

Township Overview

Introduction & Purpose

This chapter provides a brief history of Upper Providence Township along with a summary of basic information. A current base map is also provided. More in-depth information on some of these topics may be found elsewhere in this document. The chapter concludes with a review of the planning implications of this information.

Location and Historic Development

Upper Providence Township is located near the geographic center of Delaware County, Pennsylvania in the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area. Measured as a straight line, Center City Philadelphia lies approximately twelve miles to the east of the Township. The Township currently covers 5.9 square miles between the Ridley and Crum Creeks, which form its southwestern and northeastern boundaries respectively. The southern end of the Township almost entirely surrounds the Borough of Media, the seat of Delaware County.

The earliest known residents of the area were the Lenni Lenape people. European settlement began in the late seventeenth century. The Swedes and the Dutch established trading posts along the nearby Delaware River as early as 1623, but Europeans would not permanently inhabit the land now occupied by Upper Providence until William Penn and a dozen shiploads of prospective settlers arrived from England in the summer of 1682. The establishment of the Providence Great Road in 1684 accelerated the settlement process. This road still exists today as a major route through the Township, although it is now simply called “Providence Road.” Following the English model, Penn divided the Pennsylvania Colony into three counties, and established all of the area between Ridley Creek and Crum Creek as the Providence Township of Chester County in 1682. In 1687, the area was divided into Upper Providence and Nether Providence Townships.

The earliest settlers were farmers. A recently published history of the Township states that the average farm of the 1700's was about 150 acres, although some were as large as 400 acres. Most of this was cropland. The few animals typically found on each farm were there to provide labor for cultivation and to meet the needs of the family: oxen and horses pulled plows and provided transportation, cows gave milk, and sheep supplied wool. As the farms became more prevalent and more prosperous, small commercial uses were established along the Providence Great Road, and various mills availed themselves of water power from the creeks. Additional roads, most notably Baltimore Pike, provided direct connection to Philadelphia and, in the opposite direction, the western shore of the Chesapeake, including Baltimore and points south.

Historical records suggest that Township residents did not universally support the Declaration of Independence and the ensuing Revolutionary War. In the first place, a large proportion of the people were Quakers and were therefore opposed to war in principle, regardless of the cause. Secondly, many residents had prospered under British rule, felt strong allegiance to the Crown, saw the Declaration of Independence as an act of treason, and feared what might

happen under this strange democracy proposed by Franklin, Jefferson, and the Adams brothers. Upper Providence never saw military action during the Revolution: the closest battle was the British victory at the Battle of the Brandywine in September 1777. Local ambivalence about the war is reflected by various records naming those who served in the Continental Army or the local militias (or both), those punished for providing supplies to the British, and those - typically the Quakers - who did not fight at all. It should be noted that many in this last group supported the American cause with money and supplies. Finally, as *A Land of Providence* wryly notes, "Loyalties may have shifted depending on which army was near at hand."

1789 was a significant year in the politics of the Township: the new U.S. Constitution was adopted, and, more locally, the eastern part of Chester County - including Upper Providence - broke away to become Delaware County. The first United States census was taken the following year and showed that Upper Providence Township was home to 346 residents.

Life in the Township was quiet. As the eighteenth century slipped into the nineteenth, the Township population was rising slowly (about 1.5% annually) and residents were continuing to establish the institutions necessary to the life of the community. A property deed from 1776 makes reference to a schoolhouse in the vicinity of Providence and Sandy Bank Roads. This would be the earliest known school in the Township, but this deed is the only record of its existence and virtually nothing else is known about it. It is possible that this was the site where the Sandy Bank School was established in 1836. The 1836 structure was replaced by a new stone structure in 1905. This building, with several additions made since then, is now home to the Walden Montessori School. Notwithstanding the somewhat mysterious precursor of the Sandy Bank School, the Blue Hill School, established in 1777 along Providence Road near what is now the intersection of Steeple Chase Road, is generally recognized as the earliest in the Township.

A major flood in August 1843 wiped out most of the industry in the Township, which was still located along the Ridley and Crum Creeks at that time. The numerous mills that located there were never rebuilt: apparently transportation was sufficiently convenient and the people were sufficiently prosperous to get their necessary manufactured goods from Chester and Philadelphia. The elimination of industry enhanced the Township's bucolic appeal, making it increasingly popular as a location for large country homes and estates owned by wealthy Philadelphians.

The last major change to the boundary of Upper Providence came in 1850 when the Borough of Media was calved from the Township's southeastern flank (along with a much smaller portion of Nether Providence) and established as the seat of Delaware County. The relocation of County offices from the City of Chester was probably a boon to the surrounding area, as the town began to offer services required by the more affluent judges and lawyers who of necessity frequented the courts. The increasing prestige of the area as a year-round residence may be partially responsible for the establishment in 1859 of the Rose Tree Fox Hunting Club at what is now Rose Tree Park. The Pennsylvania Railroad began regular service to Media in 1870 with the station located exactly where it is today: just over the Borough line in Upper Providence Township. The following year, the Idlewild Hotel opened as a posh summer resort just south of Media, featuring a boardwalk providing pedestrians with a direct route to the train station.

Although the economic expansion of the Industrial Revolution was in full swing by the end of the nineteenth century, Upper Providence changed little through the early 1900's. The community of prosperous farmers, wealthy estate owners, and generally well-to-do professionals and businessmen working in Media, Chester, or Philadelphia changed little through the roaring '20's, the Great Depression of the '30's, and the war years of the early '40's. The end of World War II, however, brought rapid change, beginning with explosive population growth and the construction of the housing necessary to accommodate it.

In 1940, the population of the Township was less than 2,000; by 1970 it was over 9,000. This growth was in many ways typical of the post-war boom that occurred in suburban communities all over the country. In Upper Providence, farmlands and estates were developed with hundreds of comfortable new homes. In contrast, large-scale commercial and industrial development largely passed the Township by, such that it remains overwhelmingly residential to this day. This may be partially due to the proximity of Media, but is more likely due to the transportation network. Although the Providence Great Road was largely responsible for opening up the land to development in the seventeenth century, the Providence Road of the twentieth was entirely inadequate to accommodate the volume of traffic demanded by industrial parks, major office buildings, and shopping centers. In fact, the only limited access highway in the Township to this day is the Media By-Pass: although opened in the closing days of 1959 it was not connected to the regional expressway network until the completion of Interstate Route 476 (the "Blue Route") in 1991.

It is likely that the rapid development and population growth of the post-war years were at least partially responsible for the residents' overwhelming approval in 1974 of a proposal to form a Government Study Commission for the particular purpose of examining local governance. Pennsylvania Act 62 of 1972 had enabled the creation of such commissions and authorized municipalities to implement their recommendations. Commonly known as the "Home Rule" act, municipalities now had the power to develop systems of local government apart from the system of first- and second-class townships, boroughs, and cities that was in effect in most of the state. In February 1975, the Commission recommended that the Township pursue some new form of governance, better suited to the specific conditions of Upper Providence Township. At the direction of the Board of Supervisors (the Township was a second-class township at this time), the Commission drafted a Home Rule Charter that was subsequently approved and adopted in November 1975. This charter, with some amendments approved in November 1996, remains in effect today. The introduction to the current version states that the purpose of adopting a Home Rule Charter was to provide "...for increased local control, more responsiveness and openness in government, increased citizen participation, increased fiscal responsibility, ethical standards, and environmental provisions." The most obvious change implemented by the Home Rule Charter is that the governing body is called the Township Council rather than a Board of Supervisors or Board of Commissioners. Furthermore, each of the five members of council, rather than being elected at-large, represents a defined district.

FIGURE 2.1: TOWNSHIP FACTS AT A GLANCE

HISTORY: Originally inhabited by the Lenni Lenape

First European settlement in 1682 or 1683

Upper Providence Township incorporated in 1687

Current boundary established in 1850

GEOGRAPHY: 5.93 square miles

Central Delaware County, part of metropolitan Philadelphia

Highest point: 390 feet above sea level (midway between west side of Kingston Rd. and Edgmont Township line, approximately 300 feet from Providence Rd.)

Lowest point: 85 feet above sea level (where Ridley Creek exits the Township at its southernmost point)

POPULATION (2000): 10,509 - ranks 16 th among Delaware County's 49 municipalities

1990-2000 growth rate of 8.04% - 8 th highest in Delaware County

Median household income is \$71,166 - 9 th highest in Delaware County

GOVERNMENT: Home Rule Township governed by a five-member Township Council. The Township is divided into five districts, each of which elects one representative to the Council for a four-year term; there are no at-large members of Council. The Council elects a Chairman and a Vice-Chairman from among themselves to serve one-year terms in such positions. Boards and commissions provided for by the Charter include the Planning Commission, the Zoning Hearing Board, the Recreation Board, the Code of Ethics Commission, and the Environmental Commission. The day-to-day operations of the Township are administered by a full-time professional Township Manager who is appointed by the Council.

In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: 26 th Senatorial District; Township Council Districts 2 and 3 are in the 161 st Legislative District, and the remaining three Council Districts are in the 168 th Legislative District.

In the U.S. House of Representatives: 7 th Congressional District of Pennsylvania

EDUCATION: Rose Tree Media School District - Public school for grades K through 12. Rose Tree Elementary School and Springfield Lake Middle School are within the Township. Penncrest High School is about 1½ miles west, in Middletown Township.

Benchmark School - Private non-sectarian day school for grades K through 8. The school was established in 1970 and relocated to its current location on Providence Rd. in Upper Providence in 1975.

St. Mary Magdalen School - Private Roman Catholic day school for grades K through 8. Established in 1966 at current location on Providence Rd.

The Walden School - Private Montessori school for children aged 3 through eighth grade. Located in the former Sandy Bank School at the intersection of Providence and Sandy Bank Roads.

Pennsylvania Institute of Technology - Private post-secondary school offering one-year certificate programs and two-year associate degrees in technical and business fields. The school is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association

of Colleges and Schools and is also approved as a two-year college by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The campus has been located at 800 Manchester Ave. since 1982.

EMERGENCY SERVICES: Police - The Township has its own police department with twelve full-time police officers headquartered in the Township Building. Emergency response is provided via the Delaware County "911" system.

Fire - Rose Tree Fire Co. No. 1 serves the entire Township from its firehouse near the interchange of Providence Rd. and US Rt.1. This volunteer company operates five vehicles, including its original pumper: a 1953 American LaFrance truck that was restored and re-housed in 2003 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the company. Emergency response is provided via the Delaware County "911" system.

Ambulance - Media Fire, Hook & Ladder Co. No. 1, a volunteer company, provides ambulance service to the entire Township from its firehouse in the Borough of Media. This company also provides emergency service via the County "911" system.

TOWNSHIP OFFICES: 935 N. Providence Rd.

Media, PA 19063

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web: www.upperprovidence.org

SOURCES: Township of Upper Providence, 2003; A Land of Providence and Its People, 1999; U.S.G.S. (Media Quadrangle), 1966; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000; Rose Tree Media School District, 2003; Benchmark School, 2003; St. Mary Magdalen School, 2003; Pennsylvania Institute of Technology, 2003.

Planning Implications

- Organized under its current name in 1687, Upper Providence Township has existed as a municipality longer than most parts of the country. This long history suggests that historic sites and features should receive special consideration as part of the planning and land development processes.
- The Township's historical pattern of development created a community that is almost entirely residential. Commercial uses are few, small, and geared mostly to meeting local needs; industrial uses are even less prevalent. While this makes the Township a pleasant residential area with few incompatible uses, it presents the clear possibility of financial difficulty for the Township in the near future. Residential uses typically represent a net fiscal loss municipality since the tax revenues they generate typically do not cover the cost of municipal services that they consume. Most communities rely upon commercial and industrial uses to make up the difference, as the taxes paid by these uses typically exceed the cost of the services they consume. The planning challenge before our community is to optimize tax revenue while spending efficiently. The lack of developable land in the Township as well as the absence of any historical commercial or industrial

center suggest that resolving this issue by planning for major new non-residential uses is not practicable. While land use planning will be a critical part of addressing this issue, it cannot be the whole solution; it will be necessary to evaluate other approaches as well.

- We have noted that the design of Providence Road - historically the principal route through the Township - was never adequate to provide the high volume of motor vehicle access required by modern commercial and industrial uses. The design characteristics that hinder high-volume use (narrow cartway, inappropriate vertical and horizontal alignments, intersection configurations, frequency of intersecting roads and driveways) are not limited to Providence Road. Indeed, many of the roads in the Township are relatively narrow and winding. While this is one element of the Township's charm, these particular aspects of road design create safety issues relative to both motorists and pedestrians, particularly when traffic volume is as high as it is. These issues will become more critical if the volume of motor traffic through the Township continues to increase.
- In the earliest years of the Township, the connection to Philadelphia was less important than the roads leading to the river. This quickly changed as Philadelphia grew in importance. The Washington Post Road between Philadelphia and Baltimore passed through the southern part of the Township and was among the earliest major routes connecting the Township with Philadelphia. Today's Baltimore Pike follows essentially the same alignment. To this day, much of the traffic through the Township is a result of people from outside of the Township traveling to other locations outside of the Township: local shopping centers, Philadelphia Airport, and the city of Philadelphia most significantly.

Most of the information in this section is derived from *A Land of Providence and Its People: A History of Upper Providence Township, Delaware County, Pennsylvania*, published by the Upper Providence Tricentennial Commission Book Committee in 1999. Readers desiring to know the Township's history in greater detail should consult this work.