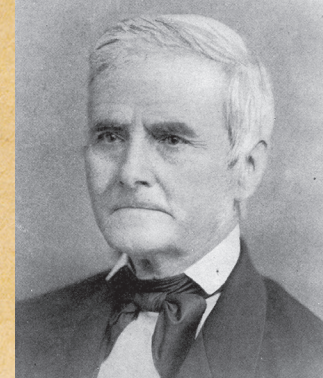


Williamson Free School of Mechanical Trades

By Susan Mescanti, Middletown Township Historical Society



The main building on campus



Isaiah Williamson

THE BEGINNING

Isaiah Williamson had been planning for 30 years to found a school that would provide financially disadvantaged young men with the opportunity to become productive and respected members of society. To him the ragged boys he saw on the corners in Philadelphia, growing up with no education, represented a huge waste of talent.

On Dec. 1, 1888, Williamson, a Philadelphia merchant and philanthropist, founded the Williamson Free School of Mechanical Trades. The 220-acre Schofield Farm on Middletown Road was purchased in 1889 to be the site of the school campus. In March 1889 Williamson fell ill and never lived to see his school become a reality. The founding of the school with a \$2 million endowment was one of his last charitable acts before he died. During the last days of Williamson's life, he visited the locality by train. From the railway, he looked across the fields that would become one of the most renowned institutions in this country.

A man with foresight, before he died, he directed a trustee to "be sure and get from the railroad company a distinct statement and guarantee in writing of the privileges they propose to grant in connection with the school." The West Chester line on the Pennsylvania Railroad established a stop at Williamson School PA. A temporary structure serving as a station was replaced by a permanent building around 1909. For countless students, memories surround the first day arriving at the station.

Shortly after Isaiah Williamson's death, John Wanamaker and the remainder of the Board of Trustees selected Frank Furness, one of Philadelphia's most prominent architects, to assist them in transforming the farm into a school. The Main Building, cottages and dormitories were designed by Furness. It was the largest collection of Furness buildings in a single location.

The school opened in 1891 offering three-year programs in bricklaying, carpentry, machine shop, and patternmaking. The students lived on campus. They were boarded, clothed and instructed without charge. Under the Conditions of Admission, the parents/guardians were required to sign an agreement that their son would be indentured to the trustees.

With the first graduating class in 1894, Williamson became a significant pioneer in America's vocational education movement. Attitudes in favor of including manual training in public schools began to be put forward.

Contagious diseases were a constant worry. In 1900 the dreaded disease diphtheria that had been an epidemic in the area for some time invaded Williamson School. Patients were treated in

the school's infirmary. All students were ordered to leave the school until the illness had subsided and the campus could be thoroughly disinfected. The 1918 influenza pandemic was much more widespread. The campus was quarantined. The overflow from the infirmary filled the cottages and healthy students were required to assist with the sick.

Williamson stepped up in the war effort. WWI was still raging in 1918. Students graduating that spring were told they were needed in industry and could do as great a service in the crisis as those on the front line. The war needed men with their skills in industry and production here at home to do service in the war.

At the same time a tractor operators' school for women was organized at Williamson School. The war had taken the men from the fields. The president offered the use of the school and tractors. The agriculture director lectured on gas engineering two nights a week and Saturday afternoons. Actual work with tractors in the field completed the course. It was a small class in the interest of efficiency.

This article gives a very brief look into the early years at Williamson. I hope it has ignited your interest in the amazing institution you pass by on Middletown Road. A complete story told through text and pictures has been written by Andrew Miller. Title: Williamson College of the Trades, Arcadia Publishing Company.

Since becoming a post-secondary institution in 1961, the college now offers associate degrees in various fields of specialized technology. In 2015 the school announced the new name Williamson College of the Trades.

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