

March is Women's History Month. I like to keep my Free Press articles about Upper Bucks County (with some personal adventures), but I've had trouble finding local 'historical women' to write about. I've done essays on Susanna Heath Morris and Rebecca Burr Chapman, but my 'expertise' is those 'olden days'. Unfortunately, few women were well documented before the 20th century. I've solicited readers for suggestions—their great grandmother, maybe, a businesswoman, politician or another local heroine—but got no response. I recently read about Mary Johnson Ambler (1805-1868), for whom the Montgomery County town is named. She was born in Richland Township and lived here 23 years, so she's nearly local. Wikipedia categorizes Mary Ambler, 'Humanitarian'. She organized aid after the Great Train Wreck of 1856 in Whitemarsh, the world's worst railroad disaster to date. In case you don't know about her, I'll tell you some things I've learned.

Mary was born to Abigail and Benjamin Johnson on March 24, 1805, just outside the recently named (1803), Quakertown, PA. They were members at Richland Friends Meeting. Mary was noted for a life-long adherence to the Quaker 'tongue' (thee, thou, saying 'Fourth-Day' not Wednesday--named for a pagan god), and Friends' customs and beliefs: honesty, plain dress, continuing revelation and universal equality. She married Andrew Ambler, an apprentice weaver, on May 14, 1829. Mary left Upper Bucks and they moved in with Andrews's parents at Montgomery Square.

After a three-year apprenticeship with his father, Andrew purchased a fulling mill and eight-three acres in what is now Ambler, PA. [A fuller makes cloth exclusively from sheep's wool; blankets, rolls of material, clothing]. The mill had been an important employer since 1731, and continued so under Ambler, after expensive repairs and modernizations. Mary and Andrew had seven sons and one daughter. When Andrew died in 1850, Mary and son Lewis assumed management of the mill.

In addition to overseeing the mill's 'business-end', the petit Widow Ambler (she never weighed more than 90 pounds), taught pre-school and religious classes. She was active in Gwynedd Friends Meeting and was known for her care-giving; providing medical attention and companionship to needy of any faith. She participated in community groups and was universally well liked.

At 6:18am on the already oppressively muggy July 17, 1856, Mary Ambler was home preparing her Sunday (First-Day), school lessons when a horrible crash startled her. She looked across a mile and a half of open fields and saw smoke rising above the hedge-line at the railroad right-of-way and faintly heard screaming and commotion. Mary gathered bandages and medical supplies and trod, cross-country, to be a 'first-responder' at the scene.

After a rail line was built to serve Philadelphia's northwest farm county a grove near Wissahickon Station became a popular recreation spot. The North Pennsylvania Railroad ran "Picnic Special" excursion trains from The City. That Sunday, St Michael's RC Church in Kensington had chartered a nine car Special to transport nearly 1,500 people: Sunday schools, parishioners, friends and family. The heavily laden locomotive, *Shackamaxon*, driven by Henry Harris, left the Master Street depot at 5:10am. Due in Wissahickon at 6:00am, she was twenty-three minutes late.

The locomotive *Aramingo*, engineered by William Vanstavoren and carrying 20 passengers from Gwynedd, waited at Wissahickon Station the "customary" fifteen minutes for a late train. But excursions ran irregularly and no communications was sent ahead regarding the *Shackamaxon*'s late departure. *Aramingo* pushed on down the one-track line at 6:15am. Meanwhile, Harris was finding it difficult to make up time with his heavy load. His effort to reach Edge Hill siding before the two trains met failed.



While *Shackamaxon* was steaming downhill into a blind curve past Camp Hill Station, blowing her whistle continuously, *Aramingo* was rounding the same blind curve. They heard, but did not see each other until too late. An eye witness reported, “I saw the down train first (south-bound *Aramingo*) ... It was slacking off as much as it could... (*Shackamaxon*) was (traveling) pretty smart. They were running about as they cleverly could I saw it and the time of collision (6:18am). Eleven of the dead were carried to my shop.”

Upon impact, the boilers smashed together causing an explosion heard for five miles. The lead three cars, the first carrying the ‘older’ children and church leaders, telescoped into the *Shackamaxon*. Following cars derailed and piled up behind. Splintering wood, screeching iron and the screams and moans of passengers followed the initial crash. Fires started. Hundreds were injured and trapped in overturned, burning cars. Panic and chaos reigned.

Then along came Mary. She calmly took control, enlisting women passengers and on-lookers to render first-aid. While men organized a bucket brigade from nearby Sandy Run, and frantically struggled to pry victims from the flaming wreckage, she sent riders into the townships gathering medical supplies and house shutters to serve as stretchers. Injured were carried to nearby shelter, five to Mary’s home. Mary Ambler worked non-stop for 24 hours. Authorities specifically noted her service as “conspicuous”.

Fire brigades arrived from Chestnut Hill and serious recovery could begin. At least 59 were killed, mostly burned, and over 100 injured. Many bodies were never identified or even found. Only four victims were over 20 years old. The youngest was nine. Organizer Reverend Sheridan and Engineer Harris died. William Vanstavoren blamed himself and committed suicide with arsenic some days later [He was exonerated. Harris was blamed].

Mary Ambler continued to run the fulling mill, making blankets for Union soldiers during the Civil War, and remained a benevolent community figure. She died, aged 63, on August 18, 1868, and was buried at Gwynedd Friends Meeting. In her honor, on July 20, 1869, the North Pennsylvania Railroad renamed the Wissahickon Station, Ambler. When the village was incorporated in 1887, citizens renamed their borough for Mary Johnson Ambler.

Now you know someone born and raised right here who’s worth honoring during Women’s History Month. If you know of any other women we should celebrate, let me know.