

Howard L. Barnes

Dean of Philadelphia's Amateur Historians

by William C. Kashatus III



Howard L. Barnes claims that Frankford is the oldest settlement in Philadelphia. Historians in neighboring Germantown dispute him, contending theirs to be the oldest community in the Quaker city area. However, no one has proven him wrong – nor can one, especially when he produces the original land deed of his beloved hometown, which dates to 1660. That *would* make Frankford not only the oldest settlement in Philadelphia, but one of the oldest European-settled communities in the nation. Quarrelling with an institution is frustrating and, inevitably, fruitless. And Howard Barnes is one of Philadelphia's institutions of history, as well as a local treasure in his birthplace of Frankford.

Known affectionately to many as "Mr. Frankford" and widely respected as the "dean of Northeast Philadelphia's amateur historians," Howard L. Barnes has served as curator of the Frankford Historical Society for more than two decades. More important, he has nurtured a strong appreciation – especially among local youth – of Frankford's contributions to the history of Philadelphia. A spry octogenarian, Barnes is a spell-binding lecturer whose mind catches details that are lost on others who are half his age and possess twice his strength. He is also a tireless researcher who has uncovered nearly a dozen significant misconceptions about the history of Frankford through meticulous examination of original documentation and tedious cross-

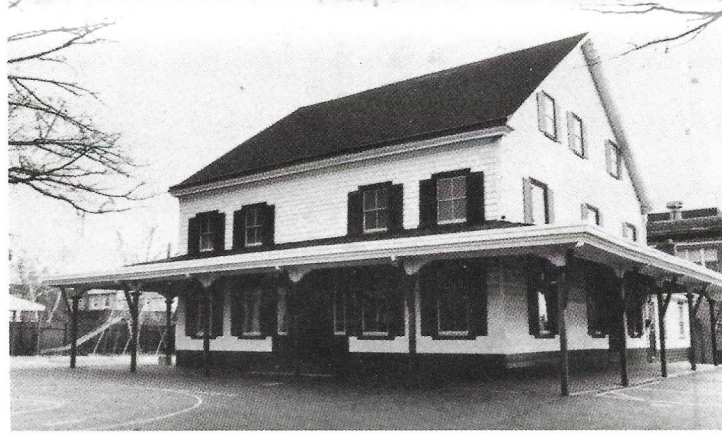
Affectionately called "Mr. Frankford" by fellow historians and admirers, Howard Lee Barnes has devoted his entire life to researching what he can document is the oldest settlement in Philadelphia.

referencing of primary and secondary sources. Barnes has also written numerous newspaper articles and two books devoted to Frankford's history. His 1986 *History of the Frankford Yellow Jackets*, chronicling a football team that was the precursor of the Philadelphia Eagles, earned him an international reputation and is part of the archives at the Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. Barnes' second book, *A History of Frankford*, published just last year, traces the area's development from its Indian origins through the 1940s.

Barnes' interest in local history dates from his boyhood fascination with the buildings of Frankford's past and his family's enthusiasm for local history. "We lived a block away from the Friends' Meetinghouse when I was growing up," he recalled, "and I would pass that old building to and from school. After my mother explained that the very first people who lived in Frankford were buried in the adjacent cemetery, I felt a reverence whenever I passed that meetinghouse." His grandmother, who lived to be more than one hundred and four years old, enhanced Barnes' admiration for Frankford's Quakers. "She was quite a

storyteller who loved to talk about the early Quakers who succeeded the original Swedish settlers. What most impressed her was the Quaker respect for the equality of all people which led the Friends to oppose slavery and encourage free Blacks to live in Frankford from as early as 1780, the year slavery was abolished in Pennsylvania. In fact, John and Virginia Parkes, who served both Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe, were freed upon the deaths of those presidents and moved North, establishing the first small community of Blacks to settle in Frankford."

The Frankford historian refined his early love of history and fueled his penchant for discovering facts by serving as an investigator with the military police during World War II. After the war—and a brief stint as chief inspector for the Philadelphia Water Department—Barnes accepted a temporary job at the Frankford Friends School as custodian and bus driver. That



"temporary" position lasted twenty years. Among his reasons were a work schedule which gave him two hours free at midday; the school's proximity to the Frankford Historical Society, which enabled him to immerse himself in historical research; and the school principal's admiration for Barnes' genuine love of children. And so from 1954 until his retirement in 1974, Howard Barnes served as a surrogate father and history teller to school children, and spent his two-hour "lunch breaks" poring over the historical society's books, documents, maps, records, and photographs. That's why he can so convincingly re-create the history of his hometown as far back in time as the day when Frankford's main thoroughfare was known as King's Highway.

He explains that, "Frankford Avenue was named King's Highway during the seventeenth century. It was the primary route

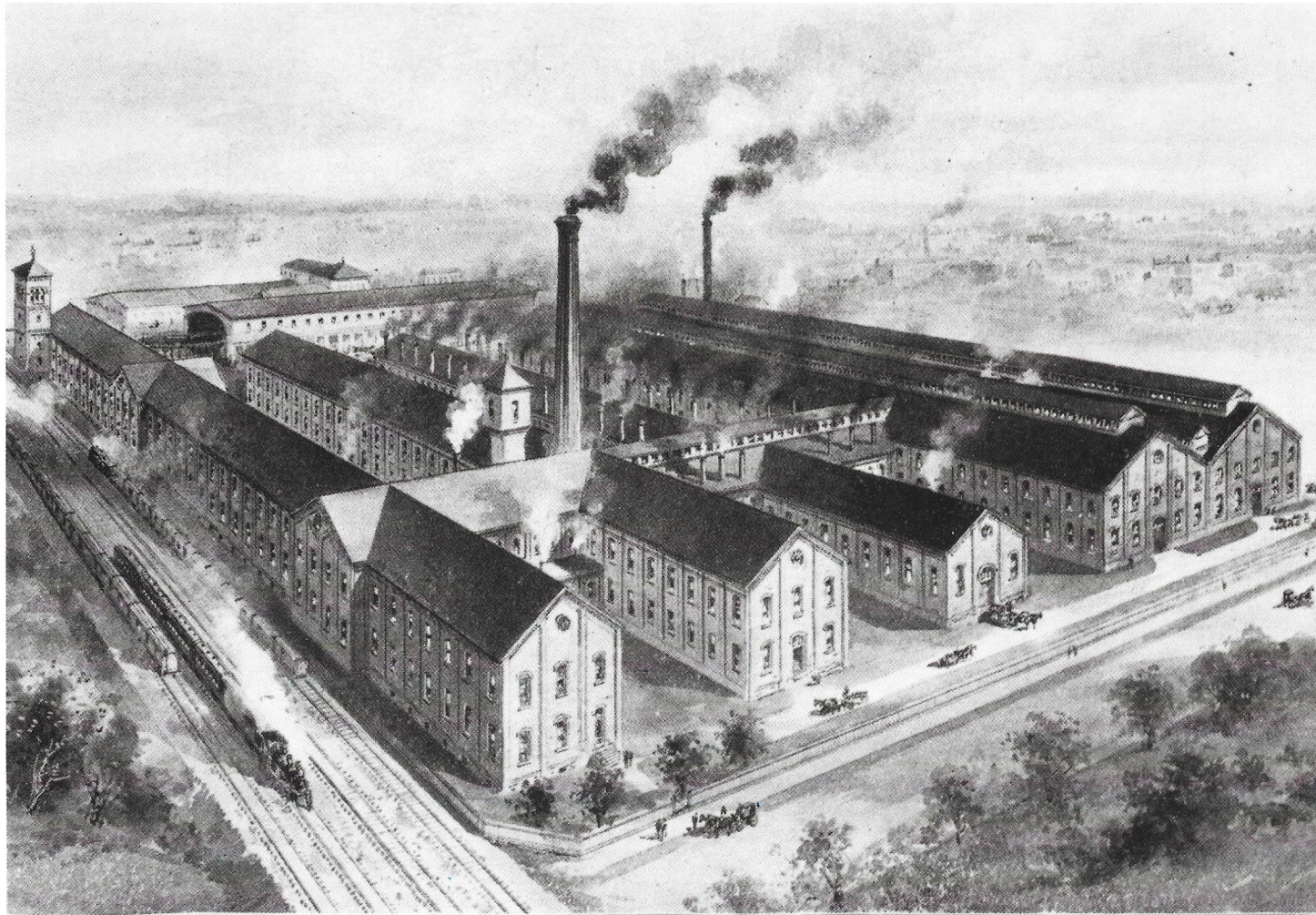
One of the landmarks of early Frankford was the Frankford Friends School (top). Howard L. Barnes remembers wistfully an era during which Frankford Avenue (above) was charming and quaint.

from Boston to Philadelphia and it cut through the heart of what we know today as Frankford. Many of the great men who signed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution traveled that highway through Frankford and had refreshments at the Jolly Post Inn."

Unfortunately, the Jolly Post Inn—built at Orthodox Street and Frankford Avenue in 1682—has long been replaced by commercial establishments. During the late eighteenth century the inn was a favorite rest stop of Dr. Benjamin Rush on his way



century town “has the proud distinction of being the scene of a conference which decided the destiny of the nation.” According to Barnes, on August 29, 1774, John Adams and a host of Massachusetts’s delegates to the First Continental Congress met in a private apartment in Frankford with a number of Pennsylvania delegates, including Benjamin Rush and Thomas Mifflin. Even at that early date the New Englanders sought independence from Great Britain. But the Pennsylvanians, who appreciated the conservative nature of many colonies, including their own, urged patience. To even mention a declaration of independence so early in the proceedings might have been dangerous to the best interests of the colonies; in fact, it would probably have delayed such action indefinitely. Delegates also suggested that New England allow another colony to propose the resolution of independence when the time arrived. Barnes quoted John Ad-



Long gone, the Jolly Post Inn (top) was once a popular retreat for the nation's founding fathers. Industries, such as Fayette R. Plumb's Edge Tool Works (above), irrevocably changed the village's character.

north to Boston and to cousins John and Samuel Adams, on their way to Philadelphia. Perhaps its most prominent patron was George Washington. “It is known that Washington often ate at the Jolly Post,” Barnes said, “but I can’t really say if he actually slept there. After all, if Washington slept at every place legend claims, he would never have won the Revolution,” mused the Frankford historian. Levity aside, Frankford *did* play a critical role in the decision for American independence.

ams’ 1822 account of the meeting.

This conversation [at Frankford] and the principles, facts, and motives suggested in it have given a color, complexion and character to the whole policy of the United States from that day to this. Without this [meeting] Mr. Washington would never have commanded our armies; nor Mr. Jefferson been the author of the Declaration of Independence; nor Mr. Richard Henry Lee, the mover of it. If I have ever had cause to repent of any part of the policy, that repentance ever has been, and ever will be unavailing. You inquire why so young a man as Mr. Jefferson was placed at the head of the Committee for preparing the Declaration of Independence? I answer, it was the Frankford advice to place Virginia at the head of everything.

Perhaps the most heartfelt recognition Frankford received for

when the Marquis de Lafayette passed through the bustling little town on his visit to Philadelphia. For that occasion, Frankford's patriotic residents had erected an arch across Main Street (formerly King's Highway) opposite the residence of Gen. Isaac Worrell, the settlement's own celebrated Revolutionary War hero. As the procession passed his house, the infirmed veteran was helped to the window to see his wartime compatriot on his triumphant march. Noticing General Worrell in the window of his second floor bedroom, Lafayette bowed ceremoniously as he passed by. It must have been a touching moment for Worrell; it certainly is for the teary-eyed Barnes who recounts the momentous event.

"Frankford witnessed some dramatic changes during the nineteenth century," according to Howard L. Barnes. "The 1800s brought manufacturing to the area as a new crop of immigrants,

Arranged in the style of a one-ring circus with animal cages and necessary accoutrements, this so-called "Ring Barn" hosted practice sessions of such celebrities as Josephine "Josie" deMott, a famous bareback rider under the Big Top; George H. Adams, the world-famous clown; the LaRue family of acrobats; and Mollie Brown, the first female rider to turn somersaults on horseback.

Professional sports also became popular in Frankford during the late nineteenth century. In 1899, the nonprofit Frankford Athletic Association, a group of local merchants and civic promoters, founded the Yellow Jackets Football team. In 1924 the Yellow Jackets joined the National Football League (NFL) in its fifth season of competition. Along with the Chicago Bears, the local team quickly became a perennial powerhouse. The only NFL team to play its home games on Saturday because Philadelphia's blue laws prohibited business or sport on Sunday, the



The United States Arsenal at Frankford (above) traces its origins to 1816 and the administration of Pres. James Madison. Frankford Hospital (right), photographed about 1909, served local residents for years.

including the Italians, French, Irish, and Polish arrived to work in the dye, textile, and hosiery mills in the area. But the pride of Frankford was the Arsenal, built in 1816." Established on ninety-one acres, the Frankford Arsenal produced such items as flint caps, grape shot, and twelve-pound strapped shot. By 1832, six stone buildings and two small workshops made up the military complex. The first power driven machinery was introduced just prior to the Civil War. A proud veteran of World War II, Barnes boasts that "the Arsenal has been credited with designing or producing every round of smaller caliber ammunition ever fired in our national defense between 1816 and 1977." But national defense was not the only industry that gained national recognition for the Northeast Philadelphia town.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Frankford became famous as a winter training center for the circus. John "Porgy" O'Brien, a resident of Frankford, organized many of these shows. "At one time he was considered the biggest showman in the country," said Barnes. O'Brien used a warehouse-type



Yellow Jackets drew thousands of the city's fans to Frankford each week.

Howard Barnes remembers those days well. He was a child, and "every Saturday," he reminisced, "I would go with Dad up to the game on Frankford Avenue at Deveraux Street, up to where Jim Thorpe and Red Grange, as well as other football greats, paved their Hall of Fame careers." Two of those greats were Yellow Jackets tackle William "Link" Lyman and end Guy Chamberlain. In *History of the Yellow Jackets*, Barnes quoted a player on his first encounter with Olympian Jim Thorpe. "Among the back-field men, Thorpe was a dangerous man in the open. The old-timers on the Massillon (Ohio) Tigers," also an early NFL team, "told me that if Jim got loose, the best thing I could do was to let him go by for the touchdown unless I wanted to chance being hurt."

"These men, all these players, deserve to be remembered as the pioneers of the game," Barnes said. "They played for, maybe two hundred dollars a game, and played twice on the same weekend after the blue laws were repealed. They made it possible for the half-million dollar salaries the players enjoy today." The Yellow Jackets folded shortly after the crash of the stock market in 1929. Four years later, in 1933, the franchise was acquired by Bert Bell and Lud Wray for twenty-five hundred dollars. The new owners moved the team out of Frankford into the heart of the city, renaming it the Philadelphia Eagles.

Twentieth century history of Frankford is not as romantic as its glorious past. Barnes claims that the most "radical change" occurred in 1922 and "forever altered the town." It was the arrival of the elevated train. Known to residents simply as the "El," the system brought noise, blocked the sun and transformed Frank-



A village long vanished: Looking south on Frankford Avenue shortly after the turn of the century (above), and the passenger station of the old Philadelphia and Frankford Railroad (left) in 1909.

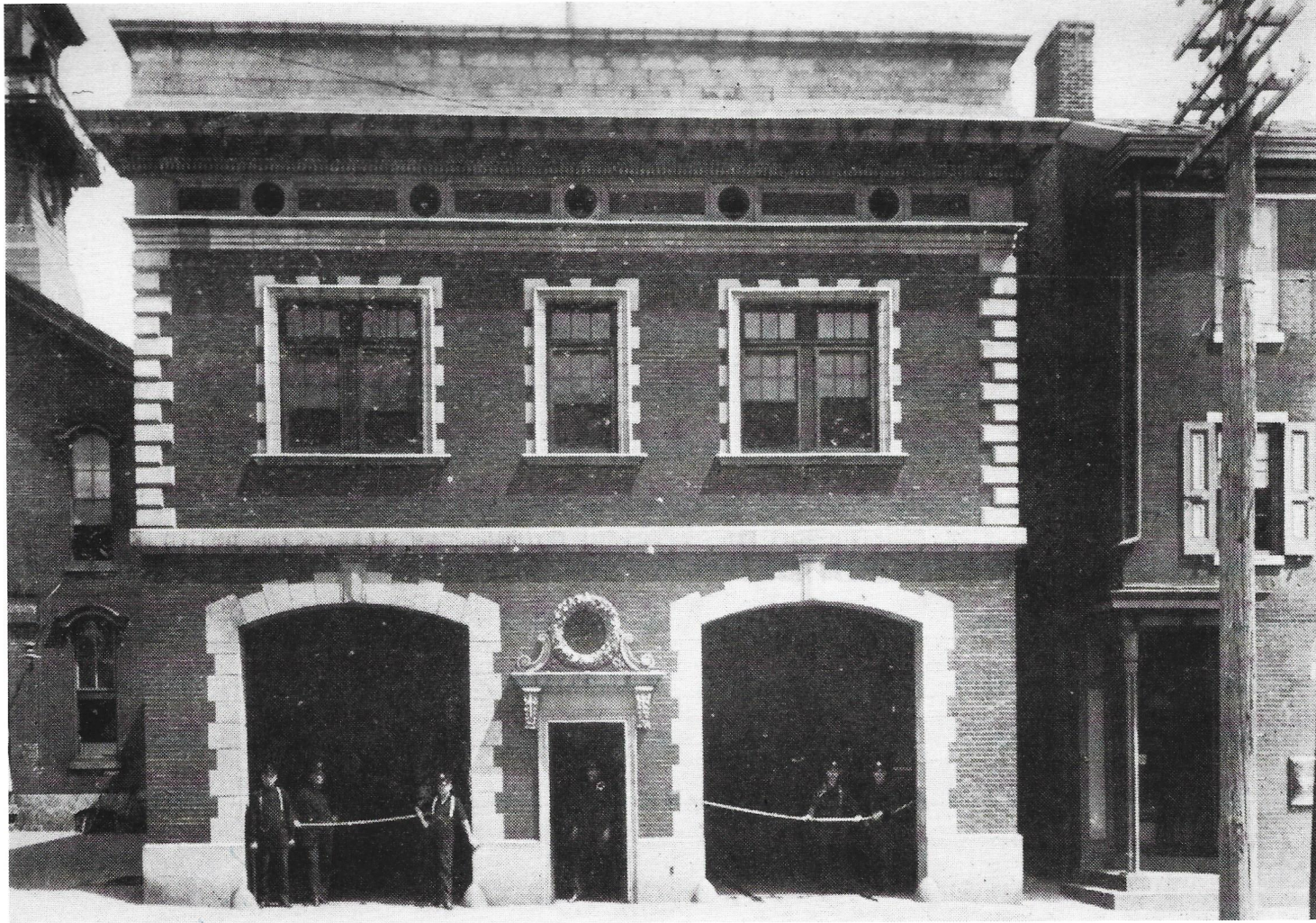
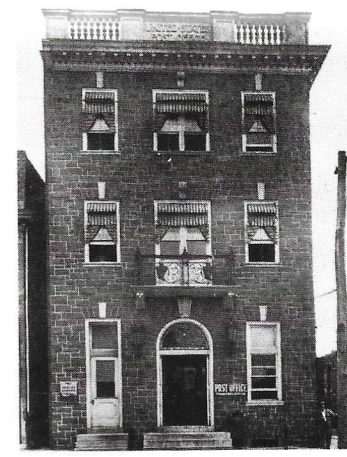
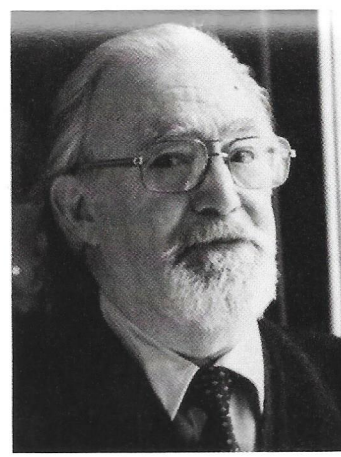


ford from "a village section of the city to the city," according to the historian. "There were charming shops along Frankford Avenue, and most of the merchants lived in apartments above their stores." It was not unusual to see shop owners out sweeping the sidewalks and gutters in the early evening. People felt safe walking the streets after dark. There was pride in the community. Today, however, the fast-food industry and absentee store owners have taken over Frankford. The textile mills and the Arsenal have been shut down, knocking the wind out of the once proud manufacturing center and adding to the high unemployment rate. Litter clutters the streets and many people feel unsafe after dark. Many of the beautiful "plantation homes" that graced the outskirts of the town are gone—as are the farms where children used to pick pears and romp in the open fields. "It's not like the old days anymore," he said sadly. "The children won't know what they once had here." That's the way Barnes chose to record his collection of facts for posterity. It is a lasting gift to the future generations of Frankford.

"I'm just a conveyor of history," he said. "I have been preach-

passed away. And I knew that the publicity of the historical society should be carried on. All of the history we have recorded at the society is not simply for me or for the members, it's for the children yet to be born."

In 1986 Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode honored Howard L. Barnes with a citation for "his commitment to the unity and pride of Frankford and to the promotion and development of arts and culture among community residents." Asked about his special honor, Barnes—with characteristic modesty—downplayed the event. "When you work at something you genuinely love—as well as the people you work with—it is a tremendous feeling. At eighty-two years of age, it is a wonderful feeling to know that you've spent your life trying to help others understand their past and, in this way, to touch the future. If I had it to do all over again, I wouldn't change a thing." ❖



William C. Kashatus III is a regular contributor to this magazine. His love of history was inspired by Howard Barnes during their years together at Frankford Friends School.

Historian Howard L. Barnes (top, left) treasures older and historic buildings, which gave the community its undeniable charm, such as the post office (top, right) and the Number 7 Fire House (above).

FOR FURTHER READING

Burt, Struthers. *Philadelphia, Holy Experiment*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1945.

Eisenhart, Luther P., ed. *Historic Philadelphia: From the Founding Until the Early Nineteenth Century*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1953.

Lippincott, Horace Mather. *Early Philadelphia: Its People, Life and Progress*. Philadelphia: L. B. Lippincott, 1917.

Oberholtzer, Ellis Paxson. *Philadelphia: A History of the City and Its People*. Philadelphia: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1912.

Scharf, J. Thomas, and Thompson Wescott. *History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884*. Philadelphia: L. H. Everts and Company, 1884.

Wolf, Edwin. *Philadelphia: Portrait of an American City*. Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1975.