

WHITPAIN SCHOOL  
(Ussahuckon Valley Historical Society)  
777 Skippack Pike and School Road  
Blue Bell  
Montgomery County  
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6021

HABS  
PA  
46-BLUEB,  
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
P.O. Box 37127  
Washington, DC 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WHITPAIN SCHOOL

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PA  
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Location: Skippack Pike and School Road, Blue Bell, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: The Whitpain School is of interest as a local interpretation of the Gothic Revival style. It also reflects the development of Whitpain Township from a rural nineteenth-century community to an increasingly urbanized locale in the twentieth century.

Description: The Whitpain School is a two-story, three-bay, square structure with mostly Gothic Revival elements. The first story is stone covered with pebble-dash while the second floor is brick laid in Flemish bond with glazed headers. It has a pyramidal-hipped roof with overhanging eaves, covered with cedar shingles. The front facade faces southwest and has a polygonal turret which cantilevers out at the west end of the second floor. The lower portion of the turret is covered with diamond-shaped wood shingles while the upper portion contains six-over-six light double-hung sash windows. Originally the turret had a "witch's hat" roof and a quill weathervane; both were blown down in a storm in the 1930s. The turret currently has a moderately sloped tent roof covered with wood shingles. The central bay of the front facade is a two-story pointed arch opening with stairs leading to the principle entrance which has Gothic Revival batten doors with ornate iron hinges. In the center of the front facade there is a frieze containing the words "Publick School" in medieval style lettering and a pointed stone arch comprised of double lancet windows and a circular motif above. Adjacent to the name on the frieze are circular date panels; the one to the west contains "AD" while the one to the east contains "1895". The west bay of the front facade has a pointed-arch opening on the first floor and a six-over-six-six light triple-hung sash window above. The east bay of the front facade also has a large pointed-arch opening on the first floor, however, the second floor contains a pair of six-over-six light double-hung sash windows divided by a mullion. The windows on the side facades are multi-light, double-hung sash with plain lintels on the first floor and pointed-arch lintels on the second floor. There is also a diamond-shaped window on the second floor of the southeast facade. In addition to the windows, the side facades have a brick beltcourse with corbelling separating the two floors.

The first floor interior has an entrance hall with a stairhall to the west, cloakroom to the east and a large classroom in the rear. The landing between the flights of stairs has an entrance to the tower which contains a winding staircase. On the second floor there is a principal's office to the east and a large classroom to the rear. Much of the original wood paneling remains intact. When the school was originally constructed, it had indoor plumbing but no central lighting system.

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History: The Whitpain School was built in 1895 by local artisans. Until 1916, the school was known as Whitpain High School. The first floor originally housed grades one through eight, with grades nine, ten and eleven on the second floor. To complete high school the students had to attend the twelfth grade at Ambler High School. The school's total enrollment was about thirty students and they were all taught by two teachers and a supervising principal. Many of the students lived on farms and therefore the enrollment varied depending on whether it was planting or harvesting season.

The cost of the building was \$3,698.54, with an additional \$261.82 for the front stone wall and grading. In 1895, the Whitpain Township school board had difficulty finding money to pay for the school's construction. The costs were more than anticipated and the board was short several thousand dollars. Rather than raise taxes, the board lowered teachers' salaries and used savings over time to pay for construction overruns. At the time, the entire school district employed six teachers who were paid \$45 a month each. Salaries were reduced to \$40 and stayed there for the next ten years, generating an extra \$2,700.

In 1916, the board constructed a new high school next to the existing structure. The older building was used until 1960 for art, music and kindergarten classes. From 1960 to 1969 it housed the Offices of Whitpain Township and its police department. It became the township library in 1969, and from 1980 to the present time it has housed the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society.

Sources:

Kennedy, Joseph S. "Whitpain Twp. School Will be put into Shape to Mark its 100th Year." Philadelphia Inquirer. August 5, 1993.

Montgomery County Historical Society files - Whitpain boxes.

Russo, Frank. Interview with HABS Historian. June 1994. Mr. Russo provided historical information about the Whitpain School, including the statement that local artisans were responsible for constructing the school building.

Wissahickon Valley Historical Society files.

Historian: Janet G. Blutstein, HABS Historian, 1994.