

The Heckler Plains Farmstead

Why is Heckler Plains a historic site?

According to Heckler's history of Lower Salford Township written by James Y. Heckler in the 1870's, Hans Reiff, a Mennonite, purchased 270 acres of land on February 14, 1718 from David Powell, a surveyor and land speculator. The tract was among the 3,000 acres Powell owned "on or near the branches of the Parkeawming Creek in the County of Philadelphia."

Reiff built two log cabins on his acreage. One log cabin is thought to have been built on the present Heckler Plains location. Archaeology students have dug around the Heckler house looking for any indication of this cabin. While thousands of red clay pottery shards were discovered, no substantial evidence of a cabin has yet been found.

On March 26, 1746, Hans Reiff conveyed a message (outbuildings) and tract of land to Peter Freed, thought to be Reiff's son-in-law, for 240 pounds. Freed improved the property by building a stone bottom barn either in 1768, according to James Y. Heckler, or in 1761, according to dated evidence found by Blue Print '76 historians. Blue Print '76 has since become the Heckler Plains Folklife Society.

The barn is one of the few remaining examples of a Rhine Valley bottom barn — a barn where the threshing floor is on the lower level between the animal stables instead of the first floor, as in bank barns.

Freed also built an addition to the old Reiff log house to accommodate his daughter, Christiana and her husband, George Heckler, who purchased the farm in 1785 for 2,000 pounds in solid gold and silver.

The land contained much heavy timber except for about 40 acres — known as "Heckler's Plain." There were many types of fruit trees, including 500 apple trees, which Heckler used in his distillery to produce applejack and peach brandy.

When George Heckler died in 1816, the present Heckler Plains acreage passed to one of his sons, David, who built a house and a mill for cleaning clover seeds and chopping grists on the property.

The land remained in the Heckler family until 1929, when the Hubicky family moved to Lower Salford Township and purchased the farm. In 1974, Lower Salford Township acquired the house, barn, and 36 acres through the open space program for \$82,500.00. A year later, the farm was placed on the Pennsylvania Inventory of Historic Places.

The Heckler legacy lives on even today as Heckler Plains Folklife Society members help students relive colonial life in an outdoor school setting as the Reiffs, Freed, and Hecklers lived by teaching the flax process, the wool process, candle dipping, tinpunching, fraktur, redware pottery and scherenschnitte.

One step of the flax process is called hatching or hackling — separating the coarse tow and fine linen fibers by pulling the flax through a bed of nails. The name Heckler originally was Hechler, which means one who hackles flax.

If you are interested in working with the children, HPFS members will train you in colonial crafts. Call Sarah Beyer at 610-584-6913 for more information about the spring and fall Children's Colonial Craft Programs.

The Folklife Society members also maintain a four square Pennsylvania German herb and vegetable garden at the farm.

You can also relive colonial life at Heckler Plains by attending the annual Christmas Carol Sing around the bonfire, this year on December 11 at 7:30 p.m. and then visit the farmhouse decorated in Colonial style.

Hecklerfest, the annual Colonial craft festival, is held in August, and the Spring Herb Festival is held on the first Saturday in May, just in time for Mother's Day!

Even today, the Heckler Farmstead continues to play a meaningful role in Lower Salford's everyday life, serving as a home to local sports teams, offering a pavilion and playground for small parties and family reunions, and at the same time, the agricultural heritage also continues through a lease between Lower Salford Township and a local farmer who cultivates the available remaining fields.

The next time you are on the Township trail system that meanders through Heckler Plains, look over at the old house and barn. It's not hard to imagine the early settlers doing some of the same activities with their families that we still enjoy doing today!

For more information about the Heckler Plains Folklife Society, contact Joan DiMaria, President, at 215-822-7422 or www.hecklerplains.org.

