

2011

# 01 Tracing West Chester's Growth Through Maps

James Jones

*West Chester University of Pennsylvania*, JJONES@wcupa.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist\\_wchest](http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_wchest)



Part of the [Public History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Jones, J. (2011). 01 Tracing West Chester's Growth Through Maps. Retrieved from [http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist\\_wchest/32](http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_wchest/32)

This Historical Map is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in History of West Chester, Pennsylvania by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact [wcressler@wcupa.edu](mailto:wcressler@wcupa.edu).



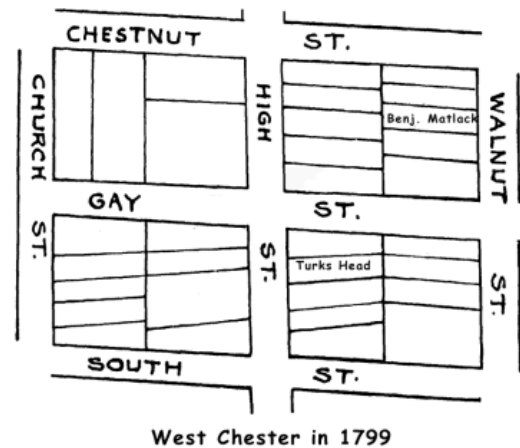
## Tracing West Chester's Growth Through Maps

Copyright 2011 by Jim Jones

Nowadays when developers think about West Chester, they think about *infill development* (building on one of the few remaining lots between existing structures) or, to a lesser extent, *teardowns* (replacing an existing structure with a new one). That is because the Borough is, in the parlance of developers, nearly "built out," meaning that every piece of land that is large enough to hold a building already does.

For the record, as of June 2006, there are three privately-owned developable properties left in the Borough, the Paxson property at the west end of Dean Street, the Stancato property on W. Ashbridge Street and the Zukin property on N. Walnut Street. A fourth -- the Wyeth property on E. Nields Street -- has recently become available thanks to the demolition of the old penicillin factory. Other large parcels are owned by the West Chester Golf & Country Club, Henderson high School and West Chester University.

The first map is really a plan of how Borough leaders hoped the town would develop after it was chartered by the state in 1799. The plan, which was reproduced in the 1899 Centennial Souvenir page 12, shows the location of the original Turk's Head tavern at the intersection of what became High and Gay Streets. It also shows the four additional streets -- Walnut, Chestnut, Church and South (later Market) Streets which defined the four original blocks of the Borough. Notice that the lot lines, which designate properties that front on the north-south streets, never came into use. Instead, as the town grew, frontage on the Philadelphia road became more important and lot lines were laid out



West Chester in 1799

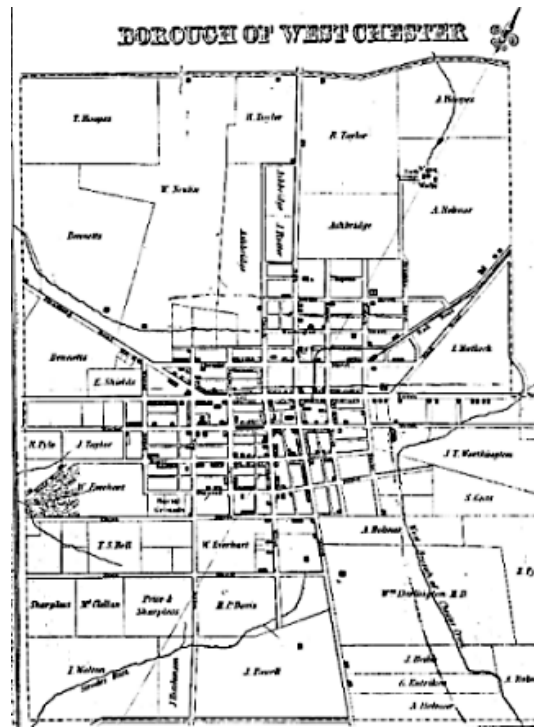
### Proposed plan for the Borough in 1799

to provide the maximum number of properties along Gay Street.

By 1847, the grid of lot lines was extended beyond the four original blocks -- north to Biddle Street along either side of High, but especially southwest and southeast to the West Goshen and East Bradford lines. That was largely the result of William Everhart's purchase of the Wollerton farm in the southwest part of the Borough, as well as the construction of a municipal water supply with a reservoir at what is now Marshall Square Park. Notice that although the lot lines are extensive, the number of buildings (shown as black rectangles) is much less so. Note also the railroad that enters town from the northeast, and compare that to the following map, which shows a second railroad entering town from the southeast.

By 1860, West Chester had two railroads and a street grid that stretched to the Borough's northern line and into the "East End." All of the roads that led into the center of West Chester were in place -- Gay, High, New, Market and Miner Streets plus Downingtown Pike -- but the area east of Franklin Street and north of Gay was still undeveloped. Two clues are evident from the map -- the railroad and the squiggly line that represents the Goose Creek. The area around East Gay and East Market was largely swamp and not considered healthy for human housing, while the area adjacent to the railroad tracks was considered unhealthy for different reasons.

Between 1860 and 1938, the town industrialized and in-fill development was extensive, especially on the east side near the railroad tracks. Not only did the Borough acquire firms like the Sharpless Separator Works and Hoopes Bros. & Darlington Wheel Works, but developers also constructed housing for industrial workers who flocked into the Borough. Oddly enough, the street grid which stretched to the southeast corner of the Borough in 1860 was less extensive on the 1938 map, perhaps in recognition that the brick works and farms on the east side of the railroad were less likely to be developed at the end of the Depression. Other changes include the completion of W. Ashbridge Street to the Downingtown Pike, and the completion of Miner,

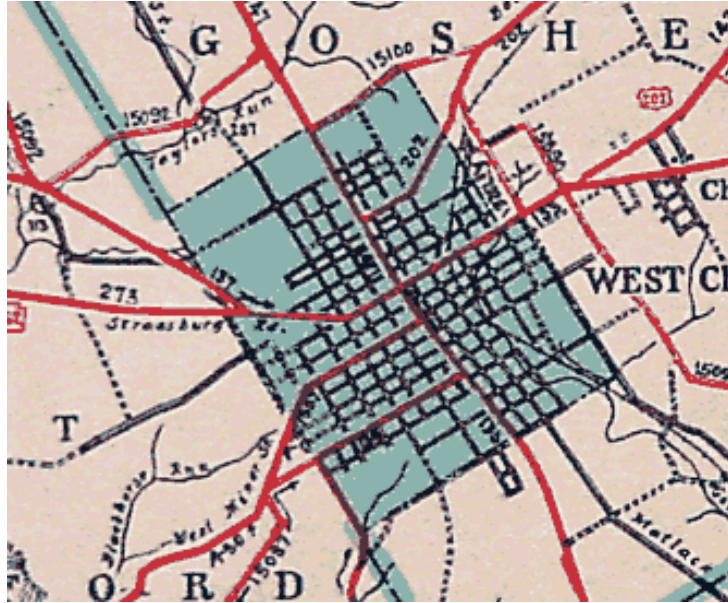


1847 (from the Historical Society clippings file)



1860 (from the Library of Congress)

Barnard, Union, Dean, Price and Sharpless Streets to the East Bradford line. Of course, Dean Street was never really extended west of Brandywine Street -- the last two blocks pass through the center of the Paxson property, which is still undeveloped (as of June 2006).



**Detail from a 1938 Chester County map**

By the 1960s, the Borough Street grid was fairly close to its current configuration. The curving streets in the far northwest, northeast and southwest -- Maryland Avenue, Marshall/Hillside Drives and College Avenue respectively -- mark three attempts to create suburban-style developments within the Borough limits. (The fourth, Ford Circle, was not built until 1982.) Both railroad lines were still active on the east side of the Borough, and S. Adams Street had not yet been realigned along the Wyeth property in the southeast part of the Borough. W. Marshall Street extended as far as Bradford Avenue, although the Mayfield development (Norris & William Ebbs Lanes) were not yet built.

The last map was prepared by Ray Ott & Associates for the Borough's Comprehensive Plan in 2000. It uses color to show different types of land use and conveys the sense that everything in West Chester is "built out." The implications go beyond colorful maps, however. As Borough Manager Ernie McNeely told Council in fall 2005, "Since the Borough is basically 100% built out there is little hope that new development will grow the



**West Chester in the early 1960s**



**From the 2000 Comprehensive Plan**

tax base and therefore help fund the growing cost of Borough services. As such, the Borough can only count on redevelopment and perhaps intensification of use on existing parcels to create a growing tax base but this of course must be balanced with quality of life issues. The alternative to such growth and redevelopment is regular tax rate increases ..."

---