

# White Horse a proud throwback to days predating developments

By DOUGLAS HARPER  
(Of the Local News Staff)

The little village of White Horse, or Planebrook, lies on Swedesford Road in the western end of East Whiteland township. It is the only one of East Whiteland's 18th century villages that hasn't been rolled over by development yet.

The name "Planebrook" only dates back to 1898, when a post office was opened there. For almost two centuries before that, the place was known as White Horse, for the White Horse Inn. But there already was a White Horse post office in Willistown in 1898, so the village became Planebrook.

White Horse remains relatively intact: five houses there date from early times, and two of its stone barns were built before 1840. The old blacksmith's shop and wheelwright's shop are still standing, as are other stone outbuildings, some of which date back to the 1700s.

**THE FORTUNES** of White Horse were intimately tied to the road that ran through it. It is Swedesford Road now, but it was originally an Indian path from the Schuylkill to the Brandywine. In colonial days it was first called the Great Wagon Road and later the Lancaster Pike.

As the Lancaster Pike, it was the most important road in colonial America, the trail that led from Philadelphia west through Lancaster to

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## Villages

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Carlisle, where traffic turned south for the new lands in the Shenandoah and Cumberland valleys.

The White Horse inn was erected at a fork in the road at the 23rd milestone from Philadelphia. One fork ran west through the Great Valley, the other turned north through Lionville.

**THE FIRST** European settler in White Horse was Richard Thomas, who in 1711 settled on Valley Creek. Thomas built his cabin near an Indian village because the Indians' dogs would scare off the wild beasts, which were then numerous in the valley.

The White Horse inn probably was built before 1720, but the first record is in 1721, when James Thomas took out a license "for the keeping of a house of entertainment, and for selling of wine, brandy, rum, and other strong liquors." White Horse was a popular name for colonial taverns; there were at least four others in Chester County alone.

The White Horse Inn still stands, though not in its original form. The eastern end of the current building pre-dates 1744, but was probably itself an addition to an original struc-

ture made of hewn logs. Its stone walls are two feet thick.

In 1978 the tavern was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, largely through the efforts of Doris Powell, who was then president of the East Whiteland Historical Commission.

**WHITE HORSE VILLAGE** grew with the valley. It was for a while one of the chief settlements of Chester County.

But as the white settlers in the valley increased, the Indians began to be squeezed out. The wild game that concerned Richard Thomas became quite scarce, and the Indians, faced with a dwindling food supply, turned their bows against an occasional farm cow, which caused friction with the local European settlers.

White Horse was sacked by the British on their march into Philadelphia after the abortive Battle of the Clouds. But the town picked up where it left off after the Revolution, and the inn was expanded to accommodate the increased traffic on the Lancaster Pike.

In 1787, Arthur Rice took over the tavern. He had been a brave soldier during the Revolution, and a trusted scout for George Washington. The White Horse became a regular meeting place for old soldiers, and from them grew the first Masonic lodge in Chester County.

**IN 1794, THE** Lancaster Pike was rerouted to its present location, a mile south of the White Horse. The old Lancaster Pike had become so deeply rutted as to be nearly impassable. The main road now bypassed the tavern, but the village was visited by a different kind of traf-

In those days cattle drovers regularly drove herds from all over the county into the slaughter yards at 40th Street and Lancaster Avenue in Philadelphia. The drovers preferred to avoid the heavy traffic on the main roads, and their route usually included an overnight stop at the White Horse.

The drovers were usually young single men, like the cowboys of the Wild West, and their stays at the tavern were frequently boisterous.

The White Horse, along with the Black Horse, in Lower Merion, were the last two stops before Philadelphia "The boys had a good deal of sport at these two taverns at nights when we arrived there," one old drover recalled in the last century.

**BUT THE WORK** was hard, too, and the drovers were up by 3 a.m. the next morning to feed the herds before hitting the road.

"Cud mornings it was not very pleasant to load hay and corn fodder

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# White Horse recalls the pre-development era

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and break corn over the rim of a barrel for over a hundred cattle," the old drover recalled.

Besides cattle herds, White Horse was likely to be visited by flocks of a hundred or more geese or turkeys, all being driven to Philadelphia to meet the same inevitable end. The sound and sight of such an army on the move must have been remarkable. Their forward progress was one mile per hour at best.

White Horse became a sort of agricultural exchange, farmers came in from the township to add their livestock to the droves.

**THE INN WAS** always busy. On sunny days, the men stood out front and played "long bullets," a sort of

early bowling game in which the winner was the one who could roll a Revolutionary cannon ball the furthest. Cannon balls were as common as rocks in the fields of White Horse after 1777.

Indians, too, frequented the White Horse on their way to Philadelphia to trade skins and furs for lead, stockings, pipes, and other goods. They drank rum and slept in the barn or, in cold weather, on the kitchen floor.

The Indians would occasionally make a little money from the locals by wagering they could shoot an arrow and hit a penny tied to a stick 50 yards away: if the Indian hit his target, he kept the penny. Even through copper cents were the size of modern half dollars in those days, it was a true feat of marksmanship.

But the loss of the Lancaster road traffic eventually took its toll on White Horse. A projected expansion of the village collapsed around 1800. The last tavernkeeper chose not to renew his license in 1855, and the White Horse became only a farm until even that was broken up at sheriff's sale in 1954.

**WHERE DID ALL THE** people go? Some stayed, many left. A newspaper item of late 1878 reported that a colony of a dozen or more White Horse families planned to emigrate to Kansas in the coming winter and spring.

White Horse enjoyed a brief resurgence with the discovery of iron ore, glass sand, and white clay deposits in the area in the mid-1800s.

By the mid-1850s, as many as 20

cartloads of ore per day headed down Swedesford Road from White Horse to the smelting operations in Conshohocken. One mine produced as much as 30 tons a day.

Land values shot up. Locals marvelled at New York companies that bought their farms for unheard-of prices, like \$1,000 for eight acres.

**MINING OPERATIONS** usually meant immigrant labor, and by 1870, East Whiteland had 208 foreign-born residents: the fourth highest immigrant population in the county, after Phoenixville, West Chester, and Tredeyfrin.

A newspaper item of 1880 offers this report on the opening of one mine: "Captain Joseph Andrews of Allentown, an experienced miner, has been engaged to work these

mines by the lessees, and he has now a large force of workmen engaged in taking out ore, and about twenty more men are wanted. As Mr. Andrews pays \$1.10 per day for laborers, he should have no difficulty in obtaining them."

White Horse, having been bypassed by the heaviest development in the Great Valley, still retains the appearance it had 150 years ago. But since 1975, part of the White Horse region has been zoned limited industrial, and office buildings have encroached on the old village somewhat.

The East Whiteland Historical Commission is anxious to preserve the last true village in East Whiteland.

Above are the familiar crossroads of Swedesford Road and Phoenixville Pike; Above right towers the silo of a barn converted to a house; at right is the village's landmark, the former White Horse Inn.

Staff photo by Larry McDevitt

