

# Historical Commission

By: Andrea Mangold, NHT Historical Commission

The history of Northampton Township can be traced back through land deeds from William Penn and place names that originated in the surnames of local farming families. More sublime, however, is our Township's connection to the era challenge that began in the shadows of the Cold War and helped launch Bucks County into the Space Age.



By the mid-1950's over 200 Nike anti-aircraft missile bases existed in the United States, situated around major cities such as Philadelphia, Washington D.C and New York City. The U.S. War Department initiated the Nike missile program in 1944 in response to the emerging threat from enemy fighter jet attacks. In Richboro, Nike Base PH07 occupied the property that is now a part of the Northampton Township Parks and Recreation Department, on land formerly owned by Dr. Arthur Widenmeyer; a second control facility was located on Twining Ford Road. The base was one of twelve in the suburban Philadelphia region, forming what was sometimes called a "ring of fire" designed for defensive attacks.

The base stored twenty Nike Ajax missiles, the first operational anti-aircraft weapon designed to be a crucial defense against the threat of attack that underwrote the political tensions of the time. The precursor to nuclear warheads, Ajax missiles had a range of 25 miles and could travel at 1,000 mph.

The Army manned the Richboro base from 1954 through 1960, and soldiers spent their free time amongst the neighboring residents. In Memories of the Richboro Nike Base (link below), township historian Virginia Geyer recorded this anecdote that while humorous, gives a hint of the very real threat that became a part of everyday life in Northampton:



*"On a summer afternoon, my mother, who wore a hearing aid, was sitting on the back porch enjoying the garden and the birds at the feeders. Suddenly she gave a loud call for me -- her hearing aid was beeping at close regular intervals. What could it be? This happened off and on all the weekend. I mentioned it to the Mississippi soldier we knew. He thought about it for a short time and began laughing. Every time the army base trained on the radar, it sent out high intensity, radar charged waves that my mother's hearing aid picked up. I wonder how many other people had the same problem, but never got the answer."*

## Nikes to Fire Only in Attack

**Edgely and Richboro Groups Hear Officers Assurances on Sites Plans**

The Nike base at Richboro, though it is to be stocked with numerous, self-guided rockets, will not fire a missile unless the area is under actual air attack. Major Joseph S. Edgar, guided missile officer of the 24th Anti-Aircraft Artillery group told the Richboro Parent-Teacher Association.

Though the Ajax missiles became obsolete and were eventually decommissioned in the early 1960's, the twin facilities remain. The Twining Ford Road facility was later obtained by the Council Rock School District and was repurposed as an administrative and operational site. The cavernous missile storage facility's secrets, literally lying beneath Township recreational land, remain tightly sealed within a vast, underground concrete chamber. As vestiges of a war that never happened, and a doomsday scenario that fortunately never came to fruition, the Nike facilities remain silent sentinels of our township's role in a pivotal point in American history.

Acknowledgment for information included in this article to Mr. Doug Crompton and Mrs. Virginia B. Geyer. Web sources for this article: <http://patch.com/pennsylvania/levittown/old-missile> • <http://www.historicbuckscounty.org/richboro/nike/RichboroNikeGeyer.pdf>  
Photos: Andrea Mangold (2012); Google Earth (satellite image)