



Downingtown Area Historical Society



The Ashbridge House c.1709

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EAST CALN

William Penn laid out 4 original counties in his organization of Pennsylvania, Chester being one of them. Original townships were quite large. Caln was part of the Chester Valley, was 14 miles long and approximately 2 miles wide. Considering the condition of roads and access, it is not surprising that in 1728, inhabitants petitioned to divide Caln into East and West.

Development during the 18th century followed the same pattern as in other townships of Chester County. People settled along rivers for the fertile soil and the use of water power for grist and fulling mills, as well as saw mills. So many mills developed in East Caln that it became known as Milltown (later to be separated off and called Downingtown.)

Development was greatly aided in East Caln by the construction of the Lancaster Turnpike, which opened in the last decade of the 18th century, allowing easy trade with Philadelphia, Lancaster and points west. Not only did trade grow as a result of the roadway, but it made East Caln a witness to everything that happened in America. It was used by troops going to Western Pennsylvania to put down the whiskey rebellion, groups of people heading west with covered wagons, sites for political speeches, and men going off to war.

Not only did East Caln see the development of industry, it was also a township of farmers, reacting and finding ways to deal with the reality of agriculture in the New World. Pennsylvania means Penn's Woods, and heavy, virgin forests covered the land. This meant that ways had to be found to clear the land, work the land, and fertilize the land. Grains came first because the land did not have to be plowed deeply for the grain to grow.

It took almost a full hundred years to make happen what most people assume was the way of life of the farmer. Most of the early settlers in East Caln were English. Most of the English methods of farming did not work in Chester County. What had to be learned, often by trial and error, was that stumps had to be removed, plows had to be developed, animals needed barns to survive the winters, land had to be fertilized, and crops had to be rotated to maintain fertility.

While the learning process was taking place, America was faced with deciding her future with England. Ultimately, the American Revolution took place, with the grist mills of East Caln playing a part. Wounded were housed in one or more barns in East Caln, a commissary was established, and a small garrison was station to forage for food for the troops at Valley Forge. In addition, the war sorely tested the religious beliefs of the Quakers, who opposed the war on general principle.

The 19th century saw industrialization and the growth of the township. Quarrying provided over a 100 jobs. The railroad came to the Brandywine Valley. Though greatly opposed by the residents of East Caln, Downingtown petitioned to withdraw from the township. The petition was granted and Downingtown was created as a Borough in 1859, taking previously East Caln lands with her.

This division also took a great deal of industry with her. In a strange sort of way, East Caln became one of the first bedroom communities before the concept existed.

For the next hundred years, East Caln had the threat of various townships petitioning for more land. A law, which required the consent of both those wanting the land and those giving up the land, was not passed until 1968. As a result, the boundaries of East Caln kept changing, leading to the recreation of the original township Caln, which ceased to be when East and West were created in 1728.

Farming continued to be the occupation of most of the inhabitants of East Caln after 1850. The township experienced everything else all Chester Countians did in the same time period. Public Schooling was started in the 1830's, but it did not become compulsory until 1909. Churches were founded, trolleys were commissioned, railroads dotted the countryside. Roads and their poor condition engaged all people in all walks of life.

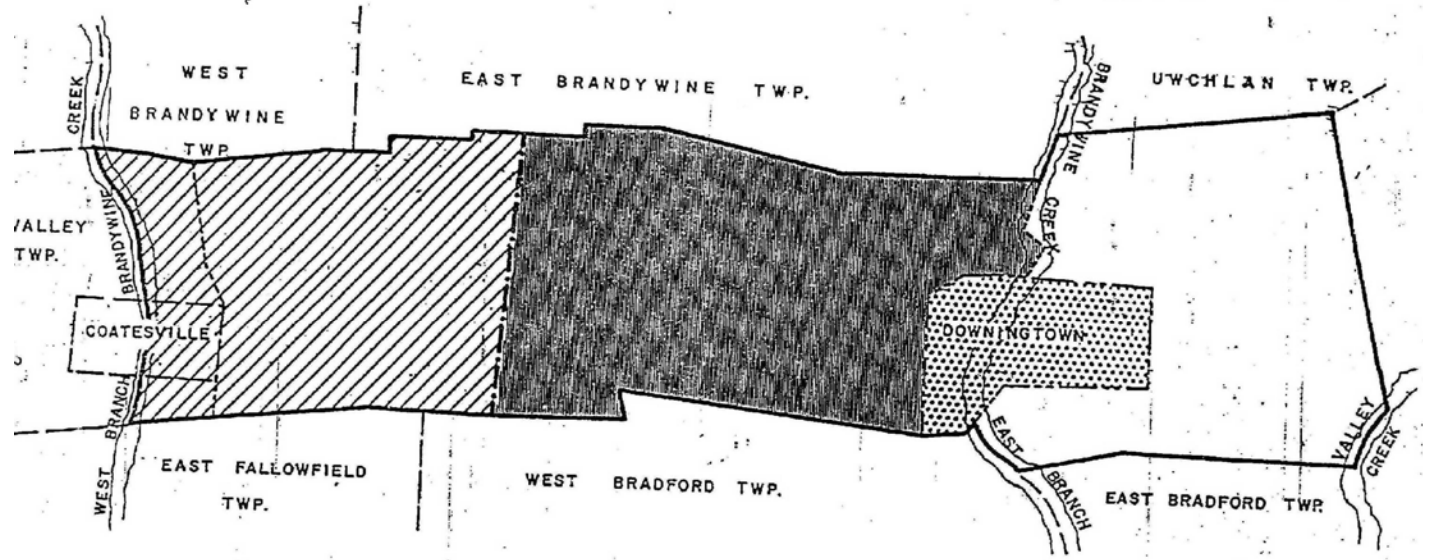
By the twentieth century, industry was booming. Communities existed. The automobile brought all of its good and bad consequences to East Caln as it did elsewhere. Radios and movies brought the world closer.

The Depression of the 1930's affected the citizens of the township as everywhere else in the Country. The end of the decade saw the United States plunged into World War II, affecting every man, woman, and child in the entire United States.

The prosperity which followed the war, brought housing and people to East Caln, a condition which exists today. The boundaries will no longer change because of the change in legislation.

Rather than emphasize dates and people, this history has tried to show that the people of East Caln have been an integral part of history, because they are an integral part of America.

MAJOR TERRITORIAL CHANGES - 1850-1870







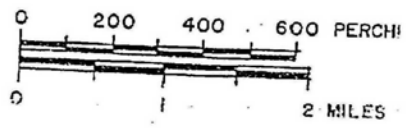
-  ORIGINAL BOUNDARY OF EAST CALN TWP.
-  1852 - TO VALLEY TWP. - 3735 ACRES
-  1859 - TO DOWNINGTOWN BOROUGH - 770 ACRES
-  1868 - TO CALN TWP. - 3424 ACRES



FIGURE 2



SOURCE: CHESTER COUNTY COURT OF QUARTER SESSIONS RECORDS, VOL. 5