

## Banjo Town 1968-77

*by Gregory Glading*

I lived at 724 Newtown Road from 1968-77. During that time I came to love Banjo Town, and now love my memories of growing up in that unique neighborhood, complete with its special history, character, and spirit. I was born in Philadelphia in 1958. In my first ten years my family would relocate ten times, so only once did I spend an entire school year in the same school. My father was a sales manager and his job often took him on the road while my mother mostly stayed at home. We were not a particularly happy, close-knit family, but neither were we dysfunctional. Out of the blue in December 1968 my mother informed me that she was divorcing my father (a rarity for our time and social class) and we were moving back to the Philadelphia area as soon as our school broke for Christmas. I despised relocating, and this time was no exception.

Banjo Town and #724 were not love at first sight. In 1968 the home was in bad need of some TLC. The walls were cracked, the ceilings sagged, and the sole bathroom was antiquated. My new bedroom was the since-demolished tiny crib room above the kitchen at the back. The previous owners had painted *Winnie the Pooh* graffiti on the wall for their infant. I was none too enamored by it, and embarrassed when anyone visited. The new Cape Cod style suburban homes on the south side of Newtown Road were more upscale than those of our previous neighborhoods, and the older “executive” houses in the adjacent Harrison Road, Parkes Run Lane, and Lesley Road area dwarfed my new home. My father's lawyer was the only financial winner in my parents' divorce and that meant further austerity. Moreover I hated Ithan Elementary and had disdain for those I perceived as snooty, rich students. The Banjo Town kids were either too young or too old for me. Additionally I had to adjust to living cheek-to-cheek with a dangerous street, one that would soon claim our beloved family dog. Things got worse before they got better.

Life did improve however. My mother soon found success as a realtor. The following school year, 1969, I had an interesting teacher who had lived in the Soviet Union. I graduated from the sterile, Ithan Elementary to the classic early 20th century architecture of Radnor Junior High, with its vibrant location in the heart of Wayne and more diverse student body. I had started to adjust to, and accept, life in a broken family. I learned that not everyone in the world lived by Main Line standards, and we got a new dog. New wallpaper soon cloaked the *Winnie the Pooh* graffiti and at some point I became aware of some of our house's more charming characteristics, such as the paneled cupboards, bookcases, and dentil molding around the house.

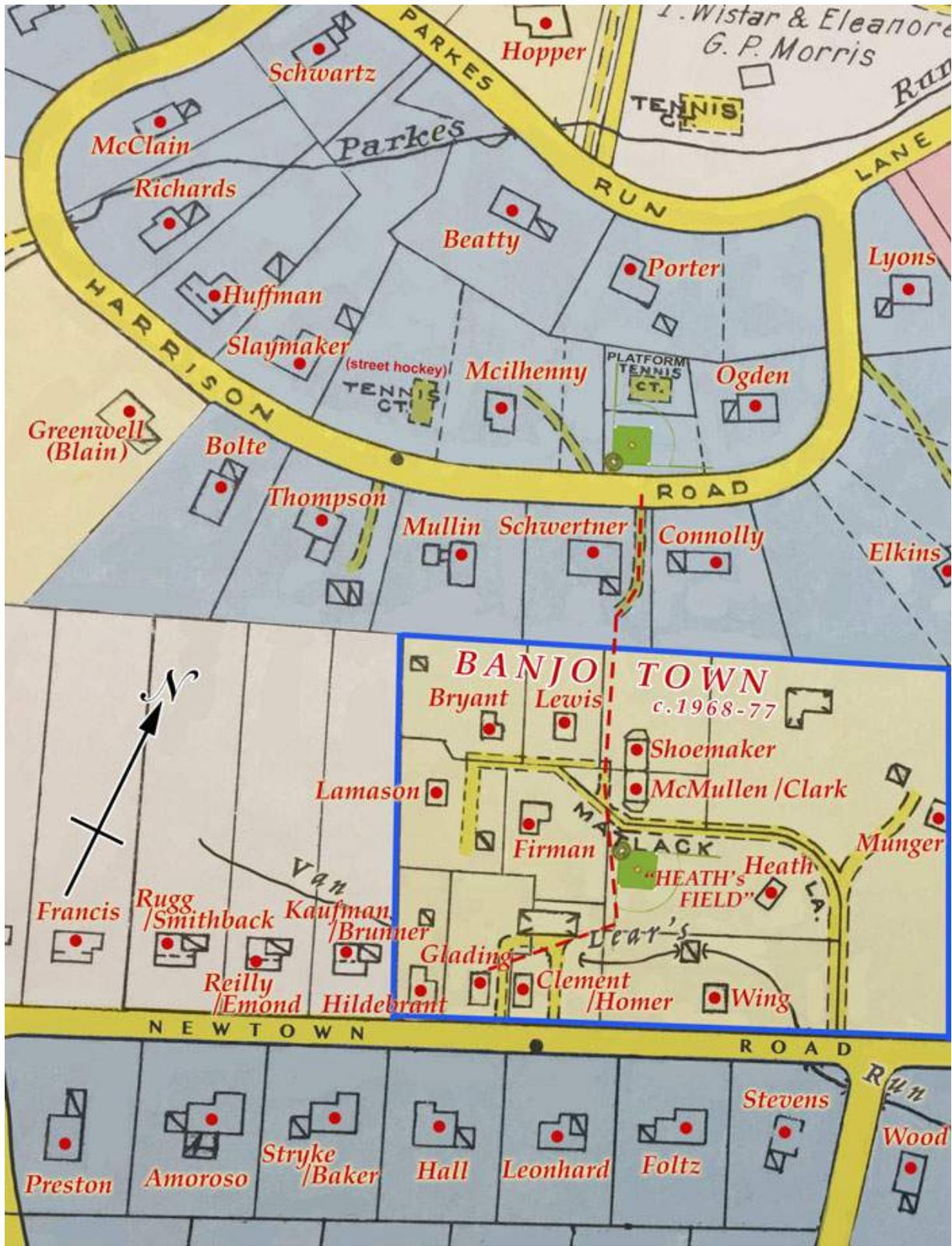
Banjo Town's younger kids got older, the relative age gap between us shortened, and kids from other neighborhoods started to visit. Banjo Town in the late 60s and early-to-mid 70s was wide open to us, since fences and boundaries did not exist. We often rode our bikes on the edge of 23 Matlack Lane, through the driveway of the adjacent home to its north on Harrison Road, and off into Wayne. At the time it was a real

town. It had a Woolworth's that sold a variety of goods and had an untouched 50s-era lunch counter. Wayne's classic diner had juke boxes at every seat and served freshly baked donuts. Wayne Toytown was rated the best toy store in the Philadelphia area and displayed eye candy for boys yet to discover girls. The Anthony Wayne Theatre was still a "Golden Age of Hollywood" movie theater, its alleyway exit opening next to an old-school Rexall drugstore with a soda fountain. A bookstore across from the train station sold a wide variety of paperback books, newspapers, and magazines. As we got older, we could sneak a long look at those forbidden magazines with centerfolds. Wayne train station was a destination in itself. Often I would either sit at the station or venture along the railway tracks, either westward to Strafford or eastward to St. Davids. The golden ring was to experience a GG1 electric locomotive pulling a mile-long freight train at 95 mph.

My maternal grandparents lived in nearby St. Davids, making Wayne my true hometown through all of the hated moves before settling in Banjo Town. My colleague, Charles P. Crawford, wrote a seminal novel based on Radnor Junior High and Wayne in the Early 70s, entitled *Bad Fall*, and I highly recommend it for a historical perspective.

Many told me that Wayne had peaked in the 50s, and by the late 60s had gotten too congested and too blighted with corporate chain stores and restaurants. Nobody moved in or out of Banjo Town, save the house next door to the east, 720 Newtown Road, during my 10 years there. The adults seldom socialized and, as far as I was aware, no organized community events were ever held during this period. The Wing family lived at 710 Newtown Rd, the Heath family at a post-WWII home to their north on Matlack Lane, while the retired Penn coach and 1976 College Football Hall of Fame inductee George Munger lived across from the Heaths. The McMullen family and a kindly old man named Shoemaker lived in the stone duplex. The Lewis family lived at 23 Matlack Lane, a reclusive old lady named Bryant lived at #25, and the Lamason family at #29. A grouchy old man named Firman lived immediately behind us at #22. He once threatened my brother and I, insisting we shouldn't play in the top of the jointly-owned long barn. My brother and I not-so-politely let him know that its ownership was split three ways, and that we would continue to use it as we wished. That set the stage for Firman to scream at us every time one of our baseballs landed in his back yard. He lacked the energy to chase us when we sprinted in there to retrieve our ball and flee back out, but man could he yell! Yet, for my brother and I, by far the most important neighbors were the Hildebrants, living next door to the west of us at 728 Newtown Rd. Their family patriarch, Frank Hildebrant, was a WWII hero in Europe. He, like my fraternal grandfather who saw heavy combat in the Pacific, was misunderstood, as little was known of PTSD at the time. I now know, as a combat veteran of Iraq, the effects that war has on a person. Mrs. Hildebrant was the beloved head librarian at the Wayne Library. Their oldest son Eric was three years my senior, his sister Zaporah was a year younger than Eric, and younger brother Howard three years my junior.

The Harrison Road neighborhood was an adjunct of Banjo Town during my time due to its easy access northward, first through 23 Matlack Lane, and then Harrison Road's



Schwertner residence, set immediately behind it. With the rise of the NHL Philadelphia Flyers, the full size Mcilhenny tennis court, between the Ogdens and Slaymakers, became our street hockey rink. Akin to the adult game on ice, we sometimes settled disputes physically, much to the chagrin of the neighbors. The open land one house further eastward, to the west of the Ogden residence, became our softball field. We first played in the NE corner of that parcel. The owner of the house, Mr. Ogden, told us that an old backstop was hidden behind the thicket in the field's SE corner. Sure enough, Mr. Ogden took a chainsaw to the thicket and pruned a large tree whose branches had intruded over the home plate area. We had ourselves an ancient looking backstop! At the time we had no idea that we were reviving the historical ground of the *Ithan Rovers*. With today's security and liability concerns, I can't imagine anyone acting as generously and graciously as Mr. Ogden. What a field he lent us! A tall, fenced-in, green painted platform tennis court sat in left field on sloping ground. At the time, hitting a softball over that fence and into that court proved challenging. We dubbed our softball field *Fenway Park* in honor of our very own "Green Monster."

In a related historical footnote, we embraced the Banjo Town location name of Villanova. We were not located in Wayne, and Ithan just didn't resonate. Big Five basketball was a mainstay of local UHF stations 17, 29, & 48, and Villanova, then as now, had a glamorous program. The Big Five basketball rivalries, spirited Palestra double-headers, and a rabid, divided fan base were in full force during my time in Banjo Town, making the Villanova name an easy choice.

Fictional accounts such as the movie *Sandlot* and many professional athletes, writers, entertainment celebrities, political leaders, and others have all wistfully recalled the sites of their youth pick-up games. Mickey Mantle talked quite a bit of his play fields in Oklahoma. Now that his name is iconic and an important part of our culture, those fields were restored. Ted Williams's favorite field growing-up in San Diego, often mentioned in his biographies and articles, still stands. Dick Allen in his three biographies harkened to his Western Pennsylvania stomping grounds before fame and controversy took away his joy of playing baseball. A professional Elvis impersonator friend has published two articles about his favorite South West Philadelphia playground, with a lament to its decline into a trash and weed-choked lair for crackheads. Baseball sabermetrician Bill James published a bitter sweet story of his youth pick-up softball field becoming a Walmart compound. He and his boyhood friends reunited, went to the Walmart, calculated that home plate was in the menswear section, and played a simulated game. Our street hockey games on the Mcilhenny tennis court and games at our "Fenway Park" provided infinite fun. While those venues were not geographically part of Banjo Town, the bulk of our games were – in a field of dreams at its heart. We called it *Heath's field*, owned by the gracious and genial Heath family. Heath's Field was an appendage of the only modern house in Banjo Town's yard. The stone duplex and Matlack Lane were to its north and east, Munger's horse fields were at the NE extremity, 22 Matlack Lane was to the west, and a wooded area to the south separated it from 710 Newtown Rd. (In the 1980s-90s it temporarily became a paddock for ponies.)

Heath's Field hosted every variety of pick-up games, to include many versions of football (two-hand touch being the mainstay), soccer, rugby, frisbee, golf, and many varieties of bat and ball games. Our football games provided hours of healthy activity, while Heath's Field's dimensions gave wiffle ball a life of its own. We mostly played with plastic, ersatz baseballs rather than standard wiffle balls. We used to call the venue "Little Yankee Stadium" owing to its quirky boundaries. Heath's presented a short right field porch, lengthy right center, insurmountable center, even deeper left center field death valley, a challenging left field, but an inviting row of hedges about 15-feet long extending from the left-field corner. Woods and trees fenced off right and center field while the Heath's driveway made for the left field boundary. Any ball landing in or over the left field hedges or on or over the driveway, into the right field woods, or in any tree, was a home run.

Wiffle ball at our own little Yankee Stadium preceded softball at our Fenway Park, and outlived it. Heath's Field was much closer to us than the old Ithan Rovers field. To get to Heath's field, all we had to do was walk across the back yard of our neighbors at 720 Newtown Road as if we owned it. Besides, as we grew bigger and stronger, our Fenway Park became too small for a competitive softball game. Hitting a ball over our "green monster" and into or over the tennis court soon posed no challenge. Additionally, the tree beside home plate fought back from its pruning. Soon the branches stopped dead anything hit to right field and its thickening trunk forced us to move home plate away from the old Ithan Rovers' backstop. So, further back down the hill at our Yankee Stadium, the physics of a plastic bat striking a sluggish, hollow plastic ball kept a home run and outfield throw a genuine challenge, so its dimensions proved perfect there as our games progressed.

The ground rules were a legislative battle for the ages. When the games began way back in the summer of '69, Russell Heath, whose family owned the Heath's Field "Yankee Stadium" lot, and lived in the house positioned behind the left field driveway, was still in high school and made the rules. His rules favored the defense. No automatic home runs existed. All fair balls were in play. If a ball landed in an outfield tree, one could catch the rebound for an out. Like most who make the rules, he made them to his advantage. My next door neighbor, Eric Hildebrant, the neighborhood's other bigger and older kid, batted left handed and with power. Eric would blast Ruthian shots into the trees. Russell would stand under the trees like a farm worker picking fruit and wait for the ball to float harmlessly into his hands. No trees stood in left field to impede his best right-handed shots. I proposed the automatic home run rule. Russell shot that down in flames and, being the leader, got the entire neighborhood to oppose me. Besides, the younger kids could not reach the boundaries and were happy to side with Russell. In following years however, their greatest athletic thrill was when they hit their first automatic home run!

All of that changed when kids across Newtown Road, as well as kids from Harrison Road, Parkes Run Lane, and Lesley Road, joined our games. The most notable addition was an older boy named Rick Foltz. He ran his mouth like a boat's outboard motor, without an off switch or a muffler. His vocabulary did not include the word

"sportsmanship" as he would argue any and every disputed play with Earl Weaver/Billy Martin ardor. Moreover, Rick had a penchant for changing the rules any time he felt it helped himself or his team. Yet Rick was not a bully and gets credit for instituting my automatic home run rule. My ground rules remained entrenched and unchallenged until the end. Eric surely enjoyed getting an automatic home run rather than an out. Our Yankee Stadium's short right field porch gave him a tremendous advantage, and didn't stop him from arguing that a ball hit in or over the left field hedges, but short of the driveway, should remain in play. In the early days it was not unusual for up to 18 kids to play wiffle ball games at Heath's Field. I was the unofficial statistician and can proudly say that I led all right-handed batters in home runs. As the 70s progressed, kids from the other neighborhoods either moved away or lost interest. Yet the Hildebrant brothers, Howard and Eric, and my own younger brother Brent, played on.

Heath's football configuration left about a 35-yards between the goal lines. It worked perfectly for 3 on 3, or 2 on 2, touch football games. Eric was three years older than me, while Howard was three years younger. My brother and I were only a year apart, so 2 on 2 games pitting Gladings against Hildebrants worked perfectly. Moreover, it permitted 2 on 2 wiffle ball games. If the first batter hit less than a home run, the force out was at home plate. The automatic home run became an essential for the offense and made defending the entire ground with just a pitcher and one fielder possible. We also often played many home run derbies, sometimes just 1 on 1 challenges. Nobody ever hit an automatic home run to the center field death valley birch tree boundary. We hit many balls over the left field driveway and deep onto the Heath's front yard. Nevertheless, no player ever came close to hitting their house on the fly or even on the bounce. As an early teen, I fungo hit a ball to the crown of the trees but never did anyone actually clear them. Ironically my best shot may have come switch hitting as a left-handed batter and I didn't even get a hit, much less a home run, out of it! I slammed a rising line drive that smashed off a tree branch at crown level. Unfortunately, an adult (an uncle) had infiltrated our game, and with the class of a banana republic martinet, decreed no automatic home runs. I remember my blast then ricocheting endlessly from crown to lower branches and safely into my brother's hands. The adult ruled me out, and considering he was on my own team that just made it worse. My reaction again proved that adults are often a harmful addition to youth pick-up games.

By the time I came truly to love and appreciate what we had, it all came to an end. I left for the US Army and Special Forces in the summer of '76. I returned to my home at 724 Newtown Road for Christmas leave, then a few days again in Spring en route to a change of station, and one final weekend in the summer of '77 for my mother's wedding. I found out in a letter from Eric Hildebrant that #724 had sold on its first day on the market.

After my first Army hitch ended in 1979, I visited the Hildebrants at #728. They informed me that Mr. Shoemaker, old man Firman, and Mrs. Bryant had all passed on. The Wings, Lewises, and McMullens had moved. The Lamasons remained and would later be the final party from my era to sell a vintage Banjo Town home. The

Heaths had also moved. I don't recall a final game, of any sort, at Heath's Field. Eric and Howard Hildebrant, Kip and Chip Lamason, and I did play one final competitive touch football game at Harrison Road's Fenway Park in 1979.

One last hurrah came in 1983 when I was living in Philadelphia. By that time, our Heath's Field games seemed forever ago. I decided to visit the Hildebrants and the old neighborhood. During my harshest of days with the US Army 10th Special Forces Group I had sometimes relieved my hardship by looking up at trees and picturing them as Heath's right field boundary. I would then imagine wiffle balls ripping a descent through their leaves. On the '83 visit I took a couple of wiffle balls with me. Unfortunately, Eric and Howard were not home, but their dear mother, beloved Wayne librarian Mary Hildebrant, was. Even though she had never attended any of our games and was no sports fan, she waxed nostalgically for at least an hour on the wonder of our many pick-up games. Afterwards I walked over to Heath's Field, found a thick tree stick and used it as a bat. Left field no longer existed. The new owners had planted trees and a put up a trellis. Nevertheless, I imagined a reunion game as I hit wiffle balls into the right field trees. The new owners soon noticed me. I remember them looking rather too afraid to confront this crazy man and the bizarre game he was playing on their lot! Surely I had hit the final home run of any sort at Heath's field?

I later saw Eric and Howard Hildebrandt in 1992 at a barbecue at Eric's Bridgeport, PA, house. After a few drinks and smokes they happily recalled vivid details of our many games, including many of the fights and antics between me and my brother. None of it came as a revelation or anything I could deny. The last time I asked my brother about our games he insisted that the full pad tackle football games at our former Maryland DC suburbs residence were far better, but that's not the way I remember it.

I now own a six-acre mini estate in Central Florida where I've constructed my own wiffle ball field. The dimensions are far more symmetrical than Heath's Field. Tree branches overhang parts of the outfield fence. Anyone who plays at my field are informed that we play by "Heath's Field rules"; i.e, any ball that so much as touches a tree leaf is a home run, regardless of where it lands, or even would've landed if unimpeded. Both of my boys would have it no other way as they love hitting home runs. My mother and her husband Paul once visited. Paul watched me and my twin sons Dante and Pierce play a home run derby. With each ball hit in the trees but landing in the field, he would ironically insist that it should not count as a home run. I politely told Paul that the owner of the field is the king, and he makes the rules so it's not up for a vote. Florida's Green Swamp is not Pennsylvania's Banjo Town but it will have to do.

My reunion game finally happened. Eric Hildebrant visited me in Florida shortly after the passing of the gracious and generous Heath family patriarch. We held a memorial for Mr. Heath, posthumously thanking him for the kindness he extended in granting us unlimited use of his field. All of us hit some "automatic" home runs. My son Dante won the contest, although a rule dispute spurned him to start a rhubarb. What nostalgia for the many donnybrooks that had erupted during our hotly contested Banjo Town

games!

A 2007 Banjo Town visit saw Heath's Field at its worst. The field had become a muddy pony paddock. A visit a decade later found a regenerated marvel, and Heath's Field again looked exactly how I'd left it 41 years earlier! I snatched my phone and hastily called Eric Hildebrant. "I'm here! Heath's Field is restored! You got to see it!"

For my 2018 visit, I took my now 14-year-old twin boys first to the Harrison Road Fenway Park. The green monster platform tennis court is long gone and the aforementioned tree had given the finger both to softball and the ghosts of the Ithan Rovers baseball team by growing damn near as thick as a redwood, and invading the entire home plate area. The thicket dutifully reclaimed the backstop. Yet the new owners had made it a lacrosse field with goals. I am sure the Ithan Rovers ghosts would approve. Next we visited Heath's Field in Banjo Town. The 60s and 70s had long passed, and if I attempted what I did in 1983, I would be sure of a police response. Nevertheless I had a wiffle ball bat and one plastic ball. Not wanting to trespass, I proposed to Pierce that I pitch him one from the street. Pierce grabbed the bat and ball, told me he would rather fungo hit it and then asked for the location of home plate. After pointing to the location, he jumped the fence partitioning the field. I told him that he had one shot at it and then we had to get the heck out. Bam! The ball he hit was still rising, and it took a nanosecond to strike a tree trunk just below the crown. I mentioned earlier just once ever hitting one higher in the trees. That one was a high arcing mortar that gently pitched into the leaves. Pierce hit a cruise missile further and harder than anything ever hit between 1969 and 1976. It was a home run by any rule. The ball ricocheted into the woods, even clearing a fence just past the tree line. No one would ever catch it. Even if someone could leap the fence and find the ball immediately, Pierce can run faster than any of us ever could. He would easily run out a home run should the automatic home run rule be suspended. I am sure that plastic balls have the nuclear half-life of a Jurassic fossil. I doubt anyone will ever trudge through the poison ivy-infested woods and find it. The last and longest Banjo Town home run ball will remain forever after I am gone.

Wayne and the Main Line boasts a legacy of wealth. Yet the middle and working classes had an important place. Everyone benefited from each other. The old-moneyed aristocracy set an example of self discipline, support of the fine arts, and social deportment. Yet they could appreciate the hard working classes who made their design imaginations a reality and who could look at a piece of machinery, automobile, or other gadget, figure out what was wrong and fix it. Now Wayne seems but a palimpsest of its former self. Less atmospheric, exclusive restaurants appear to have replaced the accessible and functional businesses of its past. What hasn't been bulldozed into oblivion has a new faux facade. What of Banjo Town? I don't necessarily advocate admonishing the developer who demolished George Munger's house and built McMansions on his horse pasture, but I would however support putting him in stocks and pelting him with rotten tomatoes. If George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin had lived in Banjo Town rather than George Handy, William Short, and George Willis, we could keep it the same, surround it with velvet ropes, and

charge admission. However, the new owners have shown respect for Banjo Town's rich heritage and history. Its sympathetic yet practical modernization is yet another phase of Banjo Town's long and lavish legacy and ensures its continued prosperity.

My mother purchased 724 Newtown Rd in 1968 for less than the price one might pay back then for a used RV trailer, but I don't think I could trade my RV for a Banjo Town House nowadays. If I could rent, I am sure that I'd expect to pay far more than our \$75 p/m. Zillow now has seven figure prices on Banjo Town homes, but they could never put a price tag on my memories of living there. Maybe in the future the sounds of youths playing two hand touch football and wiffle ball will echo in harmony with old Davis Whiteman cobbling shoes and William Short's horse powered saw mill? Perhaps.

*Adapted from recollections by Gregory Glading, 2018.  
Map by Phil Graham, Radnor Historical Society, 2018.*