

Historical Information

Thornbury Township was founded in 1687, during a time of European settlement. Speculators purchased large parcels of land that, over time, were subdivided. While most of the township was suitable for farming, the land along Chester Creek offered opportunities for water-powered mills and mining. Farming and milling dominated the economy of Thornbury Township throughout the first two centuries of its existence.

One of the more important sources of Thornbury Township's architecture was the milling operations. Early in the eighteenth century, a settlement began to grow at Sarum, where Glen Mills Road (laid out in 1687-88) crossed Chester Creek. Iron ore in the area attracted investment by a group of investors who helped John Taylor to construct a water-powered mill to roll iron. By 1724, Taylor had opened the Sarum Forge. This milling operation was the first of its kind in the state of Pennsylvania and served as an early magnet for immigration. In 1750, the Lieutenant Governor of Pennsylvania (James Hamilton) wrote to London "there is but one Mill or Engine for Slitting and rolling Iron within the County ... which is situated in Thornbury Township." Two early businesses at Sarum were a store owned by Taylor (1742) and a tavern operated by Obadiah Russell (1743).

During the American Revolution, the contending armies fought the Battle of the Brandywine in 1777 just to the west of Thornbury Township. Following the defeat of the American army, a contingent of British troops headed to the home of Captain Persifor Frazer, a prominent citizen and owner of the Sarum Forge operations. Frazer was captured after the battle and held at the Walnut Street prison in Philadelphia. During a visit to him, his wife smuggled some of his maggot-ridden bread away and showed it to the American army; General Washington sent a letter to General Howe about the treatment of American prisoners and helped to bring about improved conditions.

Following the American Revolution, the milling industry became more active. Richard Cheyney purchased a sawmill on Chester Creek in 1766; this mill later became the property of the Frazer family who owned the old Taylor farmstead (now the Taylor/Frazer Ruin). Two decades later John Edwards built a new forge in the northeastern portion of the Township; this forge became a slitting mill in 1816 and produced seven tons of sheet iron per month. Although the mill was quite profitable, in 1829 it was converted into a cut nail factory. In 1836, some of the iron mills at Sarum were converted into paper mills; this conversion may be connected to a famous strike in the Chester Creek mills in the spring of 1836 in which the workers sought shorter hours. The Sarum settlement was renamed Glen Mills about this time. Of all the mills, only the Locksley Mill remains today, although the ruins of other milling operations remain in some locations along Chester Creek.

Today the Chester Creek Historic District encompasses the extent of the milling operations along Chester Creek. In the northern reaches of the Historic District are the Locksley Mill and miller's house and the Taylor/Frazer Ruins. The Glen Mills settlement is anchored by later buildings (the railroad station and store) but also includes a pair of late nineteenth century mill workers' houses. The district continues south along Stony Bank Road and includes a series of more mill workers' houses and stone ruins of older milling operations. A large portion of the houses in the Chester Creek Historic District consists of stone dwellings from the nineteenth century; these vernacular dwellings are two- and three-story buildings built on the western slope of hills rising from Chester Creek. An example is the Wilcox Mills Workers' House on Stony Bank Road, a large three-story, eight-bay frame building. This house began as a Penn Plan house, as did a nearby mill house that was built of stone.

The boundary of Thornbury Township changed twice following the American Revolution. When Delaware County was formed in 1789 out of Chester County, farmers in Thornbury and Birmingham Townships were allowed to choose whether they wanted their farms to remain in Chester County or be attached to the new Delaware County. As a result, the boundary between the two counties through these townships is quite irregular. The majority of the farms in Thornbury Township formed the new Thornbury Township in Delaware County. Then in 1842 a portion of Aston Township south of Glen Mills was attached to Thornbury Township; this area includes many of the mill houses along Chester Creek.

Meanwhile the land suitable for cultivation to the north and west of Glen Mills became settled with farms. With the passage of years, the large tracts were subdivided into smaller parcels, leading to the creation of farmsteads such as the Thomas Brinton Farm. Although only one "working" farm exists (the Craig Farm on Route 202 in the southwestern corner of the Township), there are several intact farmsteads, some with acreage being reserved for farming or grazing. These smaller farmsteads include the John Cheyney Tenant House and Farm on Station Road, which includes a large farm house, barn, forge, and spring house. Many of these farms had associated tenant houses, such as Maple Springs Farm on Glen Mills Road. Barns in the Township generally are of single-decker variety, although a double-decker barn is extant at the Thomas Brinton Farm. The Thomas Brinton Barn is significant not only for its architecture but also for its interior silo (a common practice of the late nineteenth century).

Remnants of farms dot the landscape throughout the Township. The Pyle family was prominent in the western portions of the Township, and many men from that family built houses that bear their names today (e.g., the Israel, Eli, Jacob, and John Pyle Houses). Most of the agricultural outbuildings associated with these houses have disappeared since the owners have discontinued the farm operations. The Prospect Hill Farm on Tanguy Road is an example of a farmhouse that was enlarged and converted into a stylish Italianate residence during the middle of the nineteenth century. Further evidence of the extended viability of farming is a large Second Empire farmhouse on Tanguy Road with a mansard roof dating to c. 1870. In addition, a

farm house on lower Stony Bank Road was enlarged in the early twentieth century; this house began as a small Penn Plan house with a detached kitchen, both of which are extant.

The second settlement in Thornbury Township after Glen Mills did not coalesce until about 1830. By that time, a small cluster of buildings existed at the intersection of Glen Mills Road and Thornton Road (now the Thornton National Register Historic District). This cluster of buildings was anchored by the “Yellow House” which was built by John King. This building became a post office in 1832 and is one of the oldest post offices in the United States still using its original space. A weaver rented a portion of the Yellow House about this time and produced manufactured cloth, coverlets, linen, towelings, and linsey. Most resources in the district are two-story houses, either stone or frame. Many of the houses in this area have been stuccoed.

Thornbury Township has been the location of few religious congregations throughout its history. In the early years, settlers apparently attended religious services in adjacent townships (such as Birmingham Friends Meeting). Perhaps the earliest Thornbury congregation was the Stony Bank Methodist Church, which began c. 1810. Later in the century, three other congregations were formed: Wayside, Bethlehem, and Thornbury AME. In an interesting turn of events, three of these four congregations built new facilities in 1871. Bethlehem and Wayside reflect a more pronounced Gothic architectural influence, whereas Stony Bank has a simpler and more vernacular building. Thornbury AME rebuilt their facilities in 1958 and followed the trends of that decade, with a small front-gabled building attached to a cross-gabled classroom wing.

The advent of the railroad in Thornbury Township fostered economic growth during the nineteenth century. Thornbury’s paper mills and nail factories produced much-needed goods for the Philadelphia market, and the railroad facilitated an exchange of goods. The Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington Railroad connected Philadelphia to West Chester and stopped at Glen Mills, Locksley and Cheyney. The construction of the train station at Glen Mills in 1882 and the accompanying station store represent some of the more significant architectural trends of the latter quarter of the nineteenth century. Today there remain three train stations in the Township: Glen Mills, Locksley, and Cheyney.

As the Thornbury industry began to slow during the latter nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, one of the more important events in the Township was the relocating of Cheyney University, one of the oldest African-American institutions of higher learning in the United States, into the northern portion of the township. A series of buildings in the Colonial Revival style was constructed on a large quad in the center of the campus in the early years of the twentieth century. As such, the core of the University is perhaps one of the most impressive collections of Colonial Revival style architecture in the western Philadelphia suburbs.

Contemporary architectural trends were also reflected in the construction of new schools around the turn of the twentieth century. The Glen Mills School, west of Glen Mills, is a

boarding school for delinquent youth and reflects the Queen Anne style with its Richardsonian arches, flared eaves, and expressive chimneys. It was founded in 1889. The Township built two smaller public school buildings in 1901. North of Glen Mills is the Teresa Hall School (formerly the Eastern School), a Colonial Revival building with a pyramidal roof and cupola and arched-head windows. Thornbury School Western on Westtown Road has a large Queen Anne porch and balcony and expressive keystones above each window and arch. Each school makes evident that the Township was not isolated from the prevailing architectural trends of the time.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Township's economy shifted away from industry; farming continued as a major economic force into the 1970s. One by one, the mills closed, and most of them collapsed into ruin. A large quarrying business replaced the industry in the southeastern portion of the Township. Eventually, railroad service through Thornbury Township ceased, and the Cheyney and Glen Mills train stations were converted for other uses. With farming still profitable in the area, people interested in homestead associations created the Brinton Lake and Tanguy Homesteads. Houses in both of these associations have been much altered over the years. During the past two decades much of the farmland in Thornbury Township has been developed as population pressure from Philadelphia moved westward. As a result, several of the old farms have become isolated houses and barns in the midst of larger development.