

Freystown  
From Colonial Settlement to Gypsies

On an 1876 map of York, Freystown lies between Philadelphia and King Streets and extends from Broad Street to Sherman Street. It was part of Spring Garden Township at that time, not yet incorporated into York City. As the newspaper article indicates, Bull Frog Alley was the low swampy area around Fulton Street.

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Historical accounts up until around the turn of the 20th century often refer to the village of Freystown, but most of us today would be at a loss to pinpoint its location. It was a flourishing community with a rich history just east of York city, bounded approximately by Broad Street, King Street, Harrison Street and Philadelphia Street. Early settlement centered on what is now East Market Street around Ridge Avenue and Diehl's Mill Road (Sherman Street).

Freystown became part of York city around 1900 (sources vary), but not without reluctance. An undated newspaper clipping of that era contains a piece written in Shakespearean style; it is titled "Freystown Declines Annexation." The gist of the essay is that the city folk peered down on Freystown until the city got into budget trouble and now looked to Freystown and other suburbs as a source of revenue to save them.

The origin of Freystown rests in the 297 acres that Gottfried (Godfrey) Frey patented from the Proprietors of Pennsylvania as part of Springettsbury Manor on October 19, 1762. He could have been living on the property well before that date. (Some sources say the village was founded in the early 1800s, but original documents show that parcels were laid out much earlier.

In his 1782 will, Godfrey mentions "the Lots which I have laid out off my Land," and an original document at the York County Heritage Trust Library/Archives shows "Plan of part of Frystown, Situate in York Township in the County of York, and State of Pennsylvania, Surveyed and Laid off the 14th Day of May 1789 - at the Request of Henry Fry and Samuel Fry, the Present Proprietors. Surveyed by Jacob Spangler;" The area later became part of Spring Garden Township, founded 1822. Henry and Samuel were the two youngest sons of Godfrey, and this land was part of their inheritance. The lots on the plan, Nos. 34 through 76, stretched from a street "Called King Street or Main Road Leading from the Borough of York to Philadelphia" to a street "Called Low Street." The street names were later changed to coincide with those in York, just west of Freystown; King Street became Main and then Market, and Low eventually turned into King Street.

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<sup>1</sup> Do you know any more about the basket makers and/or the Gypsies of east York? Do you have some baskets or some photographs of them? If so, please contact me.

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Godfrey Frey's will mentions his stone house, which probably stood on the south side of Market Street at Local Way. Later descriptions describe it as a substantial house with vaulted cellars, sitting back from the street. Later owners included noted York attorney Thomas Hambly and the longtime pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Robert Cathcart. According to the family historian who wrote "Ancestry and posterity (in part) of Gottfried Frey 1605-1913," it fell into ruin about the time of the Civil War, and new houses were erected on the site.

The village prospered. Johann George Pfaltzgraff, one of the early Pfaltzgraff potters, operated a pottery for a time in Freystown, starting in 1839. A 1989 archaeological dig turned up many redware shards, confirming the site of that early industry. Freystown's Henry Sleeper, cabinetmaker and undertaker, founded his business around 1848; it continued in operation for over a century. Isaac Runk ran a successful store for more than 30 years, including during York's occupation by the Confederate Army. A story told years later related that Runk's merchandise, hidden under loads of hay in his barn, escaped Confederate confiscation due to a well-placed bribe to a southern soldier that came to commandeer the hay.

Another Freystown legacy that continues today is the Spring Garden Band, which is believed to be the fourth oldest active community band in the country. Today's organization traces its roots back to William Frey and other musicians who formed the Spring Garden Silver Cornet Band about 1855. The band became the musical part of the 87th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers during the Civil War, serving until bands for each regiment were disallowed in 1862.

One of the most interesting periods of Freystown history has to do with the German basket makers and the Gypsies that inhabited the King Street area during the late 19th and early 20th century. Oft-repeated stories combine the two groups, and there may have eventually been some connections, especially with the Gypsies selling baskets. According to census records, the basket makers had German roots. The Gypsies, who were horse traders and junk dealers, reportedly went out in painted wagons for months at a time each summer. They were said to be of Austrian or Hungarian descent, but it is possible that some of families of basket makers that had emigrated from Germany also had Gypsy blood. Accounts of the Gypsies say that some became quite wealthy through horse trading and that some descendants later became car dealers.

Basket making brings us to Bull Frog Alley. The name was given to the low lying land next to East King Street east of the railroad, because the marshy land was full of willow trees, the prime raw material for making baskets. (The area is now much drier since Poor House Run has been routed underground.) A May 17, 1878 York Gazette article states that the area's "whole population is now stripping willows ... every man, woman and child seated by their doors." When the willow supply ran low at Bull Frog Alley, the basket makers gathered willow branches from another marshy area by Mill Creek along Camp Betty Washington Road near Mount Rose Avenue. Products reportedly included market baskets, bases for parlor lamps, baskets to hold flower pots, baby carriage tops, and even bodies of pony carts manufactured by York Carriage Works, as well as utility baskets for farmers and bakers.

Some of the basket-making families, although they no longer lived at Freystown/Bull Frog alley, continued the trade up into the 1950s. Many of us may still have some of the finely crafted baskets, handed down through our families, unaware that we possess still another unique piece of York County history from the all-but-forgotten village.