

chapter 1 Introduction to Lower Paxton Township

Location and Regional Context

Settlement and Development History

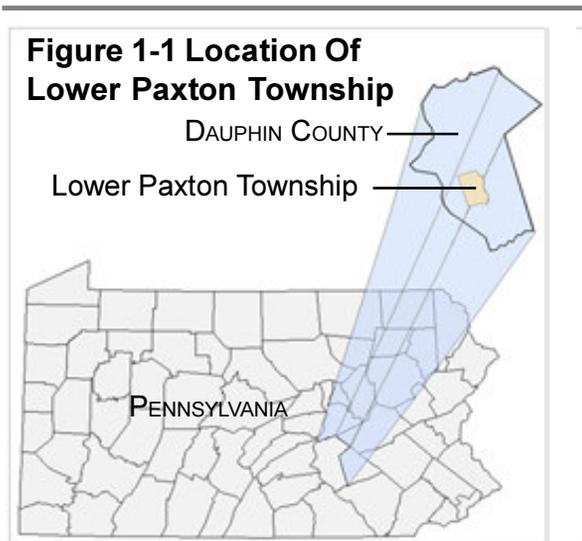
Facts about Lower Paxton Township

Location and Regional Context

Lower Paxton Township is the largest suburban municipality by area in the Harrisburg Region and, next to the City of Harrisburg, is the region’s second largest municipality and the 19th largest municipality in the Commonwealth by population. Located northeast of Harrisburg, many people find the Township to be a prime residential location while working in the region. With a variety of residential neighborhoods, commercial centers, and recreational amenities, Lower Paxton Township indeed offers a high quality of life.

As a result of its residential, commercial, and transportation amenities, the Township has become a driving force in the regional economy. It is home to more retail outlets than any other East Shore community, offers employment at numerous office complexes, and has a wide range of residential communities, from single-family developments to multi-family complexes. The Township has a transportation network that includes local, state and two interstate roadways. Interstate highways 81 and 83 draw traffic through the Township and offer ready access to regional and distant destinations, while state and local roads facilitate circulation between local sites and services.

Figure 1-1 Location Of Lower Paxton Township



Settlement and Development History

The history of Lower Paxton Township is a story that is written and revealed each day. Each decision made and each action taken have the potential to impact the community’s development. Genealogical and deed research can reveal facts and cast fresh perspectives on the journey that has brought us to the present. Knowledge of local history offers a grounding in place and time that enables us to feel connected beyond these constraints.

Though no written records exist for pre-colonial peoples in this region, archaeological research indicates that nomadic hunters inhabited the area as long as 11,000 years ago. Over time, these people evolved from a hunting society to one that relied, in at least some ways, on cultivation for food and, therefore, began to establish permanent settlements.

The Susquehannock Indians were the first to call the Susquehanna River Valley home. Their tribe descended from the Iroquois and defended the region between the Delaware and Susquehanna Rivers against rival tribes and early colonial explorers. They traveled great distances throughout their territory along footpaths. These trails would later be used by colonists and Pennsylvanians as major routes of transportation. One such trail is now known as Linglestown Road.

As colonists began to disperse west from the Delaware River Valley to pursue agriculture in the valleys, they encountered Native Americans on many occasions. A semi-organized group of men, known as the Paxton Rangers, defended new settlements from Indians as the frontier advanced westward. After numerous confrontations with the Native Americans, the colonists purchased the land south of Blue Mountain, between the Delaware and Susquehanna Rivers in 1732, though disputes continued. As a result, a string of forts was constructed to defend the settlers and to block travel routes across Blue Mountain. This line of defense included Fort Patton and Fort Barnett in Lower Paxton Township, as well as Fort Gilchrist and Fort Berryhill beyond the Township boundaries. The forts were later used throughout the French and Indian Wars.

The northwest portion of the newly purchased territory was named Paxtang and settlers were primarily of German decent, though French and Swiss settlers were also among them. Their strong work ethic led to a well-established agricultural industry. This, in combination with

the abundant stream courses, led to the establishment of gristmills. It also led to the emergence of towns and villages where residents could buy and trade supplies and services. Linglestown was the first of these, founded in 1765 by Thomas Lingle as “the Town of St. Thomas.” His plan for the town included 80 plots arranged in a linear fashion along the main street with a setback for the town square. The town was commonly called “Lingle’s town,” and after Lingle’s death in 1811, was simply known as Linglestown.

As relations with England became tense, settlers from this region were willing to fight for their freedom and rights. Their participation in the Revolutionary War is still a source of pride in residents today. This attitude persisted, as residents would later participate in the War of 1812, the Civil War, and World Wars of the 20th century.

In the mid 1700s, Pennsylvania surveyed its counties as large regions that would later be subdivided. Within these counties were Townships, whose boundaries also frequently changed as a result of division. In 1785, Dauphin County was created from a portion of Lancaster County. The first township division formed Hanover and Paxtang Townships in 1736. Lower Paxton Township was established in 1767, though seven municipalities would be carved from its land area by 1850.

As with many pre-colonial names, there are multiple theories of place name origin. One theory holds that Paxtang or Paxton is derived from Pax Town, or peace town. A second claims that it is derived from an Indian word, Peshtenk, meaning “place where the water stands still.”

The explosive growth of the railroad network in the mid to late 1800s opened new markets for business and industry across the Commonwealth. This network reached many, then rural, areas in Pennsylvania, particularly those where coal was mined. There were two unsuccessful initiatives to connect the Paxton region with the expanding railroad network. The first effort attempted to connect Linglestown with Boston. However, his vision was short-lived as construction was stopped when funding was exhausted after only three months. The second notion of railroad activity was even more brief, as the South Penn Railroad was discouraged from pursuing a railroad after its initial survey.

Agriculture continued to lead the industrial sector in the Township throughout the 19th century, though travel routes to other places of employment were improving. Small businesses thrived in the commercial centers. A new venture began in 1902 when speculators sought oil in the Township. After drilling a few thousand feet, the effort was abandoned.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries brought continued change to the Township. The first water pumper was purchased for fire-fighting in Linglestown. The automobile brought further improvements to transportation rates and routes. Commuting times were reduced and roads were improved with hard-surface pavement, with Jonestown Road and Route 39 being two of the first to receive these improvements. These “firsts” and many others are indicative of the technological revolution that continues to change our lives today.

Timeline



Pre-Settlement



Age of Agriculture



Village settlements



Civil War support



Early transportation routes



Early neighborhoods

The local population continued to grow through the early 1900s. Industrial growth from Harrisburg placed residential and commercial development pressure on the surrounding areas. Colonial Park emerged at this time as a village of small brick homes along Jonestown Road. The 1950s witnessed the greatest increase in Township population of any decade in the 20th century—an increase of more than 169 percent. While this pace has slowed, growth has continued and necessitated planning efforts on the part of the Township.

With increased automobile ownership, highways were built across Pennsylvania and Lower Paxton Township was not exempt from this construction. U.S. Route 22 was improved as a major east-west highway that connected Harrisburg with Allentown and New York City. Interstate 83 was built along the Township’s western border in the 1950s and terminated at U.S. Route 22. When Interstate 81 was completed in the early 1970s, Interstate 83 was extended north, completing the eastern portion of the Capitol Beltway.

Residential and commercial development expanded during the late 1900s as landowners and developers sought inexpensive property outside the City of Harrisburg. Agricultural parcels were converted to residential and office uses across the Township. Shopping centers sprouted along the east-west corridors. The Colonial Park Mall was the first major shopping center on the Harrisburg East Shore, and continues to be one of the most successful malls in the Harrisburg area.

Lower Paxton Township experienced another large population expansion in the 1970s. This was due to several factors: significant development of single and multi-family housing, depopulation of the City of Harrisburg, extensive public sewer expansion, and improvements in the transportation network serving the Township. With the expansion of the supporting retail and service sector, Lower Paxton Township was clearly considered *the* place to live in all of Dauphin County.

Growth continued in the 1980s as residential, retail, service, and office markets continued to expand. The Colonial Park Mall underwent a substantial expansion, while strip development continued along U.S. Route 22 and Union Deposit Road. Residential development continued and large office complexes started to develop throughout the Township. Liberty Square, a retail/office hybrid, was completed during this period.

The 1990s have continued to see expansion, particularly in the retail area. Colonial Commons was completed in the early part of the decade, Paxton Square was completed on the site of the former Harrisburg Drive-In Theater and more recently the Paxton Towne Centre, Lowe’s Home Improvement Center and other commercial developments have opened. Clearly U.S. Route 22 and Union Deposit Road flourished into premier retail corridors for the East Shore communities.

At the start of the 21st century, development continues to expand the suburban areas of Lower Paxton Township. Residential developments are gradually filling undeveloped sites near major transportation routes. While

Facts about Lower Paxton Township

Location: Dauphin County, PA

Size: 28.1 square miles

Established: 1767

Population (2000): 44,424

Median Age (2000): 38.9 years

Average Household Size (2000): 2.35 persons

Median Household Income (2000): \$49,566

Per Capita Income (2000): \$21,116

Median Housing Unit Value (2000): \$120,300

Climate

average temperatures:

summer - low to mid 80s

winter - low to mid 20s

average precipitation: 40.4 inches

Natural Setting

physiographic province: Ridge and Valley

watersheds: 3 to the Susquehanna River

Beaver Creek (Swatara Creek)

Paxton Creek

Spring Creek

Recreation

community parks: 5

neighborhood parks: 9

natural resource parks: 5

Friendship Community Center



Retail centers



Private Schools



Township parks



VoTech education

commercial sites frequently change ownership, the business sector continues to grow. The community continues to draw new residents and businesses and seeks to provide a high quality of life and services.

In the context of this change, the Township faces a number of issues: environmental protection, growth management, historic preservation, protection of existing neighborhoods, traffic impacts, continued commercial development pressure, park development, and bicycle, pedestrian, and greenway opportunities.