

In the Spotlight

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LIVING HISTORY



by Gene Pisasale

Oxford, Pennsylvania: Railroads, confectioneries and higher education

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Contributing Writer

Once called Oxford Village and Oxford Crossing, the Borough of Oxford, Pennsylvania straddles the border between Lower Oxford and East Nottingham townships. The town got its first Post Office more than two centuries ago in 1805, but its history dates back even further, to circa the 1750s, when a small establishment called Hood's Tavern (better known today as the Oxford Hotel) operated in the village roughly halfway between Philadelphia and Baltimore. It turns out that Oxford is a dual crossroads—it is also roughly the mid-point between Lancaster and Wilmington, Delaware. Over the years, its proximity to those regional cities and to the railroad which ran through town made Oxford a bustling community.

Incorporated officially as Oxford Borough on April 8, 1833, the town's library has roots that pre-date that event by almost five decades—to 1784, when a subscription group formed after local citizens wanted to share their love of books. According to its website, the Oxford Public Library is the oldest one in Chester County, and the third oldest in Pennsylvania. In "Around the Oak," reprinted by the Friends of the Oxford Public Library, the subscription library operated out of people's homes until 1868, when its resources were made available to citizens for the purchase of a share of stock and annual dues of one dollar. The institution became a free public library in 1939.

The railroad came to Oxford just before the Civil War and it spanned many offshoots in the area. The planned Philadelphia and Baltimore Central (P&B) Railroad was re-routed through town, the traffic helping local development. The P&B was chartered in 1854 and operated a 110-mile line that ran from West Philadelphia to Octoraro Junction, Maryland near Port Deposit, along with several branch lines. The first train arrived in Oxford on Dec. 22, 1860. The P&B was purchased by the Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington Railroad; passenger service to Oxford ended in 1948. The Lancaster, Oxford

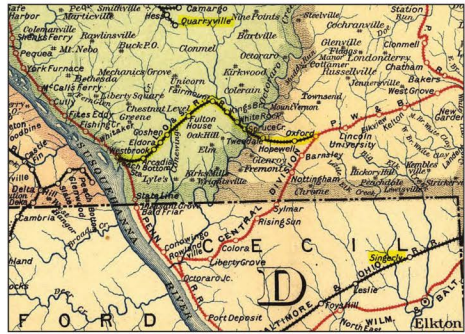
and Southern Railway (LO&S) was a successor to the Lancaster, Oxford and Southern Railroad. Its original line was built between 1872 and 1878 as a division of the Peach Bottom Railway, beginning in Oxford and connecting with the P&B. Investors had planned to connect Lancaster County to the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad, but it struggled financially and the line was closed in 1918.

The Dickey family had a major influence on the development of the town of Oxford. John Miller Dickey (1806-1878) was a Presbyterian minister who was born in Oxford. Members of the Dickey family owned a substantial amount of local real estate—roughly the northern half of the town. Reverend Dickey and his wife are known for having begun the Ashmun Institute in 1854 for the education of blacks, who had limited opportunities to better themselves. Ashmun Institute was named after Jehudi Ashmun, a religious leader. It was renamed Lincoln University in 1866 after President Lincoln was assassinated. In 1921, President Warren Harding visited the campus and gave the commencement address, honoring the 367,000 African Americans who served in World War I. Notable alumni include Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and the poet Langston Hughes.

The Oxford Historic District includes hundreds of buildings in the central business district and adjacent residential areas. Most of these structures are brick, made between 1870 and 1910, but many older ones survive, including the Octoraro Hotel and Tavern dating to the 1820s. The Hotel experienced a devastating fire in 2014, but has been completely refurbished by John and Nickole McGlothlin. Gail Roberts

and John Bradley of the Oxford Area Historical Association were quite helpful providing information on Oxford's colorful history and that of the hotel, which was vacant for years. It is back again, serving customers and has a new nickname—"The OTE"—so called because those three letters were the only ones still lit in the remaining sign. Stop in for a burger, a beer and some live music. The Female Seminary once served the area, dating to the late 1830s; the building no longer stands. The Oxford Hotel, a four-story, L-shaped Italianate-style brick structure was built in 1853; it was enlarged and modified from the late 1880s to the 1920s. Its historic walls now contain apartments. You can't help noticing the lovely, eight-foot high Oxford Town Clock, which dates to 1925, situated on the side of a former bank building. It was fully restored in 2001.

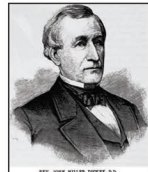
Candy lovers will definitely find their sweet tooth satiated in Oxford, as it is the headquarters of Neuchatel Chocolates. Named after the Swiss city of Neuchatel, the company was started by fifth generation Swiss Chocolatier Albert A. Lauber, known affectionately as Al to his patrons. Neuchatel has been in operation for nearly four decades—since 1982—offering the highest quality chocolates "this side of the Atlantic Ocean." Swiss chocolates have been recognized as the best in the world. The company website notes that they were given permission to use the name on the condition that the ingredients for its candies come only from Switzerland. Why does location matter? The company states that the Swiss import the highest quality cocoa beans from places like Tanzania, Ghana and other regions and use "homegrown" milk from



A map showing portions of the Lancaster, Oxford and Southern Railway.

Swiss cows, not powdered milk as some producers use. Albert's apprenticeship in Switzerland and experience as a pastry chef at five-star hotels formed the foundation for his culinary excellence, which he imbues in each one of Neuchatel's chocolates. The company store in Oxford showcases their many superb products. Albert noting that they offer more than 300 to their customers. The place itself is steeped in history: the store is attached to a building estimated to be roughly three centuries old. This author was pleased to meet Albert, discuss Neuchatel, and sample their delicious chocolates. The verdict: outstanding! The company website www.neuchatelchocolates.com displays their numerous offerings. So, if you find yourself in southern Chester County and want to do some exploring, stop in Oxford to enjoy its rustic ambience while connecting with the town's past.

Gene Pisasale is an historian, author and lecturer based in Kennett Square. He has written ten books dealing with fascinat-



Reverend John Miller Dickey, from "History of Chester County" by Futtley and Cope, 1881.



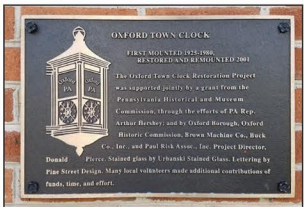
The Oxford Town Clock, which dates to 1925.

ing topics in American history. His latest book is "Forgotten Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania and Delaware in the American Revolution." His books are available on his website at www.GenePisasale.com.

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Lincoln University campus, courtesy of Lincoln University.



Memorial plaque describing the refurbishment of the Oxford Town Clock.



The Octoraro Hotel in Oxford.



The Oxford Hotel.



Neuchatel company store in Oxford.