

## Northampton Township - A Decade of Change

By James Briggs

Northampton Township has been described by some as the quintessential bedroom community. Our family moved here in 1951, and we lived on 2 acres surrounded by farms. We often had to wait for use of the telephone because it was still a party line system. We did not have a separate number until the Elmwood exchange started in 1953. These memories were triggered by the current construction of a new and larger police department headquarters. The current police building sits across from the Northampton Administration building and is almost 45 years old.

The township is unique among municipalities in not only having all emergency and administrative functions in the same complex, but also in separate buildings. The Tax Collector and Municipal Authority did relocate last year a short distance away. But the rest of the township agencies sit on the 10 acres purchased in 1962. And a small parcel added in 1985 for the library. Many township residents are not aware that prior to the current situation most operations for Northampton Township were centered in a building located on Second Street in Richboro next to the Spread Eagle Inn.

At the end of the Second World War, Northampton Township existed as it had for over 200 years - a community centered on its many farms. Local government concerns were primarily focused on maintaining local roads often with farmers handling the roads in lieu of taxes. The police and fire departments were composed of volunteers. Stores for consumer goods were minimal in size, places of worship limited to one in Richboro, and sources of entertainment unchanged from bygone years.

Northampton Township did not even have any zoning laws until 1948, allowing one to build unencumbered except for staying off your neighbor's property. With increased mechanization, gone were the days of large masonry houses and cheap labor provided by having large families. Even though the township population did decrease slightly according to the 1930 census, there was some growth in housing between the two World Wars. During this period building of new houses was primarily stick-frame construction. Sears Roebuck & Co. did sell pre-fabricated houses in the 1930's, and there are a number in the Township, especially Cornell Avenue in Churchville.

There had been some small roads added to the Township during this period and the Pa. Dept. of Highways did pave many of the major roads, but everyone lived without a street address. Our family lived 3/4 mile outside of Richboro and had only a Post Office as an address until the late 1950's. Visitors were told to travel the approximate distance and look for our house described to them by my parents.

This changed in 1949 with the construction of the first "development" north of Richboro. Now for the first time one lived in "Casey Track" as the new section was called by its developer. No longer did one live in or near one of the three towns - Holland, Richboro, Churchville or have a Rural Delivery address Ivyland, Newtown, and Langhorne to live in Northampton.

It did not matter if the houses built were a split-level, colonial, rancher, etc. The population growth in Northampton for almost 30 years was new housing R-2 developments with 1/2 acre lots. These early sections prior to the existence of the Municipal Authority had septic systems and wells for water. In 1955 the Township passed a

The volunteer Northampton Township Police Dept. - photo taken 1962



new ordinance changing the specifications for R-2 developments so new roads were widened to 31 feet and they had concrete curbing. It is interesting to drive throughout the Township and identify those sections preceding this date by their road design.

Many of the new families moving into the township during the 1950's were WWII vets often educated by the GI Bill and a traditional stay-at-home mother. The surrounding business community was slow in adapting to the burgeoning population. The first small shopping center was built circa 1957, but the larger food stores did not arrive until the late 1960's. With many households only having one car and fathers commuting for employment, necessary food items were provided by home delivery--milk from Gardenville Dairies, bread from Freihofer Bakery, and ice cream from O'Boyles in Bristol. We even had the occasional visit from the Fuller Brush Man.

Most people then as now moved to Northampton for its openness and "bucolic" setting. Achieving this with some of the new higher density housing was difficult, but most preserve some "open space" as a green buffer. In the 1950's and early 1960's there were no public parks, but the 1/2 acre lots provided the elbow room. The Township felt more open partially because there were fewer trees blocking your view. Farmers tilled every acre possible unless limited by poor drainage or steep grades. I can still remember the shock when a survey taken in the late 1970's indicated most students felt they lived in Suburbia while we still had farms adjacent to our property.

My experiences were shaped by the 1950's and perhaps my glasses have become rose-colored. But I admire the men (sorry, women were not involved in politics at this time) who witnessed a growing community and took steps to guide its future. They brought a new degree of professionalism to a job as Township Supervisor now as then mostly volunteer and unappreciated. They utilized local laws (ordinances) at first allowed under the Second Class Township Code, produced the first Comprehensive Plan in 1962 guiding future growth, and finally established a full-time police department in 1965. Hopefully, reader interest and personal time will allow me to examine the individual departments of the township in greater detail during this period of growth and change in Northampton.