



# Chestnut Hill Local

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Monday, February 8, 2021

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## A room at the inn: Hill was once home to a host of hotels



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The Maple Lawn Inn at the intersection of Germantown and Bethlehem Pikes, circa 1910. Note the large fifth-floor cupola where guests could appreciate the views from the highest point in Philadelphia.

Posted Friday, January 29, 2021 11:50 am

**by George McNeely**

Today, Chestnut Hill has only one inn -- our fine Chestnut Hill Hotel, built in 1894 and renovated a number of times since. That building replaced an older inn built back in 1772.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that hotel was just one of many that served a neighborhood that was an important hub for commerce and travel of all sorts. Chestnut Hill's location at that time benefitted from both intersecting major roads and nearby sources of waterpower and thus served as a nexus for travelers.

Germantown Avenue, and its extension Germantown Pike, follows a much earlier walking path created by Native Americans. It was adopted by early European settlers to connect the port of Philadelphia on the Delaware River to the very early settlements in the German Township (founded 1683). As settlers gradually moved west, that road became ever more important.

Bethlehem Pike also followed a Native American walking path that was called the Minsi Trail, named for a subtribe of the Lenni Lenape, who lived to the north. That road connected to the rich farmland and limekilns of Whitemarsh Valley and further to Bethlehem and its neighboring towns.

Combined, those roads served as significant routes for agricultural products brought into Philadelphia, the largest city in the colonies in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and its port. In return, those same roads distributed products made in city workshops or imported via that port.

During that same period, the Wissahickon and Cresheim Creeks, although not navigable for commercial shipping, provided waterpower for many mills scattered along their banks. Sawmills cut logs. Grist mills ground the grains grown in the surrounding countryside. Fulling mills made wool into cloth. Paper mills ground wood pulp and rags into paper. Oil mills took the seeds left over from the flax grown for linen and made them into linseed oil.

Those functions required both inputs (e.g., raw material bought to the mills) and outputs (e.g., finished products for both local and remote markets). Those required horses, wagons or carts and men (and perhaps the occasional woman?). Given the limitations in how far a man or horse could walk in a given day, those men in turn required places to eat, stay and stable. Hence the many hotels in Chestnut Hill in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Just as the current Chestnut Hill Hotel was preceded by an earlier building, so was the Mermaid Inn, which now sits at 7673 Germantown Ave. That earlier structure was built around 1735 in a hefty German Colonial style, with thick walls, low ceilings and a particularly tall roof similar to early buildings in Bethlehem or the Ephrata Cloister. It benefitted from being located at the busy "bi-modal" intersection of Germantown Avenue and Cresheim Creek. That original building was demolished around 1915 for road works and replaced with the current popular restaurant and bar.



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Up in the middle of the village, the building that now houses Robertson's Flowers, 8501 Germantown Ave., was once known as Henry Cress's Hotel and later the Eagle Hotel. Burned by British troops during the Revolution, it was rebuilt in the 1790s. The east end was demolished to extend Highland Avenue to the east, and the building was carefully restored after World War II. It shines today as a particularly handsome reminder of the many lost 18<sup>th</sup> Century buildings that once graced the Avenue.

Another prominent but lost hotel was located at the intersection of the Germantown and Bethlehem Pikes. Originally built in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century as Yaekel's General Store, the building was later expanded with two additional stories and a tall cupola. It reopened in 1876 as the Maple Lawn Inn, although it was popularly known as the "Dust Pan" because of its busy location.

The expansion of the Maple Lawn Inn, just a block from the terminus of what is now the Chestnut Hill East railway line, heralded a changing hotel landscape in Chestnut Hill.

The invention of the steam engine and the resulting development of steam ships and railroads caused a dramatic decline in shipping by road. Thus our Germantown and Bethlehem pikes gradually declined in importance in favor of the newer, faster alternatives. The steam engine also created a revolution in manufacturing, moving the centers of activity away from smaller, inconveniently located water-powered mills to more centralized areas that permitted larger factory buildings and easier access to major waterways. That change brought a decline in business for both our local mills and the various local inns and taverns.

The arrival of that railroad in 1854, first for cargo business and then for passengers, opened Chestnut Hill to a new world of suburban development and recreational activities. The clean air at the highest point in Philadelphia, appealing ravines and creeks, and access to open farmland all combined to attract urban dwellers eager for respite from the dirty and polluted city.

That new audience dismissed the older crowded coaching inns on the main street that housed hard-working farmers and their smelly horses. They wanted up-to-date facilities, wide porches, fine food, pretty views, and suitable other guests with whom to mingle and discuss the pleasures of prosperity.

Some older hotels tried to appeal to the newer visitors. The Maple Lawn Inn expanded and added that alluring fifth-floor cupola to take in the views. Some larger houses in salubrious locations were converted into hotels. One prominently sited above the intersection of Bethlehem Pike and Stenton Avenue became the Eldon Hotel, with its dramatic views west out over the Whitemarsh Valley. And there were others.

But Henry Houston took the bull by the horns and constructed the Wissahickon Inn on a far grander scale. Opened in 1884, the building is now part of Springside Chestnut Hill Academy. The quality of that hotel rivaled those in the fashionable resorts of Tuxedo Park, Newport and Bar Harbor. But his primary goal was establishing Chestnut Hill as a desirable suburban rival of the Main Line, in which he succeeded beautifully. We are all the beneficiaries.

*Huge thanks to the extensive archives at the Chestnut Hill Conservancy and all who work there.*

## Comments

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