSDALE: A Town Is Born

Unlike many towns in the suburban Philadelphia area, Lansdale is not a community with colonial roots.

At the time of the Revolutionary War, what is now Lansdale was undeveloped rural countryside, a mix of woods and open fields with clay-laden soil that was generally unsuitable for crops. The tract was known as "The Mud Hole".

There were no municipal borders in those days; some of the land was in Hatfield Township to the north, the rest in Gwynedd Township to the south. Most of the land was owned by Welsh immigrant Jenkin Jenkins, who passed it along to son John Jenkins I in the early 1740s.

John, who came to America with his father in 1729, chose to permanently settle on the expansive tract. He built a log house in 1746 near the headwaters of the Towamencin Creek for his growing family.

Jenkins was a farmer of sorts, but he also bought and sold land to sustain a comfortable but hardly lavish standard of living. At their largest, his holdings totaled 220 acres and extended as far north as Cowpath Road.

As the Jenkins family grew in number, the log house became increasingly crowded and John was forced to build a larger, more permanent structure - his "mansion" as he would call it later. That mansion, now the Jenkins Homestead, was begun in 1770 as an attachment to the log house. The strategy was to move the family into the addition, tear down the log house and build the second part of his new homestead. Unfortunately, the Revolutionary War interceded, and it was not until 1785 that the mansion was finally completed.

Three generations of the Jenkins family - those of John I, II and III - lived on the farm before it was finally sold at a public auction in 1871. Through most of those years the countryside was little changed. There was the homestead and little else. Even the main highways of the time, the Allentown Road and Bethlehem Turnpike, were several miles away.

Then two events only a few years apart led to dramatic change. In 1853, a fledgling railroad company named the North Penn decided to build a new route from Philadelphia

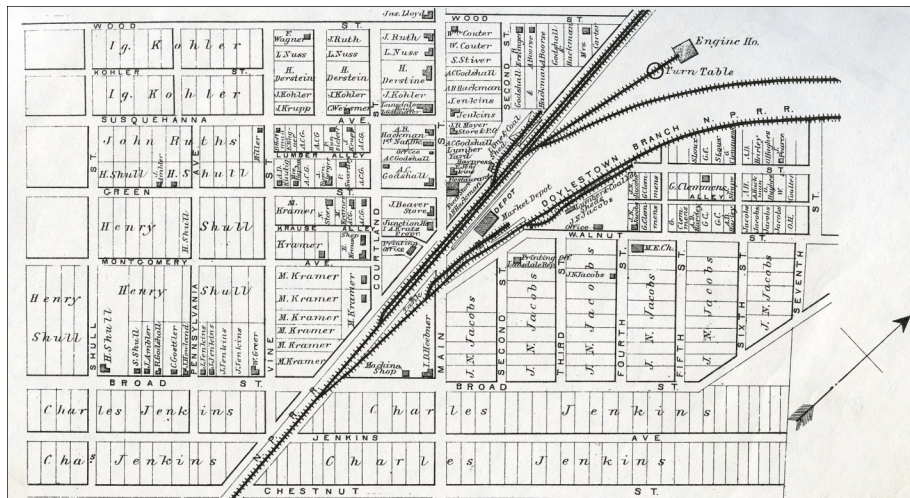
to the Lehigh Valley in hopes it would later expand to New England and points west.

The railroad's board of directors assigned its chief surveyor, Philip Lansdale Fox, to map the new right-of-way as quickly as possible. Time was critical: Trains were all the rage at the time and competition was stiff. It was important to strike first.

Fox's strategy was to plot a relatively direct path to Bethlehem, complicated by the need for two tunnels, one south of the village of North Wales, the other at Landis Ridge near Perkasie. A strip of the Jenkins property was included in Fox's calculations.

As construction progressed, residents of Doylestown, Bucks County, were disappointed that the new railroad passed them by. Long a stagecoach stop on the Easton

Road, Doylestown residents recognized the need for modern transportation if their town was to continue growing. The town's businesspeople offered to help pay for a spur line to Doylestown if the railroad company would agree. The board concurred, and surveyor Fox was once again dis-



patched to locate the best place for the spur to cut into the main line. His orders were clear: Find a spot where no one will complain about the choice.

That was an important factor because a junction town would inevitably develop there and not everyone wanted the inevitable rough-and-ready railroad crowd to invade their community. That wasn't a problem with the sparsely-populated Jenkins tract, so Fox made it his choice. The rest, as they say, is history.

Within months a small village of railroad workers, many of them immigrants, sprang up. Some came with their families and a permanent settlement was established. Service businesses like general stores, feed and grain mills, lumber yards and boarding houses soon followed. After the rail line finally opened in 1856, the pace of development quickened.

One matter needed to be settled in a hurry: The little village needed a name to attach to its primitive train station. "Jenktown" was

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LANSDALE: Village to a Borough

(Continued from page 2)

the obvious choice, but the name was already assigned to another stop along the route. The residents remembered surveyor Fox's choice of locations, and they settled on his middle name for a moniker. However, by then he had moved on to survey new railroads out west and it's possible he never knew that a town was named for him.

Lansdale grew by leaps and bounds through the Civil War years, but with growth came a nagging new problem: The village did not have its own government — it was split down the middle between Hatfield and Gwynedd with Main Street as the dividing line. This was unwieldy and impractical because the issues important to a growing village weren't high priorities for the leaders of the rural townships who ruled it.

In 1872, three years after neighboring North Wales split from Gwynedd, Lansdale applied for and was granted incorporation as a borough. The application was approved Aug. 24, 1872, but for some reason, it received no mention in the *Lansdale Reporter* for two weeks. Over-all, it was a low-key event. No celebrations in the street, no lofty speeches. The only hint of change was the election of a borough council for which there were few candidates.

The proximity of the railroad paid big dividends in Lansdale's early growth. It was a magnet for new businesses, the most important of which was the Heebner Agricultural Works which was housed in a large plant adjacent to the Broad Street crossing.

Heebner's became the world's largest manufacturer of horse-powered farm equipment. They specialized in threshers and reapers that were turned by horses walking on treadmills. These machines were in great demand in rural areas in the days before gasoline and internal combustion engines became readily available.

Heebner's was one of several early industries that put Lansdale on the map. A.C. Godshall built a large feed and grain mill that sold its goods up and down the rail line and throughout southeastern Pennsylvania. The Abram Cox Stove Works moved its extensive manufacturing operation from Philadelphia to Lansdale. A large brickyard was established by the Scholl family.

Add to that a growing number of clothing and cigar factories, tailors, bakers, grocers, blacksmiths and myriad tradespeople, and Lansdale's population edged well beyond 1,000 residents by the 1890s.

By then, the original North Penn Rail Road had given way to the Philadelphia and Reading which only accelerated Lansdale's importance as a transportation hub. An average of 85 trains passed through town every day of the week.

With growth came schools (1871), religion (the Methodist church at 3rd and Walnut Streets was the first), and culture (the Music Hall, the town's first entertainment center was built in 1887). Yet Lansdale never really lost its reputation as a blue-collar junction town. It was home to more than its share of rooming houses, hotels and saloons. It was a destination for traveling salesmen, drifters and others of questionable virtue, but their numbers dwindled as the town became a haven for young families and enterprising businesspeople.

As the 20th century dawned, Lansdale matured into a diversified commercial hub that quickly became the population center of the region. In 1900, two trolley lines came to town, providing an alternative to trains. They traveled to points the railroad could not reach and they brought in more people to do business downtown. Geller's Grand Emporium, Lansdale's answer to a department store, was the biggest retail operation, but it was only one of more than a hundred stores and professional offices situated along Main, Broad and Walnut Streets, and Railroad Avenue.

Architect Milton Bean built Lansdale's first car in 1900, but the coming of the horseless carriage didn't negatively impact the town's commercial fortunes for another 70 years. Main Street was lined with first-class stores that attracted scores of shoppers every day. Woolworth's, the Dresher Arcade, Clemens and Ralph's Markets, the Acme and American Stores, Kaufman's Furniture, Sun Ray Drugs, Hager's, Bartholomew's and Jeanne's clothing stores were just a few. Folks could eat at the Hotel Tremont, the Deluxe Diner, Schrey's, or Sallie Ann's. Buy records at Moyer's or a TV

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Lansdale Reporter!

Lansdale, Pa., September 5, 1872.

Wanted!

Immediately at this office, a good Job Printer, one who can work on a hand press. Such a one can have a permanent situation and suitable wages. Only a steady man need apply.

TO THE PUBLIC. — Committees for the arrangement of excursions, pic-nics, festivals, parties, &c., will please notice, that we are now fully prepared to execute all kinds of plain and fancy printing at short notice and at the very lowest cash prices. We are constantly adding new material to our already extensive stock. — Give us a call.

NEW BOROUGH. — At the August Session of the Courts of Montgomery county Lansdale was made a Borough. The elections will be held in the schoolhouse, and the first election for Borough officers will be held on the 14th September, next, between the hours of 1 and 6 o'clock, P. M.

WOOD LAND. — Next Saturday, at 3 o'clock, P. M., Philip S. Jones will sell 174 acres of heavy timbered woodland, situate in Lansdale. The wood and land will be sold together. Fail not to attend the sale, as this is a chance seldom offered. — Read adv.

OUR SCHOOL. — Last Monday the Lansdale school was again opened after the summer vacation for the regular session. Under the efficient management of Miss Emma L. Beaver, teacher, our school will certainly thrive.

NEXT WEEK. — Our monthly list of the subscribers who have paid us during the month of August, will appear next week.

Married.

At Harmonville, Montgomery county, August 15, 1872, by Rev. H. H. Leamy, Mr. George Keys, of Plymouth, to Miss Emma Kirk of Whitmarsh. All of Montgomery county, Pa.

August 17th, at the parsonage of the De Calhoun street M. E. Church, by Rev. T. W. Slupers, Mr. Samuel E. Carl, to Miss Louie I. Kremer, daughter of F. C. and M. L. Kremer. All of Norristown.

On the 22nd inst., before Mayor William S. Stokley, of Philadelphia, David Hille and Lydia W. Stephens, both of Norristown.

On the 28th of August, by the Rev. A. J. Weddell, at the home of the bride's parents, H. U. Brunner and Miss Mary Hoopi, both of Norristown.

HAY AND STRAW MARKETS.

SATURDAY, SEP. 5.
During the week ending on last Saturday, 251 loads of hay, and 97 of straw arrived at the Farmers' Hay Market, and sold at the following prices:
Prime, timothy hay, per 100 lbs. \$2.35a2.52
Mixed " " " " " 1.60a2.00
Straw " " " " " 1.30a1.40

Mothers & Nurses!

FOR
Children Teething.
Or Suffering with Colic, Sour Vomiting, Summer Complaint, Dysentery, Cholera Morbus, or any complaint incident

Real Estate and Property at Public Sale

Will be sold at public sale On Saturday, September 7, 1872, at 10 o'clock, A. M., in ROCKHILL TWP., 1 The following described val

A Small Farm

Containing 27 acres of situate in the township and on one mile from Sellersville, a of Morgan Stoneback, Henry cob R. Grossman and others, vided into convenient fields w and in a high state of cultivat res therof is heavy timbered of good meadow, the remain young apple orchard, besides abundance on the premises. ments consist of a two-story

Slate roof, containing 2 first floor and 4 on the se ret over the same, col whole; a frame kitchen; and ba ed to the dwelling; a well of ing water between the house a frame barn, stone stable high for 4 horses and 10 head of house attached, hogstie, chi other outbuildings. The bui new, having been erect only of purchasers, as it is located This property is well worth of view the above property) sale, will please call on the sal ing close by. Terms easy, a given at any time.

At the same time and place the following Personal Proper

Ten head of cows, most of th profit by the day of sale; cart, and threshing machine. Quake good as new; feed cut'er, wi corn sheller, rakes, forks, sho cow chains, &c. Also, House and Kitchen Furnit one cook stove and pipe, 2 kit

LANSDALE: The Transition years

(Continued from page 3)

or radio at Swartley's. Take in a movie at the Music Hall or the architecturally impressive Lansdale Theater. Next door they could fill a prescription or hang out at the soda fountain at Bitner's Pharmacy. The sidewalks were packed with shoppers, not just at Christmas time, but year round.

Industry also flourished in the first half of the 20th century. Franklin Tile Co. started small in the 1920s but rose to become the world's leading manufacturer of ceramic tile as American Olean. Weaver Steel forged the framework for some of the nation's most impressive buildings. At one time during the 1930s, 5 percent of the world's supply of silk stockings was manufactured in Lansdale. Leading the way were two companies, Dexdale Hosiery and Interstate Mills, but dozens of other smaller plants also provided employment around town. Bakeries including Koehler & Fretz and Perfect Foods were well-known throughout the greater Philadelphia region. Before the advent of the transistor, millions of radios and TVs were built using products manufactured by Lansdale Tube Co.

Government reacted to this growth. During the 20th century the borough annexed additional land from Upper Gwynedd, Towamencin, Hatfield and Montgomery townships as suburban sprawl found its way to the North Penn Valley. Lansdale School District consolidated with its surrounding communities to form a regional high school in the mid-1950s. The borough began its parks system in the 1930s and has added to it ever since. Borough Hall moved twice, first from Montgomery Avenue to West Main Street and then in 1987 to its present site, the former post office at Broad and Vine Sts.

Following World War II, another transformation began to take place. Post-war prosperity led to more cars – the two-car family was becoming the norm. Trolleys disappeared in 1951 and train ridership was steadily declining. New stores were opening along highways, not near rail stations. Shopping centers sprang up, followed by malls with copious amounts of parking.

Lansdale was not immune to this trend. In the mid-1950s, the borough cleared land behind the Main Street shopping district for Madison Parking Lot to relieve the shortage of parallel parking spaces along the street. An urban renewal project followed in the mid-1960s which led to the demolition of more than 60 downtown buildings but only one - Century Plaza - was erected in their place.

A number of downtown revitalization projects were considered over the years. These included some visionary – but expensive – proposals. One called for turning Main Street into a pedestrian mall; another recommended lowering the railroad tracks to eliminate the Main and Broad street crossings. None was adopted.

While revitalization was being discussed, the commer-

cial center of the region was shifting to Montgomery Township where a bevy of stores and industrial parks were replacing open farm land. In 1977, Montgomery Mall opened a mile from Lansdale's border, launching a hurried exodus of downtown businesses that had prospered for decades.

Industry, too, was hard hit. The hosiery business died out quickly when nylon replaced silk as the material of choice for stockings just prior to World War II. Other clothing factories headed south in search of a less-expensive labor force. Weaver Steel and other heavy industries in the northwest corner of town also faded away, and American Olean Tile, once Lansdale's biggest employer, changed ownership several times and eventually closed.

Numerous attempts have been made to attract new businesses to the downtown storefronts, an effort that continues to this day. In the past year, several new establishments have opened their doors, raising hope that more will follow. In addition, SEPTA's commuter rail line to Lansdale boasts the highest ridership of the system. Its classic 1903 station, long the centerpiece of downtown, was restored in recent years and a new park was built nearby.

While Lansdale has changed dramatically since the first train came through 155 years ago, it remains a community of opportunity for those who live here. Most of its original settlers came here not as a group but as individuals or families who saw the potential for a better life, a place where hard work and new ideas would be rewarded. Once they found common ground and developed a vision of what they wanted for their town, forward progress took only a matter of years. It could happen again.

Lansdale's first election lacked any hint of drama

Lansdale's first elected officials took office in September, 1872. Some played important roles in the borough's development. Others are all but unknown 139 years later.

One was the town's first burgess (mayor), A.B. Hackman, who operated a feed store and was a partner of A.C. Godshall, who operated a feed and flour mill near the train station.

The original borough council included: L.G. Stauffer, proprietor of the Lansdale Hotel; Uriah Beaver, whose family operated

a successful general store at Main and Green Sts; Seth Scholl, who owned a brickyard; and Godshall. E.C. Krause, O.M. Evans and John Ruth rounded out the original council but little is known about them.

Also elected were George Fry, constable, and justices of the peace John Hergeheimer and Jacob Beaver. Beaver tied Henry Derstine in the assessor's race but we have no clue how the deadlock was resolved.

Also missing is the number of voters who cast ballots.

THE FOUNDERS

Heebners brought jobs to new village

By **DICK SHEARER**

While a number of individuals played key roles in the founding of Lansdale, none could equal the collective importance of the Heebner family.

David S. Heebner, the patriarch of the clan, came to the village from Worcester in the late 1860s so that his farm equipment business would be in close proximity of the railroad, a needed source of transportation for the heavy threshers and reapers he would soon be shipping around the world.

David was originally joined in this venture by his son, Josiah, but eventually he brought on two other sons, William D. and Isaac, creating Heebner and Sons Co., a name that became as well known as John Deere is today.

The Heebners impact on Lansdale went far beyond owning an industry that provided stable employment for many of the town's residents. David bowed out of the presidency of the Heebner Works in the 1880s, but William steered the ship for many years after that. In addition, he served as a member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. He is credited with authoring legislation that prevented Valley Forge Park from being subdivided and sold as building lots.

Isaac was less active in the business than his brother, but he left an indelible mark on the community by heading the public school board in its infancy. Under his leadership, both the Broad Street and Green Street schools were built. In their day, they were among the best in the Philadelphia suburbs. In addition, the Heebners operated their own newspaper, *The Republican*, which competed with *The Reporter* for almost 40 years.

All three Heebners worked for the betterment of the new borough. They supported the local banking community and provided seed money for many early businesses. They were active in



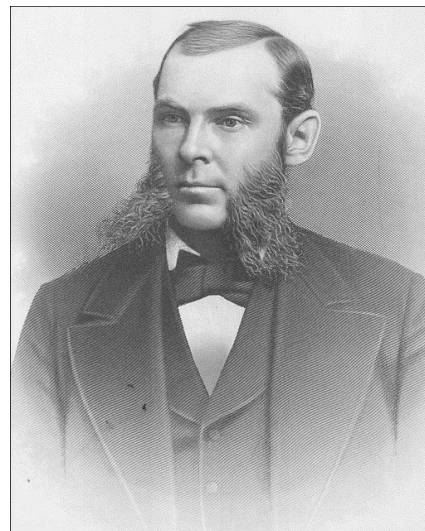
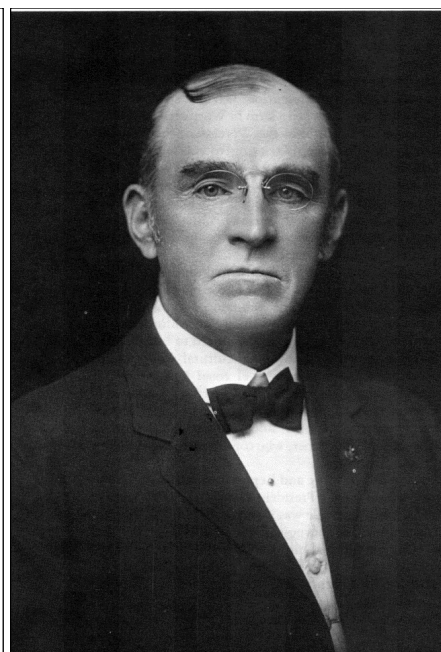
ALL IN THE FAMILY

David Heebner, above, founder of the agricultural works came to Lansdale in the mid-1860s. Son William, top right, ran the company for 40 years. Son Isaac, right, is considered the father of Lansdale's education system.

church life, helped build the Music Hall, Lansdale's first entertainment center, and were the driving forces behind the formation of the town's first symphony orchestra.

Isaac's storybook house, the Tremont, became Lansdale's most-beloved hotel and restaurant. David's stately mansion across the Main and Broad intersection from the Tremont, became the Eitherton boarding house, the best for miles around.

For his part, William, built the Victorian house on the corner of



Broad St. and Jenkins Ave. that now houses Montella's restaurant. During his time in the state House, William entertained many important politicians in his parlor.

The agricultural works grew from humble roots in a Worcester barn, and it was not until they mastered the technology of powering farm machinery by placing horses on wagon-mounted

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THE FOUNDERS

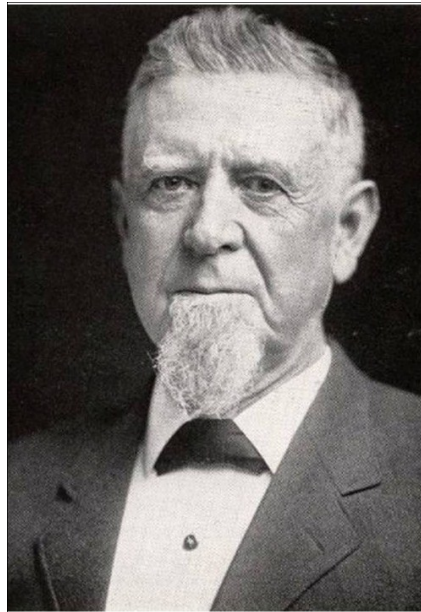
Folks knew Doc Jacobs was boss

By DICK SHEARER

On the eve of Lansdale's first Founders Day celebration, let's attach names to the some of the people who guided the town in its early days.

First, a little stereotyping: They were all men (women's suffrage was still decades away). They were Republicans (Lansdale was pretty much a one-party political town). They were almost all businessmen, and as such were major stockholders in the community's future success. And they were financially secure. They were born well before the Civil War and the last of them died during the 1930s.

The undisputed founder among founders was Dr. John N. Jacobs who was the first to sign Lansdale's petition for incorporation in 1872. Forward-thinking, outspoken and fiercely independent, Jacobs played a part in the town's development for more than 50 years, at least 20 as an elected official on the local and county level. At the time of his death in 1924, he was referred to as the "Daddy of



DR. JOHN JACOBS
Served borough for 50 years

Lansdale".

Jacobs was born in 1839 in Sumnerstown and received a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1861, just as the Civil War broke out. He enlisted in the Union Army's cavalry, but was injured falling off his horse and reassigned to the medical corps where he served

with distinction at the Battle of Gettysburg.

The war changed Jacobs' career path, and he soured on the idea of being a country doctor. He settled in Lansdale in 1869, buying large parcels of land on the east side of town, which had been subdivided and sold as building lots.

Jacobs turned to banking and finance as his occupation and he quickly gained a reputation for his uncanny investment instincts. At the time of his death he was president of the Doylestown National Bank. Earlier he was credited with resurrecting the failed Montgomery Trust Co. of Norristown.

The Montgomery Trust story evokes comparisons with Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life." Faced with trying to run a bank with no money, Jacobs applied for a \$250,000 loan from a leading Philadelphia lending institution. Asked what he would offer for collateral, Jacobs responded, "my personal note and my reputation". The money was forthcoming that very day.

He requested the loan be paid in small bills so he could stack it high in the teller's cage the following

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Heebner Ag Works was known world-wide

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treadmills that success came to the Heebners.

They did not invent the horse-powered treadmill, but they advertised widely and gained a reputation for building reliable equipment and standing behind their products.

Heebner-made threshers and reapers were in high demand in parts of the country where internal combustion engines and gasoline were not readily available. As development

spread west and eventually overseas, the agricultural works filled a crucial void.

At its peak in the 1880s and 1890s, the Heebners cranked out thousands of implements at their large factory situated where Vespa's Tire Center now stands. Shipping was as simple as pushing the finished products across Broad Street to the freight station.

Heebner and Sons was slow to adopt the engine, and eventually the

tractor won out. As business waned, so did the workforce, and in 1926, the company folded. The factory was torn down during World War II and replaced by a gas station.

The Eitherton was torn down in the 1960s, the Tremont in 1997, leaving only two reminders of Lansdale's pioneering business – William Heebner's house and the bell from atop the factory, which now sits in front of the VFW Home on Second Street.

THE FOUNDERS

A.C. Godshall: Mill owner had vision

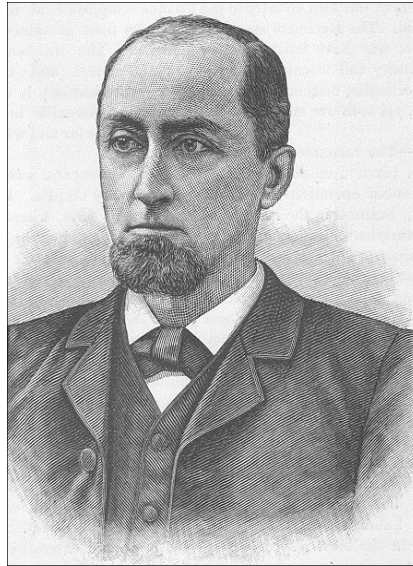
Another of Lansdale's Founding Fathers, was Abraham C. Godshall, born in 1839 on a farm in Franconia Township.

In 1861, as the Civil War was commencing, A. C. Godshall came to Lansdale to establish a flour and feed business with Henry Derstine, whose daughter he married that year. At the time the village consisted of only a few houses.

In the early years, Godshall and Derstine served as a retail outlet for flour and feed that was ground in water-powered plants in Bethlehem and shipped to Lansdale by railroad.

In 1876, Godshall and his brother, John, built their own mill just west of the rail line and named it Centennial Mills in honor of the nation's 100th anniversary celebration. Centennial Mills became one of the major grain producers in the Delaware Valley, turning out as many as 1,000 bushels a day.

A.C. Godshall was a member of the first Lansdale Borough Council, elected in 1872, and remained a member until 1912, five years before his death at age 78.



A.C. GODSHALL
Founded Centennial Mills

Godshall's contributions to the borough went well beyond the mill. Water was essential to his business, so he was the incorporator of the original Lansdale Water Co. He also installed a power generator at his mill that supplied electricity for Lansdale's first street lights.

Eventually, he sold his generator to the borough, which later morphed into today's Lansdale Electric De-

partment.

He was also an officer in the Lansdale National Bank and for a time served as its president. In addition, Godshall had extensive land holdings in Lansdale, much of it purchased when the Jenkins farm went on the auction block in 1871.

He was an early member of St. John's Reformed (U.C.C.) Church and served on the building committee that oversaw construction of the first church and parsonage. Upon his death, he was the first person entombed in the new Lansdale Mausoleum.

Godshall was not a firebrand like John Jacobs, but he had his moments. Old-timer Joseph Ganser told a story about the time Jacobs proposed - with the support of residents and council - that Main Street be widened and paved, and the land for this would come from the south side of the street, right in front of Godshall's house.

Godshall, as you would expect, raised a stink, but Jacobs, as usual, got his way, and A.C. soon found the sidewalk built right up to his front steps. This event ended their friendship, but both continued to work in their own ways for the betterment of Lansdale.

'Daddy' Jacobs: Strong-willed leader of new town

(Continued from page 6)

morning when depositors rushed in for their money. When they were advised that Jacobs was now in charge and they saw the piles of money many decided not to withdraw their funds. Within a month Jenkins was able to repay the Philadelphia bank in full.

"Daddy" carefully avoided getting involved in Lansdale banking institutions. Instead, he provided start-up money for many of the town's businesses from his per-

sonal wealth or through the sale of land.

In numerous cases, Jacobs made loans interest-free, but he warned that at an undetermined future date that he considered appropriate, he would show up and demand repayment in full right on the spot. The fear of getting on his bad side was reason enough to comply.

Jacobs was always forward-thinking - ahead of the curve, we would say today. During the 1880s, word spread that a railroad branch

was planned between Norristown and the Philadelphia-to-Bethlehem main line, and the junction would be at North Wales. That didn't sit well with "Daddy", so he hustled up enough money to convince the railroad board that the Stony Creek junction had to be in Lansdale.

Jacobs remained a power on Lansdale council right up to his death in 1924. When the end came, he and his family were buried, not in Lansdale, but in the Doylestown Cemetery.

THE FOUNDERS

Jacob Geller: Master merchant

By DICK SHEARER

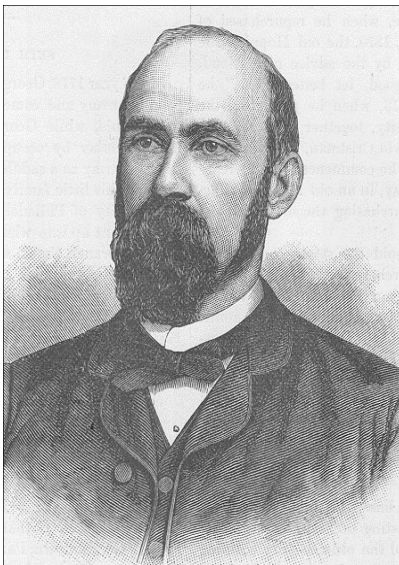
When it came to retail businesses in early Lansdale, location was everything.

Prior to 1900, more than 200 different stores and service businesses vied for space in the downtown district, which was only a few blocks long. The goal was to get as close to the railroad station as possible because trains attracted people like magnets and window shopping along the way was an everyday fact of life.

Merchants came and went by the dozens. A few stood out above the rest, and at the top of the heap was Jacob S. Geller.

Jake Geller came to Lansdale in 1878, six years after the village was incorporated. He operated general stores in Hoppinville and Kulpville before the prospect of moving into a railroad town won him over.

Geller bought out John Kindig's business at Main St. and Susquehanna Ave., along with his house and some building lots. He promptly



JACOB GELLER
Owner of the Grand Emporium

expanded Kindig's store and called it his Grand Emporium, which today is home to the Lansdale School of Cosmetology, Wilson's Hardware and a cell phone shop.

Geller sold anything and everything that his customers might want. If he didn't have it, he'd get it.

Food, clothing, millwork, toys, tools, fuel – it didn't matter. Not only did he sell caskets, but he offered undertaking services as well.

His specialty was furniture. His sales pitch went something like this: "If you buy your dining room set from me, I'll see that it is delivered to your house by my formally attired attendants in our highly polished wagon at the time that is most socially- advantageous for you. It will show your neighbors that you have the good taste to buy from Jacob Geller."

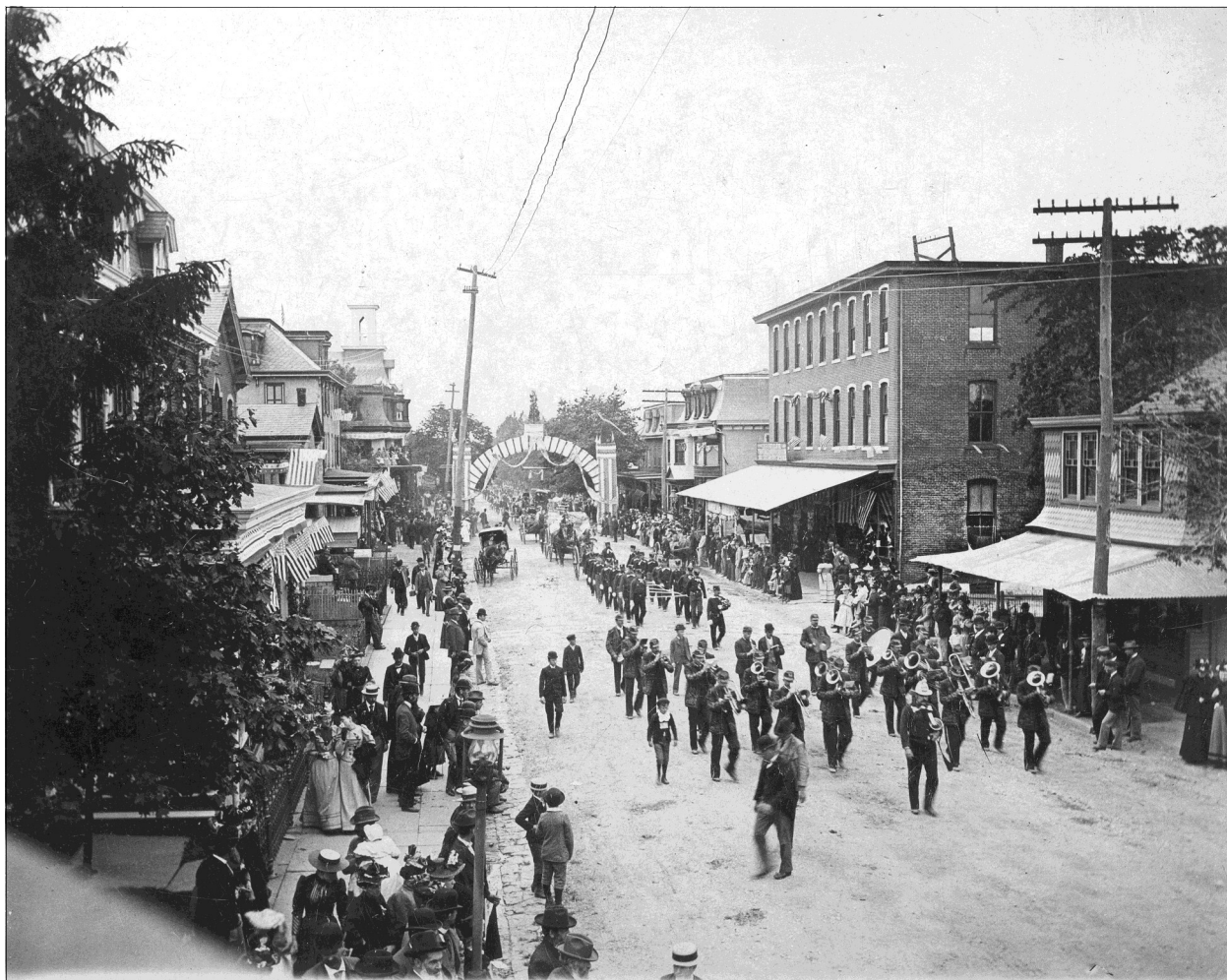
In addition to his presence on Main Street, Geller dealt in real estate and maintained a big commission merchant business that sold 2,000 pounds of butter a week along with various other dairy products.

By the time of his death in 1916, specialized competition had taken a big bite out of Geller's businesses. The building was sold off to settle his estate and the era of the general merchandise store was coming to an end.



GELLER'S STORE

The Grand Emporium was all decked out for a parade in this photo taken early in the 20th century. The original store, in the center, was flanked by Geller's home on the left, and the three-story addition he added later. Eventually the business was so profitable that he expanded the store into the residence and the family moved across the street.



CIRCA 1894, VETERANS' PARADE DOWN WEST MAIN STREET
Note the gaslights and the special arches that were built for the occasion

Reflections of 1870s Lansdale

By **DICK SHEARER**

To the best of our knowledge, none of Lansdale's founding fathers left a diary or extensive notes about what life was like in the village's infancy. But we are fortunate to have a detailed description of those early days thanks to Joseph Ganser, who spent part of his youth here during the 1870s.

Ganser put his thoughts to paper in the late 1940s in the aftermath of Lansdale's 75th anniversary celebration. He was specifically responding to a history of Lansdale written by Mary Dirks, publisher

of the weekly *North Penn News* for the diamond jubilee.

Ganser took issue with some of Dirks' information so he decided to set the record straight, at least as he saw it. Some of his observations are at odds with the recollections of others, but because his were first-person accounts, we suspect most were accurate.

Ganser's tale begins in April, 1874 when he and his family arrived from Norristown by way of the recently opened Stony Creek railroad branch. His father, James, who had obtained a liquor license, purchased "the goodwill and fixtures of the American

House Hotel from a Mr. Clemens."

The family's household goods and clothing came with them on the same train. The freight car containing their possessions was switched to a siding and everything was hand-carried across the tracks and right into the hotel, which stood where Railroad Plaza Park is today.

Young Joseph was keenly aware that his father's hotel faced plenty of competition. The Junction House, built around 1861, stood directly across Main Street from

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Son of hotel owner recounts childhood

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the American House. In 1874, shortly after the Gansers arrived, Davis Longacre became proprietor of the Junction House which would continue to be operated by the Longacre family for almost 90 years.

Ganser speculates that the first hotel was not located adjacent to the railroad tracks, but rather at the corner of Main St. and Susquehanna Ave., now the site of a municipal parking lot.

Part of his reasoning is that it was originally named the Lansdale Hotel and the business was conducted by Louis Stauffer back as far as the Civil War. "It had rather spacious stabling accommodations ... and was often the location of horse and cattle sales." In a follow-up letter in 1948, Ganser said he found evidence that the hotel was actually built in 1857.

As was the custom in those early days, businesses frequently changed ownership and in a matter of years the Lansdale Hotel was in the hands of A.G. Freed, "who was probably the most progressive hotelman that Lansdale ever had". By 1880, he had torn down the stable and erected Freed's Hall, a three-story meeting hall with stores on the ground level. Many of the town's churches held their first services there, and most of the fraternal clubs gathered there on a weekly basis. His hotel was renamed the Norwood.

Another of the old hotels was built by C.G. Rosenberry at Broad and Vine Sts., now the site of Borough Hall. Rosenberry's hotel, named the Broadway House, also contained a meeting hall and sapped some of the business from Freed's Hall.

Ganser relates a number of stories pertaining to the Founding Fathers. Of course one of them, had to feature Dr. John N. Jacobs, whose importance to Lansdale is

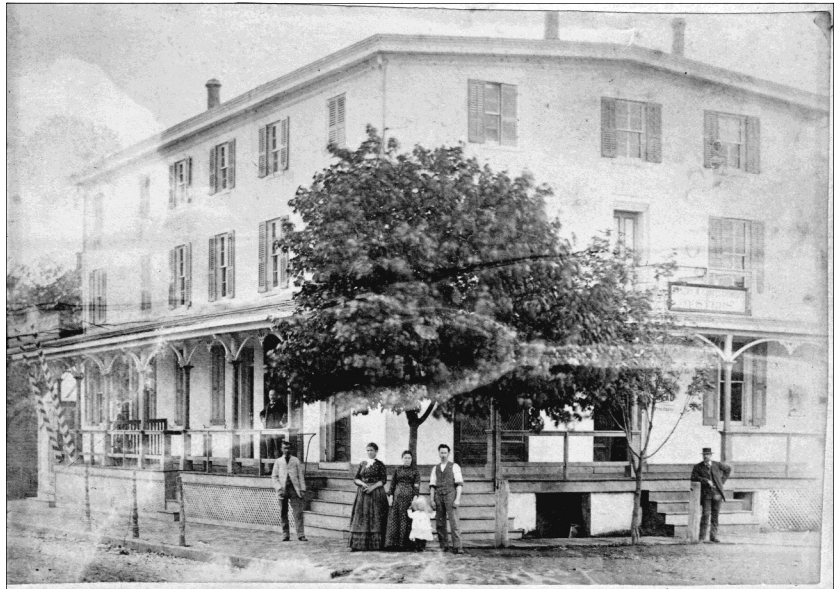
described elsewhere in this section.

"While he (Jacobs) put the spirit of enterprise into the borough, he was not entirely disinterested with the enhancement of the value of his property."

According to Ganser, Jacobs had loaned a sum of money to the Methodist Episcopal church's Sunday school (Third and Walnut Sts.) for the purchase of an organ. "One Sunday he came into the church and re-

had all the farmers in the region come to town at the same time to pick up their machines:

"They (the Heebners) had them form up into quite a nice parade, and when the last one passed over the railroad tracks, an engine drawing 11 flat-bed cars loaded with Heebner equipment pulled out on its way to Philadelphia. It was said some of the machinery went to South Afri-



THE AMERICAN HOUSE HOTEL
It later became Zane's Bakery and Beinhacker's store

mained seated until the school was closing, then arose and told (the church leaders) they were not properly repaying him – and he conveyed that message in just as few words as necessary."

Early histories suggest that only about a dozen houses existed in Lansdale when the railroad began service in 1856. But by the time Ganser came to town, there were more than three-dozen businesses and probably more than 500 residents.

Ganser talks about the importance of the Heebner Agricultural Works, the John Deere of the farming industry in the 1870s. One day, to gain publicity for their equipment, they

ca."

Ganser reminds us that Main Street was a toll road for many years and the tollgate was located at what is now Main and Cannon Ave. There was another tollhouse in the vicinity of St. Stanislaus church.

Entertainment took several forms. There was the Lansdale Band, which Ganser described as "good enough for any town". The band traveled considerable distances to perform. They traveled in a brightly painted wagon, pulled by four horses.

He recalls the first baseball

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Life near the rails was dangerous

The railroad's importance to Lansdale's founding is unquestioned. In a matter of a few brief years, it transformed a wooded, flat countryside into a bustling village with new residents and businesses arriving daily.

During the 1880s – a mere decade after the borough was incorporated – 80 or more trains a day passed through Lansdale. Not only was the passenger and freight station the center of activity, but right behind it was a network of sidings that opened like a fan between the Bethlehem and Doylestown branches. The freight yard featured a turntable that allowed huge steam engines to be turned around and headed back to Philadelphia.

During those early years the railroad was indeed a blessing for the economic welfare of the town, but this blessing came with many downsides: Life near the trains was dangerous.

When the North Penn Rail Road route to Bethlehem opened in 1856, it was single-tracked. North- and south-bound trains shared the same set of tracks and rail crews had to depend on exacting schedules, properly-placed sidings and a healthy dose of luck to avoid head-on collisions. The Great Train Wreck of 1856 east of what is now Ambler was one such



THE SECOND RAILROAD STATION

It was built in 1868 and replaced by the current station in 1903.

accident. The initial impact, exploded boilers, crushed passenger cars and the resulting fire cost 59 lives. It was at that time the worst railroad tragedy in U.S. history.

Not all accidents attracted the public's attention, but there were plenty of lesser mishaps that led to many deaths and injuries. Some were signs of the times caused by primitive communications, inadequate brake systems, sprays of sparks from the engines, and a lack of for-

malized training. Others were the result of plain, old carelessness.

An example of these tragedies is detailed in the *Feb. 22, 1872 Lansdale Reporter*:

KILLED ON THE RAILROAD: *It becomes our painful duty to chronicle the accident which befell Dr. M. Yerger last Monday afternoon. The doctor was traveling on the track of the main line of the North Penn Rail Road on his way*

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Young boy remembers the early days

(Continued from page 10)

team, named the Honky Dory, which played at White's Field. They had white uniforms with blue stockings and trimmings.

Ganser was of school age during his seven years in Lansdale, and he attended the original two-room schoolhouse that was constructed on East Main Street in 1871. Teachers came and went. Henry Conrad was

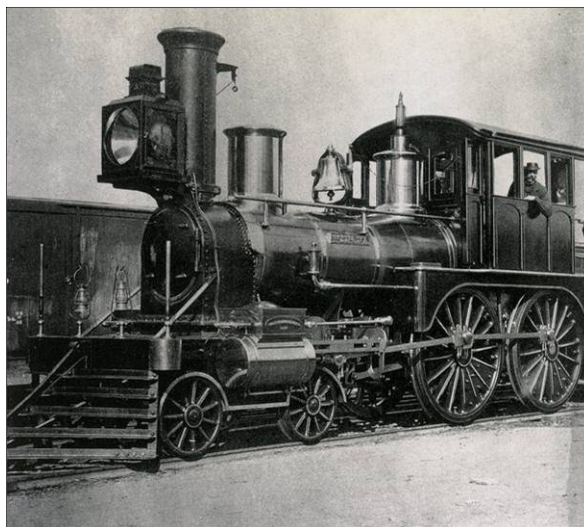
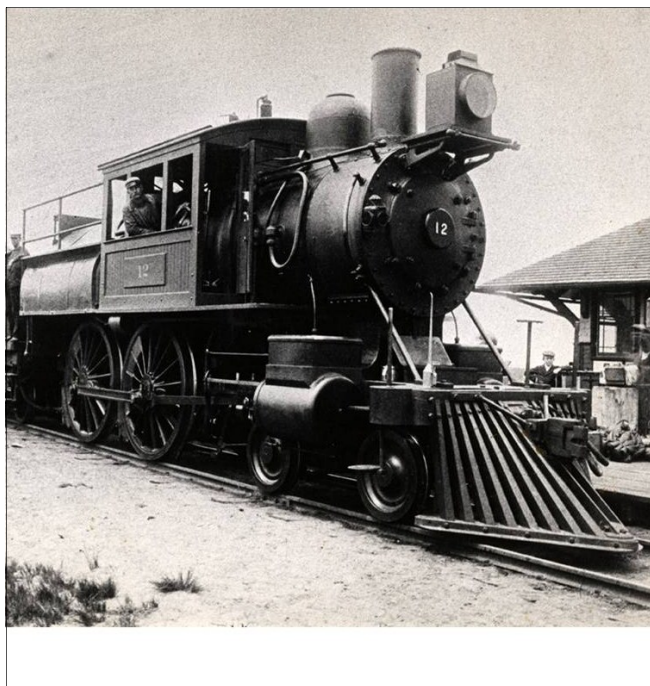
one of them, but according to our witness, he was "too easy with the big boys who began to misbehave too much."

The school board replaced Conrad with Ephriam Kratz "who had a reputation of being a strict disciplinarian. He whipped a large number of the boys but he was so hated he narrowly avoided a ride on a rail."

What makes Ganser's recollections

of early Lansdale so important is the vivid details they contain. He literally traveled the town's streets block by block, recounting who lived where and what they did for a living.

The pity is that back in 1947 no one could seat him in front of a video camera to preserve his storytelling. What a priceless treasure that would be.



POWERFUL IRON HORSES
Here are two examples of the North Penn and Philadelphia & Reading steam engines that traveled through Lansdale before the 20th century.

Rails brought convenience, misfortune

(Continued from page 11)

homeward; this was about 5:30 o'clock in the afternoon and the up train, due here at 5:23 had just left our station, and between here and Clifton's farm (near the Hatfield Township border today), the sad accident happened.

The doctor was hard-of-hearing, and we think he did not hear the train coming along. The engineer gave the alarm signal but to no avail, and the unfortunate man was run over. When he was picked up he breathed his last. The officials of the train placed him on the train which was backed up to the station, and the corpse was taken into the freight house and from there was removed to his residence. One of his arms was broken at two places and he was severely hurt about the head. The doctor was about 86 years of age and leaves an old aged widow.

In October of 1872, *The Reporter* decided to do a little editorializing along with a story on another accident. In this case, the route had already been double-tracked for a short stretch:

LOSES FOOT: Last Friday afternoon while John Lewis, in the employ of Eli Delp in Franconia Township, was about to cross the railroad track near the meeting house below Hatfield, he perceived that a down (southbound) coal train was fast approaching and he attempted not to cross until it had passed, but just at this time a passenger train going north was on the other track, which he did not notice.

He drove on the track to cross but at this juncture the the engine struck the wagon and a complete wreck of the two-horse team was made — one horse killed outright and the other more or less injured. Mr. Lewis had one foot badly smashed and otherwise received serious injuries. On Saturday morning it became necessary to have the foot amputated.

People should exercise the greatest of care at railroad crossings, as these are the places where most of the accidents happen.

And of course there were some trains you should avoid. Take the case of the steam engine "Ambler",

as reported in December, 1872, in the *Doylestown Democrat*:

ENGINE OFF THE TRACK:

On last Wednesday evening, the ill-fated engine Ambler, which had had so many narrow escapes, completed its latest wild freak by running off the track down at the Doylestown depot. The train arrived safely at the station but in running the engine backwards in shifting the cars, Mr. Frank Penrose, who tends the switch, accidentally left it open and the engine was thrown off. After several fruitless attempts by a wreck-car crew the powerful engine was finally back up on the track shortly past midnight. This engine seems to be unfortunate, having been thrown from the track twice and an attempt was made to wreck it on another occasion.

Hundreds of accidents like these took place along the old North Penn Rail Road line since 1872. The horse-and-buggy age gave way to automobiles and their drivers in the early 20th century, but as we have seen time and again, they fare no better against the might of a powerful train.