

# Neighbors

## Montgomery County

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## A helping hand with historical preservation

The Conservation Center takes on projects selectively. It aids with collections and archives.

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In the case of the Conshohocken Historical Society, the aim was to better preserve the borough's historical artifacts.

With Germantown Academy, the challenge is to establish a state-of-the-art archival system, worthy of sheltering evidence of the school's 200-plus years of existence.

Both institutions found help in the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts' Preservation Needs Assessment Program. Funded by the William Penn Foundation, the program was established as a four-year effort and is now in its final year. It works with institutions to improve the care of collections, and to develop sophisticated preservation agendas.

According to Virgilia Rawnsley,

preservation services officer, the Conservation Center, in Philadelphia, awards grants of \$500 to \$3,000 that must be matched on a one-to-one basis by the institution. To date, the Conservation Center has worked with 76 small to mid-size institutions in the Philadelphia area, several of which are in Montgomery County.

Preservation experts visit each approved organization twice, and the visits are followed up by a comprehensive evaluation and list of recommendations. Based on those recommendations, a specific project and grant proposal are developed.

"In general, the preservation assessment outlines all the preservation concerns facing the institution and its ability to care for the collection," Rawnsley said.

Some institutions, such as the Con-

shohocken Historical Society, whose missions center on the preservation of historical data and artifacts, appear to be logical choices for acceptance into the program. But with Germantown Academy, for example, the program marked a first foray into the world of professional restoration and record-keeping. The school is one of 21 organizations enrolled in the program this year, six of them from Montgomery County.

Four years ago, Edwin Probert, an English teacher at Germantown Academy who coached the drama club, based in the school's basement, happened to look in a room filled with boxes and file cabinets.

"I asked, 'What's all that stuff?' and was told it was the 'archives.' It dawned on me that all that stuff was the school's history rotting down there. I spent about 2½ years just sorting the stuff out. I was reading books on how to run an archive, and as I was reading it, I was doing it,"

said Probert, who has since been named the school's collections control manager.

The school, established in Germantown in 1759 and now located in Fort Washington, has a diverse collection consisting of fine arts, mostly portraiture of former headmasters and distinguished alumni; decorative arts ranging from antique tables to a Lukens grandfather clock built in 1834, and a collection of George Washington memorabilia.

"We were given the telescope which George Washington used at the Battle of Germantown. That is the most valuable thing we own," said Probert.

In 1793, Washington sought refuge at Germantown Academy from the yellow fever epidemic that was sweeping Philadelphia. During his residence there, his cabinet met at the school, in which he later enrolled his adopted son, George Wash-

See **HISTORY** on MC2

## Conservation Center steps in to help groups

**HISTORY** from MC1  
ington Parke Custis.

Probert, excited about organizing the school's archives, was eventually steered in the direction of the Conservation Center. Although the academy has not had a site visit or submitted a grand application yet, Probert said he has already been helped by advice "on lots of little things I can do without the money from William Penn," such as monitoring the temperature and humidity levels where the collection is stored.

Joseph Collins, a councilman from Conshohocken's First Ward and president of the Conshohocken Histori-

cal Society, has been steeped in the borough's history all his life.

His father, William Collins, one of the society's founding members in 1963, was president until the younger Collins took over the helm seven years ago.

"The Conservation Center really gave us a format to work on and a direction to go in," said Collins. "Being in the program has also been valuable in helping to raise funds for other projects to fulfill the recommendations. Funders are more willing . . . when recommendations have come through the Conservation Center. It gives you some real legitimacy.

It's the foundation we needed for moving ahead."

The historical society, housed in the Mary Wood Park House, chose to restore and seal a map of Montgomery County that dates back to 1844. It received a \$1,000 grant from the William Penn Foundation, a grant that was administered by the Conservation Center. Collins said the additional \$1,000 required for the project was raised through private donations and corporate grants.

"The map was in ragged, dilapidated condition, and the work was done to preserve it for future generations," said Collins.