

Podcast 14 Transcript

Pigeontown — The Forgotten History of Blue Bell, Pennsylvania | Crooked Whitpain Podcast | CrookedWhitpain.com

COLD OPEN [0:01 – 0:40]

Before the mansions, the golf courses, and the corporate headquarters—before office parks replaced the orchards—this place had another name: Pigeontown. It's a name that has all but vanished from maps, road signs, and the memory of the people who live here. This is the story of how Pigeontown became Blue Bell. And what got left out along the way is the history nobody around here tells anymore. This is the forgotten history of Blue Bell, Pennsylvania.

THE LENAPE & WILLIAM PENN [0:44 – 1:56]

Long before Europeans arrived, this land belonged to the Lenape people. Their trails crossed what we now know as Skippack and Butler Pikes. Their presence here stretched back centuries. To the Lenape, this wasn't a frontier. The creeks, game trails, and ancient oaks were simply home—woven into a way of life much older than any deed or charter. That all changed in 1681, when William Penn established Pennsylvania. Penn's colony was built on a promise of religious tolerance. Settlers followed almost immediately—mostly German families seeking land and liberty. One of the early buyers of Penn's land was a London merchant named Richard Whitpain. He never actually lived here, but his name certainly stuck. On paper, Whitpain's purchase was an investment. The township that grew from it still carries his name. Today, Whitpain Township is one of the oldest in Montgomery County.

THE PASSENGER PIGEON [1:59 – 3:51]

So, where did the name “Pigeontown” come from? The answer lies with a bird that no longer exists: the passenger pigeon. In the 1800s, passenger pigeons were the most numerous bird in North America—maybe even the world. John James Audubon once described a single flock that passed overhead for three straight days. He wrote that the midday light dimmed, like an eclipse. The flocks numbered in the millions, darkening the sky for hours. When they migrated, tens of thousands gathered right here in the woods of what is now Blue Bell. For the early farmers of Whitpain Township, the pigeons provided food and income. They were so central to life here that the settlement simply became known as Pigeontown. Then, the pigeons started to disappear. Industrial-scale hunting wiped them out across the continent. They were netted, clubbed, and shipped by rail to restaurants in Philadelphia and New York. Nobody believed the pigeons could ever run out. But within a single human lifetime, they were gone. By 1914, the last passenger pigeon on Earth—a bird named Martha—died in the Cincinnati Zoo. Her body was preserved and sent to the Smithsonian Institution, where it remains today. The species that gave this town its name was erased so completely that most locals have never even heard of Pigeontown. Keep that idea in mind. Because it won't be the last time something was erased from this town's memory.

THE WHITE HOUSE INN & 1777 [3:52 – 5:42]

In 1743, an inn opened at the local crossroads. They called it the White House. It was a lodge for travelers on the road between Philadelphia and the countryside. And in the fall of 1777, it hosted the most famous guest in America. After the American defeat at the Battle of Germantown, George Washington and his army retreated through this area. The attack on Germantown was a bold gamble—a surprise strike through the morning fog that very nearly worked. When it failed, the Continental Army fell back into Montgomery County to regroup. Washington made his headquarters nearby at Dawesfield. Local legend says he frequented the White House inn. Before the army moved on to winter at Valley Forge, nearby Boehm's Church was converted into a makeshift hospital for wounded soldiers. Men who had marched through the fog at Germantown lay recovering beneath the roof of a country church. Years later, the inn's owners ran into a problem: there were simply too many places called the White House. So they mounted a large blue bell high on the building, where every traveler could see it, and renamed the place the Blue Bell Inn. It was a simple fix for a practical problem. But no one could have guessed that the name would outlive the pigeons, the old pike traffic, and the town's own memory. The inn became so well known that, in 1840, the town officially followed suit. Pigeontown became Blue Bell. The new name looked toward the future, while the old name slowly faded away.

QUAKER ABOLITIONISTS & CIVIL WAR [5:45 – 6:32]

Whitpain Township's Quaker roots gave this community a deep, documented commitment to abolition. Quaker meetings across this part of Pennsylvania had condemned slavery since before the Revolution. The region was connected to prominent anti-slavery figures, including Lucretia Mott and Hiram Corson. When the Civil War came, the community organized. In 1862, local women formed the Whitpain Ladies Aid Society, sending food, clothing, medical supplies, and money to Union hospitals. In an era when women could not vote, this was how the women of Whitpain went to war.

WHAT HISTORY REMEMBERS [6:32 – 8:05]

This is the history Blue Bell remembers. It's real, it's documented, and it's worth honoring. But local history has a habit of recording its proudest chapters in detail—and its darkest ones not at all. Through the late 1800s and into the 20th century, Blue Bell stayed quiet and agricultural. It was farmland, a crossroads, and little more. The crossroads kept its slow rhythm of planting and harvest, while the city crept closer, decade by decade. Then Philadelphia's suburban sprawl reached Whitpain Township. Farms became subdivisions. Estates became business parks. The old inn watched it all happen, still standing at the crossroads just as it had since 1743. Today, Blue Bell is home to corporate headquarters, country clubs, and some of the most expensive real estate in Montgomery County. Money magazine once ranked it among the best places to live in America. The Blue Bell Inn has a fine dining restaurant, a country club, and a movie theater. The Coatesville Community Center is a modern facility. The town has a high school, a middle school, and an elementary school. The town has a police department, a fire department, and a library. The town has a park, a playground, and a walking trail. The town has a history that is rich and varied, and it is a place that is worth visiting and exploring.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE PART [8:06 – 9:32]

Here is where this story stops being comfortable. Local history is often written by volunteers. What they chose to record is what survived. During our research into Pigeontown, we found a death that appears in no township history, historical society pamphlet, local marker, or walking tour. The circumstances raise disturbing questions. Three pieces of evidence, in particular, do not fit the official silence. In our full investigation, we explain why those clues may point to a lynching. In a community proud of its abolitionist heritage, this death was not included in the local story at all. You won't find it on historical markers or in walking tours. That research became a book and documentary project called *Lynched*. The full episode examining the evidence is linked below, along with the source documents at crookedwhitpain.com.

CLOSING [9:33 – 10:32]

Every town edits its own memory. In Pigeontown, the pigeons went extinct, and the old name became a curiosity—a trivia answer, if it survived at all. But history doesn't disappear just because it goes unrecorded. It waits in courthouse ledgers, family Bibles, and letters nobody has read in a hundred years. If you have records, information, family accounts, old photographs related to Pigeontown or early Blue Bell, we want to hear from you. Visit crookedwhitpain.com to see the documents and sources for yourself.