

A Brief History of Franklin Township

The earliest known inhabitants of the Township are the Lenni Lenape. Later, much of Franklin was part of the London Tract, sold by William Penn in 1699 to the London Company (officially the Pennsylvania Land Company). The remainder (to the south and west) was in smaller land grants, a few (south of Strickersville Road, centered roughly on Appleton Road) granted by the Calverts of Maryland as part of New Munster. Among the early settlers were Susannah McKean, grandmother of patriot Thomas McKean. Farmers cleared the old-growth forests, and the rich soil was plowed and planted with crops.

In the early 1700s, townships were established in the area. New London, which Franklin was then part of, was chartered in 1723. In 1852, Franklin was created from SE New London Township. The new township was named in honor of Benjamin Franklin, who during the 1760s and 1770s owned 215 acres adjoining what is now Kemblesville.

Improved roads in the 1700s led to the establishment of inns and stagecoach stops, including the taverns associated with Elizabeth Furey (1758, preceded by William Alexander in 1748 and Matthew Porterfield in 1753) and George McCleave (1763), as well as Franklin's villages, Kemblesville and Chesterville. By the mid-1800s, Kemblesville was a prosperous village with three mills, a hotel, and a nearby pottery works; Chesterville was a compact village with several buildings. Milling developed in the 1700s and remained important in the 1800s. Most mills were grist mills, others saw or paper mills. An 1847 map shows six mills in Franklin on branches of the White Clay Creek and on Big Elk Creek.

The "Common School System" was introduced in the 1830s. Municipalities were divided into local school districts, each served by its own schoolhouse. One-room schoolhouses were built in most of Franklin's districts. Their operation ceased in 1956, when the Kemblesville Elementary School was built and the system was fully integrated into the Avon Grove School District.

In 1933, the Township voted to remain "dry" when the 21st Amendment repealed Prohibition. It has been implied that before Prohibition, Cecil County was "dry" and workers from Elk Mills found Kemblesville a lively spot on Saturday nights.

The automobile brought many changes to the Township during the 20th cent. Roads were improved to accommodate growing traffic, and over time Franklin moved from being an agricultural community to a bedroom community. Traditional but obsolescent businesses, such as saddleries and blacksmith shops, closed with the times, and other businesses also ceased operating, such as Kemblesville's general store (1955) and hotel (1969), as residents traveled further afield more easily. In the mid-1980s – more than 100 years after its founding – the Township moved into an official township building, converting a former farm machine shop to offices and meeting space.

Historical Commission, April 2016