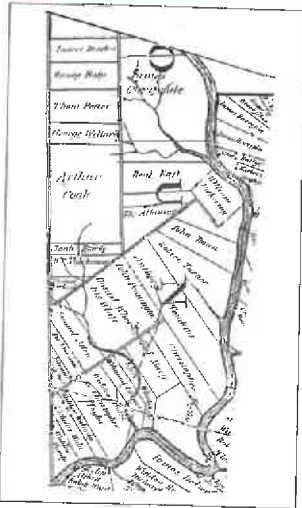


# A History of Roads by James M. Briggs



Holmes Map of 1681, showing earliest land grants in Northampton Township area

We have been looking at how the expanding population in the 1950s impacted the local government in Northampton Township. The Township for the first time in its history consolidated all of its operations at a central location in Richboro. In future articles, we will examine various separate functions of government and how they were affected. But we will begin with one of the government's primary requirements since the Roman Times – the need for "improved" public roads.

Most people know William Penn established the counties of Southeastern Pennsylvania from a grant by the King of England in 1681. But there were scattered settlements along the Delaware River prior to Penn. The earliest road laid out in Bucks County circa 1677 enlarged an existing Native American path making it "passable for horses and carts". Portions of this road became Route 13 in the 20th century.

William Penn insisted that a proprietor (owner of the ground) from his land grant first compensate the Native American occupants before it was occupied. Penn formalized his own purchase in 1683 for lands between the Pennpack and Neshaminy Creeks. This area contained what would become the municipalities of Lower Bucks County with Northampton and Warwick Townships eventually along its northern borders.

Penn's property was first surveyed shortly after the King's grant in 1681 and the lands which would become Northampton Township had already been divided among 16 of his wealthiest friends. (See Holmes Map). Curiously the straight property lines closely equate to some of the major roads in the Township; Almshouse Road, Second Street Pike, and Bustleton Pike. Most of those first properties were never settled and the proprietors would be viewed today as little more than land speculators.

The Northampton area was originally referred to as the "adjacents of Southampton" and next surveyed in 1703-1708. The number of proprietors had increased to over 30, but most were not original to the time of William Penn approximately 25 years earlier. There were some roads close to Northampton established by the 18th Century. Philadelphia Road (Second Street Pike) was officially started in 1693 and extended a few years later to Southampton. At roughly the same time the "Kings Road" in 1693 was built from what is currently Langhorne to Feasterville eventually becoming Bridgetown Pike. A portion of which is still the southern border for the Township.

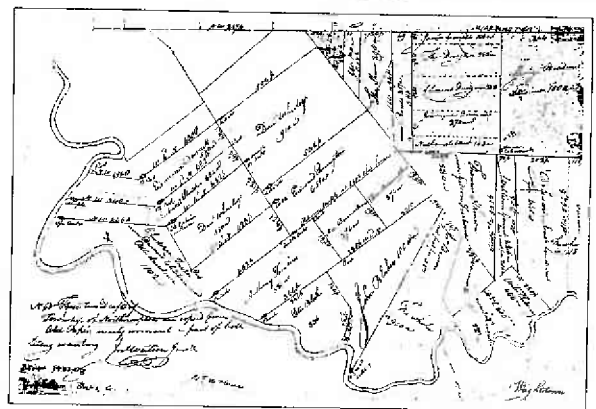
During this period most local roads in this area were little more than farm lanes, and property owners could fence those areas at their choosing. Many of the land disputes were settled in Quarter Sessions Court and by 1709 some property owners from this area wrote a letter to the court. They complained that roads were cutting their properties into "narrow and irregular pieces". On December 11, 1722, 21 proprietors of the approximately 40 settlements asked to be "granted as a district Township to be called North Hampton." Permission was granted in five days and a Supervisor of Roads appointed in July 1723.

Many of these early roads are difficult to place because they had different names for various portions or changed names with adjacent property transfers. We know the road from Southampton was extended in the early 1700s through what is now Richboro, to Newtown, and ultimately Yardley. Bristol Road in 1724 was extended from the Holland area along the township border, Bustleton Pike from Feasterville and Jacksonville Road from Warminster. So many roads were added the Township needed a second road supervisor in 1745. The upper portion of Second Street Pike called the "Middle Road" was chartered in 1753. This connected to Wrightstown Township on the first bridge in this area "Chain Bridge" started after 1748.

Early roads were established by simply laying out the location, clearing the trees, and removing stumps. This was acceptable for pedestrians or to travel on horseback. But this was inadequate for the increasing requirements of handling commerce on heavy wagons. By the early 1800's many of the roads were improved and maintained by private toll companies. Some of our local roads required tolls until Pennsylvania began assuming control of the major roads in the 1930s. There were still in the 1950s three old toll houses remaining in the area. My parents had a replica of an original toll schedule ranging from .24 cents for a wagon to .02 cents for a pedestrian and people going to church.

A comparison of maps from the 1800 era and a modern one from 1948 show general differences in the Township roadways. The newer map had "County" numbers for identification purposes and the farms were generally smaller because of mechanization advantages. Almshouse Road (called Poorhouse Road until the 1950s) originally did not continue straight into Richboro until cut through after 1812. The largest changes to the road system during this period were created by the construction of the Churchville Reservoir and the consolidation of farms due to the creation of the Tyler Estate (now the State Park).

The next article will continue the examination of the roads in Northampton as they were impacted by the technological changes of the 20th century. Much of the early history roads in the Township was compiled by Virginia B. Geyer to whom I am indebted.



John Cutler's survey of "adjacents of Southampton," 1703-1708.  
(Library of Bucks Co. Historical Library, Doylestown, Pa.)