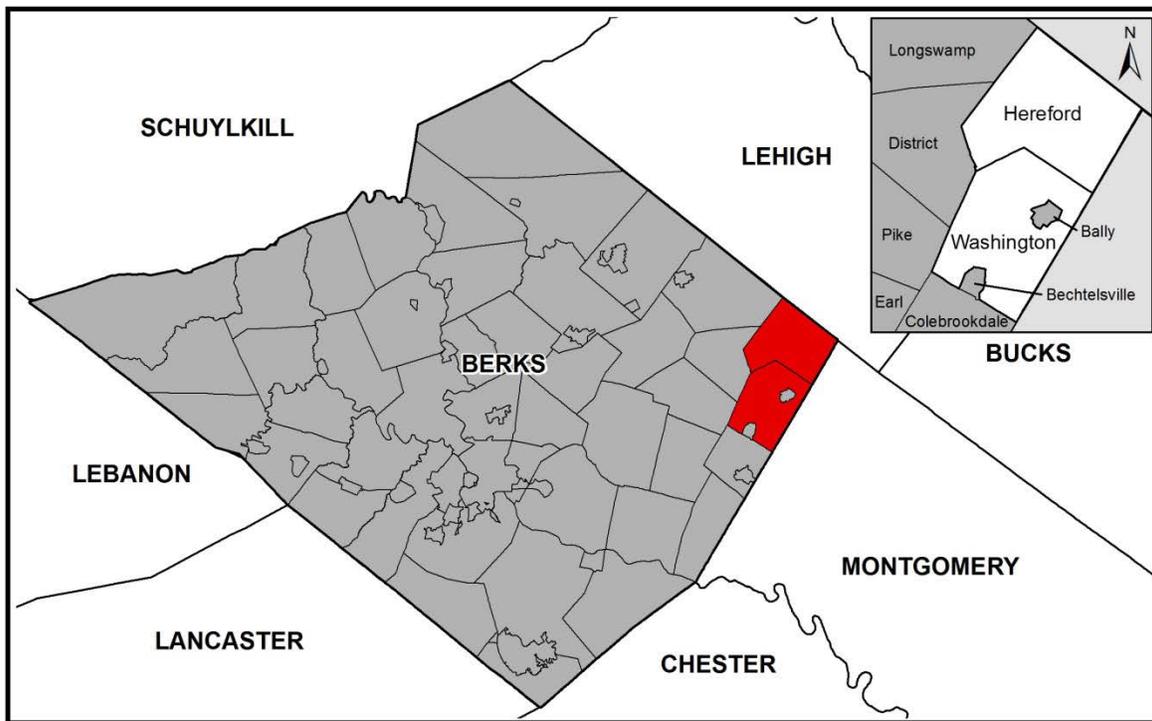


LOCATION AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

Hereford and Washington Townships are contiguous municipalities located in the eastern tip of Berks County, Pennsylvania. Both municipalities adjoin Montgomery County to the east, and Hereford Township adjoins Lehigh County to the north. Both Townships are predominantly rural townships. They are, however, included in the Reading Metropolitan Statistical Area for statistical analysis and comparison with other metropolitan areas across the state. Within Berks County, Hereford and Washington Townships are considered part of the Pottstown urbanized area.

The joint Planning Area of Hereford and Washington Townships lies along the State Route 100 (SR 100) corridor that connects the Allentown and Pottstown areas. Located as such, the Planning Area receives through regional traffic traveling to and from these business centers, as well as local traffic moving throughout the Oley Hills area. The Planning Area is also equidistant between the Reading and Allentown areas. Smaller urban centers of Boyertown, Kutztown, and Quakertown are also readily accessible.

The Planning Area is predominantly an upland landscape containing some of the headwaters of the Perkiomen Creek and the Little Lehigh Creek. Agriculture is still active in the eastern portion of the Planning area – in the valley along SR 100, - though development is pressing northward along the SR 100 corridor into this easily developed region. The hills and uplands remain predominantly wooded with scattered fields and pastures. Development is also occurring here, though at a slower rate and in a more dispersed pattern.



Settlement and Development History

Less than 300 years ago, the area now known as Hereford and Washington Townships was inhabited by the Lenni Lenape tribe of Native Americans. These peoples valued the forest, particularly, the hickory and chestnut, for its fruit and hunting habitat, and they grew maize and squash in small clearings created by lightening fires and other natural events. They named this region “Perkiomen,” meaning land of cranberries.

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Early settlement of the region occurred in the 1700s. Southern German and English settlers traveled west from eastern ports, accompanied by a handful of Swiss and French, seeking peace from war-torn Europe and freedom from government and religious oppression. Amidst the resources of the Perkiomen region, they found timber for construction and heating, iron ore for smelting, rich soils for crop production, and steady waters in the Pekiomen Creek for powering mills—from grist mills and oil mills (producing linseed oil), to bone mills and sawmills. Fields were planted with oats and flax to meet both food and clothing needs. Small furnaces, mines and creameries were also common throughout the community. During the 19th century, clay soils in southeastern Washington Township would support a small but vibrant pottery industry, which sold its products in country stores and by wagon.

Political organization in Early Pennsylvania established counties and townships. Until 1752, Philadelphia County encompassed this region, when Berks County was created and bounded. Hereford Township was surveyed in 1732, as a township much larger than the one known today. It was bordered to the south by Colebrookdale Township. These political boundaries remained until January 1840 when portions of both Townships were removed to create Washington Township.

From the early 1700s to the early 1900s, five distinct villages developed among the hills and bottomlands of Hereford Township: Chapel (Herefordville), Hereford (Treichlersville), Huffs Church (Huffsville), Harlem (Perryville and Gery Mills) and Seisholtzville. Similarly, the villages of Mount Pleasant (Barto), Bechtelsville, Churchville (Bally), and Eshbach, grew throughout the area that would become Washington Township.

The iron industry took hold in the region in the 1730s. Hereford Furnaces was built and brought into operation in 1734, employing 100 to 150 men.

The first furnace in Washington Township (then Hereford Township), Mount Pleasant Furnace, opened in 1737. The furnaces and forges produced pig iron, as well as finished iron products, such as stoves, and “country castings.”

Though the iron industry would experience unstable growth, by 1745, the Hereford Township community had grown to include 89 taxable persons. By 1759, that number increased to 105.

The rural road network is a result of Native American footpaths and cartways that connected the various mines, furnaces, forges, and mills, as such needs developed. The official designation of many of these roadways has been documented in the Berks County Records. For example, the Oley Path was originally traveled by Native Americans and later connected Seisholtzville with Huffs Church and the Oley Valley. Also, Old Route 100 was established as a road to connect Colebrookdale Furnace with Mount Pleasant Furnace in 1736.

By the late 1700s, the appearance of the community was visibly changing. Thick, stone-walled houses were preferred over log construction, for durability and fire protection. The exteriors were commonly plastered and whitewashed. As the woodlands were harvested for charcoal and minor construction, the landscape was increasingly opened and converted to agricultural fields and pastures. Dairy farming was most common, but orchards, potato fields, and hay and corn were also planted and cultivated.

Clay tiles were laid to drain the level fields of the Butter Valley. By the mid 1800s, the bounty of agriculture was also visible in the expansion of barns and new barn construction. Farming became a family trade, as many farms passed through the ownership members of the same family over generations.

In 1868, rail lines were extended from Pottstown to Boyertown, Bechtelsville, Eshbach and Barto to provide passenger and freight transportation. Further extension was planned (to connect to rail lines in the Lehigh Valley) but was constrained by lack of funding.

Iron mining in the upper Midwest drew the iron industry away from Berks County in the late 1800s. With local iron mines, furnaces, and forges closing, the rail road business was no longer profitable along the Colebrookdale Branch, and the rails were removed.

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The village of Bechtelsville became a borough in 1890, removing approximately 1,000 acres from Washington Township. That same year, a creamery was built and opened along SR 100. The creamery was later bought by the Longacre Family and continues in operation today.

Community services developed as the population grew throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Washington Township already had nine schools by 1890. There were 8 schoolhouses in the Hereford Township by 1923. In 1924, volunteers began operating the Barto Fire Company and in 1947 applied “for charter with the state.” In 1956, the Hereford Fire Company was organized.

Community development was incremental throughout the first half of the 1900s. Thereafter, as personal automobiles became commonplace and regional roads were improved, development pressure began to increase from the south and patterns began to shift toward tract housing and subdivision development. Compounded by the declining profitability of farming, agricultural land owners were increasingly willing to sell farmland for its development value.

At the cusp of the 21st century, Hereford and Washington Townships can look back to over 200 years of history and an on-going evolution of community values—and they look forward to the future. What will that future bring? How will it change the community appearance? How will it continue to shape community values? What change should be encouraged? These are the important policy decisions needed to guide the Townships through the coming years.

Sources: “Hereford Township,” Carl Arner, 2002; Continuing the Vision: Preserving the Values, Washington Township Historical Committee, 1990; and Worth Remembering: Profiles of a Community, Washington Township Anniversary Fest Committee, 2002