

Print of Chester County Courthouse, 1860, scanned from Futhey & Cope

## West Chester Celebrates 225 Years at the Center of Chester County

MAKE PLANS TO JOIN THE PARTY.

Cara Coridonna

**D**ID YOU KNOW THE CHARMING BOROUGH OF West Chester is reaching a historic milestone? There's still time to brush up on your history so you'll understand just what's being celebrated this April.

### EARLY DAYS

In the early days of the Pennsylvania colony — centuries after the Native American tribes, including the Lenape people, were here — there were just three counties: Philadelphia, Bucks and Chester. With Philadelphia in the middle, Bucks sat to the east, with Chester to the west. Early on, settlements hovered near the city, but as people began to seek new opportunities, more roads started popping up to carry them in all directions.

Gay Street, built in 1735, was one such street, this one connecting Philadelphia to the western areas of Chester County. Ten years later, High Street would do the same for travelers heading to and from the Delaware city of Wilmington. At that busy intersection, a

watering hole, the Turk's Head Inn, was established to offer respite — and food and drink — to weary travelers.

As populations shifted, Chester County saw a need to move county functions closer to people at the edges of the territory.



Pennsylvania Railroad Station on Market Street c. 1930



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1. "Turks Head" West Side, High and Market (pastel) by Barclay Rubincam (1974)
2. Turk's Head Inn sign, photo by George Fistrovitch
3. Graphite sketch of 13 North High Street, Darlington Building, by Barclay Rubincam (1975)
4. *Mansion House Hotel* (pastel), depicted as if it's about 1856, by Barclay Rubincam (1969)

RUBINCAM PHOTOS BY LASZLO BODO

Centrally located Turk's Head, the town named after its popular waystation, became the new county seat in 1788, in place of the city of Chester. (Chester regained its status as a county seat but for newly created Delaware County.) Turk's Head, renamed West Chester in 1791, would hold the honors as county seat for the newly downsized Chester County.

### THE BOROUGH AND THE QUASIQUI WHAT?

It was a wild start for the little town, which would finally earn borough status on March 28, 1799, about a decade after it was named the new county seat and 225 years ago this year.

"This celebration has a name, which you have to include," said West Chester Mayor Lillian DeBaptiste. "It's the most awkward name."

She's right. It's quasiqubicentennial. Meaning the marking of 225 years.

"That's what we're celebrating. This little borough needs to recognize its origins," she said. The mayor is helping lead a group of volun-

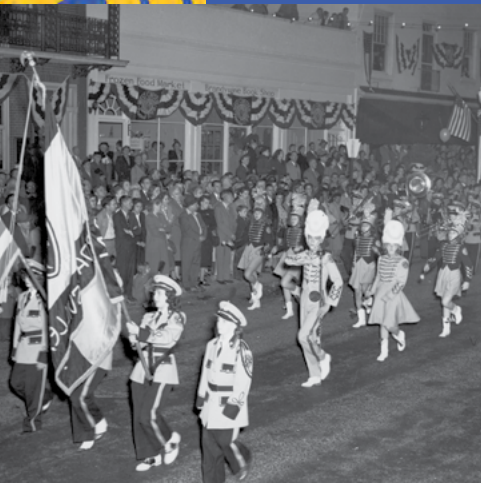
teers representing the business, historic and municipal communities trying to figure out how best to commemorate the milestone.

### PARTY LIKE IT'S 1799

The Greater West Chester Chamber of Commerce has plans to kick things off on March 26, with a co-hosted event with the Chester County History Center. Chamber President Katie Walker describes it as a "kick-off birthday party" for the Borough. The still-evolving plans include a champagne toast, maybe some birthday cake and plenty of history to reflect on. The event will be open to members of the business community as well as West Chester dignitaries.

A birthday party, however, is just the start. On April 21, West Chester will be shutting down the streets for a the-more-the-merrier Birthday Parade. Plans are for the parade to feature a variety of floats showcasing West Chester's heritage. There will be balloons, festive decorations, marching bands and plenty of displays of West Chester pride.





Left to right: West Chester Sesquicentennial Celebration, 1949



West Chester Pioneer Corps at Washington and Matlack Streets, 1899



Historic photos like these will be featured on a new mural from the Public Arts Commission later this year.

“Whether you’re a longtime resident, a newcomer to our community or just passing through, everyone is welcome to participate in this historic event,” said West Chester Parks and Recreation Director Keith Kurowski.

The parade is currently slated to start at 1 p.m. at the corner of New and Market Streets, then head down Market to Matlack Street before heading back up Gay Street. Unlike other Borough parades, this one is planned for a Sunday afternoon.

The 225 organizing committee hopes that celebrations won’t be left just to what members can think up and organize, but will be embraced by others in the community.

“We’re asking other organizations to wrap the theme of West Chester’s 225 into their events,” said Mayor DeBaptiste. West Chester’s Historical Commission, for example, will be recognizing the milestone during its annual Original Memorial Day “Veterans Appreciation” ceremony held on May 30 at the Chestnut Grove Cemetery.

And a joint celebration will be part of this year’s Town Tours and Village Walk program, celebrating 30 years of tours. The series’ inaugural event is scheduled for June 6 at the Chester County History Center and will involve speeches from county and local dignitaries before heading out for a half-dozen different tours through the Borough.

### MORE MURALS

West Chester’s Public Arts Commission (PAC) also hopes to offer its own unique contribution, one that can be taken in at leisure by all who visit West Chester’s Beer Mill on Hannum Avenue.

The PAC has already helped bring two large mural projects to the Borough, each associated with historic events. The Women’s Suffrage mural on the side of East Market Street’s Salvation Army building was completed in 2020 to mark the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment. Then two years ago, the Friends Association added an equity mural to the side of its West Chestnut Street headquarters to celebrate 200 years of supporting the West Chester community.

Now the PAC is hoping to work its magic for the Borough itself, only this time there will be no artists on scaffolding with brushes.

“We started to head in the direction of using a historic photo,” said West Chester PAC Chair Jimmer Breen. Photos can be enlarged and printed on a variety of materials to accommodate nearly any situation, including the side of a building. “I did some research, and, with the help of the wonderful folks at the History Center, I came across an awesome collection of photos depicting people on the street in 1888,” said Breen. “The photos are fascinating

because portable cameras were new in 1888, so these are some of the first images of regular West Chester people going about their regular lives,” he said.

The project is still in the development phase, but if all goes as planned, the Commission is hopeful to have a big reveal later this year.

### COMMUNITY BALL AND HISTORY

Mayor DeBaptiste is also considering the idea of hosting a Mayor’s Ball, but she doesn’t want it to be exclusive. She wants everyone to be able to come. So where to hold it?

“Maybe in the street?” she spitballed. What to wear? “Sequins and sneakers,” she suggested. She’s on a roll now. All the events, the splash, the sparkle — it’s fun, but it’s important, too.

“I think history is important,” she said. “How we navigate history. Are we repeating? Are we moving forward? Are we going in circles?”

When West Chester celebrated its 200th birthday, DeBaptiste’s father, Clifford, was mayor. The future of the little Borough wasn’t so clear then. Crime was high. Too many businesses had deserted the downtown center. West Chester was just starting to come back.

“Now, here we are, very sought after,” the current mayor said, noting West Chester’s recent distinction as the country’s most popular real estate market on Zillow small town searches. “We have a sense of pride, but also, we need to pause and say thank you.”

West Chester officially marks 225 years as a borough on March 28, 2024. Come join the celebrations.

To keep up to date, check the West Chester Parks and Recreation Facebook page. ♦



Official flag of West Chester. The six stripes represent West Chester’s first streets: Market, High, Gay, Chestnut, Church and Walnut



Special thanks to Chester County History Center for many of the photos in this article



# West Chester <sup>225 years</sup>

On the eve of West Chester's 225th birthday, what better way to celebrate than by learning some fascinating facts about its rich history? Brush up on local history trivia — from before the town's incorporation to today — with these dozen interesting details. How many did you know?



PHOTO COURTESY WIKIMEDIA DOUGHERTZ



The Lincoln Building



Horticultural Hall, 1958



- It all began with a tavern. Before its incorporation in 1799, West Chester was home to a crossroads tavern called the Turk's Head Inn, which provided the original name of the town.
- The area's history stretches back even further. Before its 18th-century incorporation, West Chester was the confirmed location of eight Native American campsites.
- All aboard! West Chester was home to one of America's first railroads, starting operation in 1832 and used primarily for transporting goods to Philadelphia.
- The first known biography of Abraham Lincoln was written by John Locke Scripps and published in 1860 in what's now known as the Lincoln Building.
- Before the Civil War, West Chester was the proud home to one of the nation's highest populations of free and educated African Americans.
- Frederick Douglass's first speech in West Chester in 1863 was at Horticultural Hall, 32 years before his final public speech on West Chester University's campus. His 1863 speech inspired over 100 young and free Black men to join the Union.
- Bayard Rustin, civil rights activist, architect of the March on Washington and subject of an Oscar-nominated film, was born and raised in West Chester over 100 years ago. He was arrested for trying to sit in the whites-only section of the Warner Movie Theater.
- In 1985, West Chester's Downtown Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- From 1898–1950, commuters used a 30-mile-long trolley service to travel from West Chester to Philadelphia.
- During its Golden Age of the 1950s, West Chester had three full-service department stores to choose from, including beloved Mosteller's. The KOP Mall put the kibosh on them.
- West Chester's population in the 1800s of 374 has grown to a whopping 18,630 today (excluding WCU students)!
- West Chester Business Improvement District (now Downtown West Chester) rebranded, and the courthouse silhouette logo evolved to include five iconic buildings: Sunset Hill Jewelers, West Chester Fire Co. (Slow Hand), Chester County Courthouse, F&M Building (align. space) and 135 W. Gay St. (Crusin' Style Barber Shop).