



HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF BENSALEM TWP

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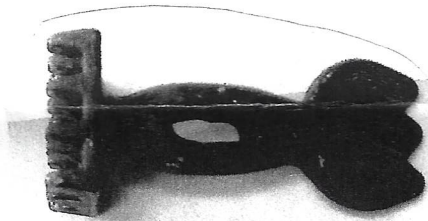
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NEWSLETTER FOR MAY AND JUNE 2021

MYSTERY SOLVED.....

This picture in the last newsletter was identified by Mary Ann Matuszewski's son-in-law John Kozlosky. He has a collection of old tools and knew immediately what it was used for....a handle would be inserted in the hole and you would use it like a hammer to tenderize meat. The points would break down the gristle running thru the meat. Thanks John for solving this mystery.



Our New roof has finally been completed in spite of all the rain and cold weather.

Has anyone seen a copy of the "King of Andalusia" ? We would like to know if it contains some history of Andalusia and the Hoagie Hut.

Many thanks to a "Special Lady" for donating the stamps for this mailing. THANKS also to everyone who has sent a donation with their dues.

IN MEMORY OF

On March 4th we lost our long time member Mary Jane Vandegrift Rittenhouse McLarren. Always ready with a story from her Bensalem High School days or from the early days of this Society, we shared many laughs and we will all miss her. With deepest sympathy to all her family from this membership.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

We would like to send BELATED BIRTHDAY wishes to Beulah Behm on her 100th birthday last December. The residents of Midway Manor helped her celebrate this special day. HAPPY BIRTHDAY BEULAH from all the Society members.



NEW ADDITIONS

Gordon Larson donated 2 Bensalem High School Letters and a patch from the Snyder School.

**The Allbrook Family donated small artifacts found on the grounds of
Growden Mansion.**

**Amy Loher donated a binder of old advertisements, Bucks Co.
Directory 1884, Boyds Bristol Directory 1891-2, and Mannings
Bristol Directory 1929**

**Ralph Douglass donated a Derby Ducks shirt and 5 other special
Bensalem Tee shirts**

**Bro. Joseph Grabenstein donated many books, blueprints, papers,
And items from the Christian Brothers archives concerning
St. Francis School and De La Salle Vocational School.**

**Per Family donated 2 Newtown 275th Ann. Booklets, items from the
Oct. 2000 musical tribute to St. Katherine Drexel, items from
The Dedication of the High School Gymnasium in 2011.**

**Hardeep Chawla (Sant Properties) donated the 7 Dioramas from the
Freedom Wall at the Strawbridges/Macys Store.**

DUES ARE DUE FOR 2021

**We hope you will continue to support the Society by mailing in your
dues for 2021 in the usual amounts - Single \$15 Family \$20 Business
or organization \$75. Anyone who has NOT PAID will have a sticker on
the first page stating "NOTICE Last Newsletter Unless Dues Are Paid".**

NOTICE FROM TOWNSHIP

**A Memorial Day Parade will be held on May 31st at 10am along Bristol
Pike as per a message from Mayor DiGirolamo. Come out and enjoy
a little bit of normalcy. Hope for good weather !!!!!**

Please continue reading for a special report on the Dioramas

**Quote.....People are prisoners of their phones and that's why they are
called "Cell Phones"....**

The Board

Diorama Drama at Neshaminy Mall – Part I **Historical Society of Bensalem Saves Dioramas!**

Article & Photos by Robert Homolka

Neshaminy Mall is not the first building that comes to mind when discussing Bensalem history, but not so fast! Neshaminy Mall has a secret room that shoppers don't ever get to look in for bargains. Deep in the former Macy's Department store (originally the Strawbridge and Clothier Department Store) is a "secret room" where the dioramas are located, but let's not get ahead of our story!



Figure 1: Diorama of William Penn's Treaty with the Indians

Originally known as the "Freedom Wall" the seven (7) dioramas, mostly associated with the American Revolution, were commissioned by George S. Strawbridge. He wanted to display them in his new flagship store at Neshaminy Mall when it opened in August, 1968. Mr. Strawbridge was known for being a history buff, especially local history, and saw it as an opportunity to not only gain publicity for the new store, but to educate and entertain school children and the general public about the American struggle for freedom. The seven dioramas depicted important historical events that occurred in the Philadelphia area. Animated with movement and sound, the dioramas would light up and come alive to tell a story about each historical event depicted in the Philadelphia area. As time went on the dioramas eventually became a part of Bensalem history *themselves!*

Each diorama has colorful three dimensional figures. The handmade figures, some of which are animated, are historically accurate down to the likeness and clothing of each famous character in each scene. Each figure measures approximately 24" high each. The scenes and all the figures are almost 100% completely made of painted paper mache. The size of each diorama varies, but each are approximately 90" High x 90" Wide x 39" Deep. They are much larger than what appears in the viewing window when on display. The weights of each diorama also varies, but is estimated to be around 350 lbs each.

The seven "Freedom Wall" dioramas are titled on their brass plaques as follows:

- 1.) William Penn's Treaty with the Indians
- 2.) The Return of Benjamin Franklin to Philadelphia
- 3.) The Liberty Bell is taken to Allentown
- 4.) Valley Forge Encampment
- 5.) Washington Crossing the Delaware
- 6.) Signing of the Declaration of Independence
- 7.) The Battle of Germantown

For decades Neshaminy Mall has been home to these seven unique dioramas. Loved by residents and visitors alike, it was time for them to find a new home. In March 2020, the former Strawbridge and Clothier Building was sold and the new owners wanted the dioramas removed. Unfortunately, for the dioramas.....their lease would soon be up!

Then in late February 2021, Mayor DiGirolamo's office got a call from the new owners of the building. They asked, "Did he know anything about the seven dioramas and more importantly did the township and/or historical society want them?" The Mayor was keenly aware that members of the Historical Society of Bensalem have been working "behind the scenes" to save them from possible destruction since Macy's had closed in March of 2017. The Mayor then called the historical society and our membership sprang into action! With the help of the Mayor's Office, The Bensalem Township Public Works Department, Buttonwood Custom Cabinetry, and our Historical Society, we all teamed up to begin the challenging task of extricating the dioramas from the former Strawbridge and Clothier building. They would pose a challenge to remove. This was no small task and this unlikely group of people would pull together to save the dioramas from scheduled destruction.

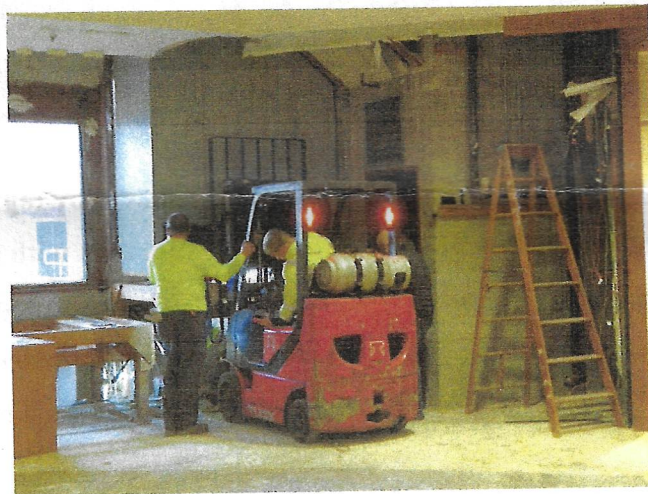


Figure 2: Bensalem Public Works lifts a diorama using a forklift.

Notice the window to the left looking out on the mall where another diorama was located. The personnel door to the very right of the forklift is a "secret room" where the last three dioramas are located.

So in the early morning on March 17, 2021 (St. Patrick's Day), the removal process began. However, the dioramas were not about to leave their home without a fight. Over the last 50 plus years while on display in the front windows a number of things were installed under, over, and around the dioramas.

In order to remove the first four (4) dioramas from the building it was necessary to remove the entire wall inside the old Macy's shoe department to gain access to the back of the dioramas. This task had already been started by Buttonwood Custom Cabinetry after Macy's closed in March of 2017. So, we had a huge head start on the removal. In addition, it was necessary to disconnect all the electrical wiring to each diorama. Then there was the challenge of clearing the sprinkler heads for the fire alarm system, as you slowly backed out each diorama from its display window. Some dioramas cleared the sprinkler heads by about a 1" margin, but we squeaked by them.



Figures 3 & 4: Views of two different dioramas showing the amazing detail.
The left view shows a view of the Valley Forge diorama with General Washington.
The right view shows the Signing of the Declaration of Independence diorama.
Thomas Jefferson stands by as Benjamin Franklin prepares to sign his name.
(The dioramas are surprisingly in good shape - just in need of a good cleaning.)

Meanwhile, as the removal process progressed the media showed up. Channel 6 – Action News and the Bucks County Courier Times both wanted to do news stories on our historical society's efforts to save the dioramas. In order to keep things moving, society members Sally Sondesky and Robert Homolka fielded questions from the reporters about the dioramas. This allowed the other groups involved time to concentrate on the arduous and tedious task of removal. Time was of the essence for this part of the project.

By the end of the day, four of the seven dioramas had been removed and were out of harm's way and whisked away to safety at a local storage facility. One of the biggest dioramas, "The Signing of the Declaration of Independence" already had a promising new home waiting.

But, what about those last three dioramas? How were we going to get them out of that "secret room"? What did the future hold for them? Would all seven dioramas find new homes?

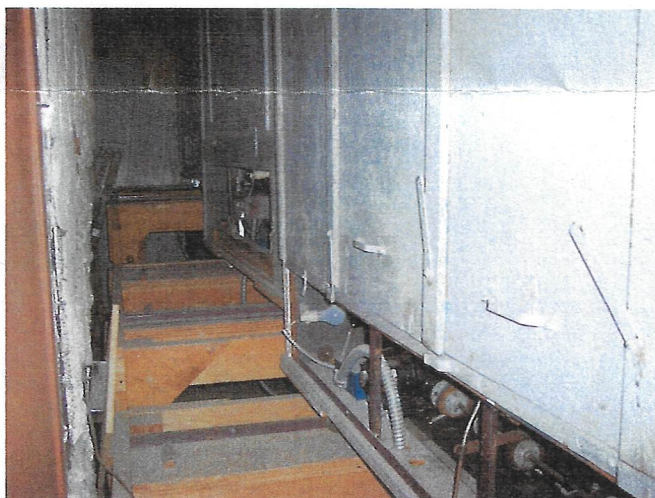


Figure 5: The "secret room" with the three remaining dioramas.

It is tight quarters back there – looks like our greatest challenge is ahead!

Find out the answers to these questions and more in a future newsletter with our next installment "**Diorama Drama at Neshaminy Mall – Part II.**" Until then we'll see you next time.