

The Evolution of Holmesburg

In the autumn of 1681 William Penn appointed three commissioners - William Crispin, John Bezar, and Nathaniel Allen - to proceed to Penn's new colony of Pennsylvania to make arrangements for a settlement and to lay out a town. Crispin, Penn's cousin, would die aboard ship on the journey across the Atlantic. Penn replaced him with Thomas Holme, who he named Surveyor General of the Province. Holme arrived in August 1682 with his children and his soon to be son-in-law, Silas Crispin, son of William Crispin, deceased.

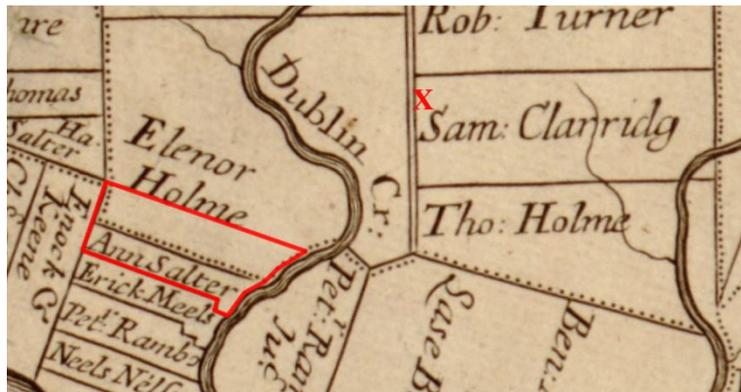
In a letter dated Sept 30, 1681, Penn instructed his commissioners: "Let the rivers and creeks be sounded on the Pennsylvania side of the river Delaware, in order to settle a great town, and be sure to make your choice where it is most navigable, high, dry, and healthy; that is, where most ships may best ride, of deepest draught of water, if possible to load or unload at the bank. It would be well if the river coming into that creek be navigable at least for boats up into the country. Such a place being found out, lay out ten thousand acres contiguous to it, in the best manner you can, as the bounds and extent of the liberties of the said town."

Thomas Holme's map (detail below, dated as early as 1681 but not published until 1687) shows one particular situation that met the 10,000 acre requirement – the NW bearing twin columns surrounding Dublin Creek (aka Pennypack Creek) that became Lower Dublin Township after the creek name - outlined in red.



Upon more careful inspection, Dublin Creek and the immediate area along the Delaware was found to be unsatisfactory for the "great town". The river access and land lying between the Schuylkill and the Delaware downstream, though encompassing only about 2000 acres, was deemed much more appropriate. Holme completed his map of the City Philadelphia in 1683, though the location had probably been decided upon before Penn arrived in late October of 1682.

In November, 1682, Thomas Holme received a grant of 1646 acres from Penn on either side of Dublin (Pennypack) Creek (detail below). This would become his Wellspring Plantation. The majority of the 1646 acres was put in his daughter Elenor's name. (Before Holme died in 1695, it was put back in his name.) In 1686, Holme purchased the 500 acre Sam Clarridg tract giving him a total of 2146 acres, bounded approximately by today's Cottman Ave to Grant Ave and Frankford Ave to Ashton Rd, the SW corner being at about today's Cottman and Brous. The dividing line down the middle of the Wellspring grant was to be a "great Street"; likely the main street of a city, had it been located there. This was to be Susquehanna Street, which was intended to connect the Delaware and Susquehanna Rivers, a distance of 125 miles. It was never completed in the city, but it does run today in a straight line in Montgomery County for about eight miles. Thomas Holme was buried close to the planned Susquehanna St. The Holme-Crispin Graveyard is on Holme Ave below Holme Circle at the edge of the baseball fields - red X below.



When Thomas Holme died in May 1695, his son-in-law, Silas Crispin, who had married Esther Holme shortly after their arrival in 1682, was named executor of the estate. He quickly sold 933 acres of the earlier Elenor Holme tract on the southeast side of Pennypack Creek (the name Dublin Creek was very short lived) to Charles Sanders, who also purchased the Ann Salter tract. In 1696, Sanders sectioned out 240 acres bordered by Township Line Road (between Oxford Twp and Lower Dublin Twp - today's Cottman Ave) to Pennypack Creek and the King's Road/Highway (today's Frankford Ave) to Keen's Road (today's Ditman St) for the millwright Peter Dale. See the 1696 survey map below and the red insertion above. Dale and Sanders went into business to build the Pennepack Mill, the largest mill in the colony accessing the Delaware River. Its construction coincided with that of the Pennypack Bridge, dam, and mill race in 1697.

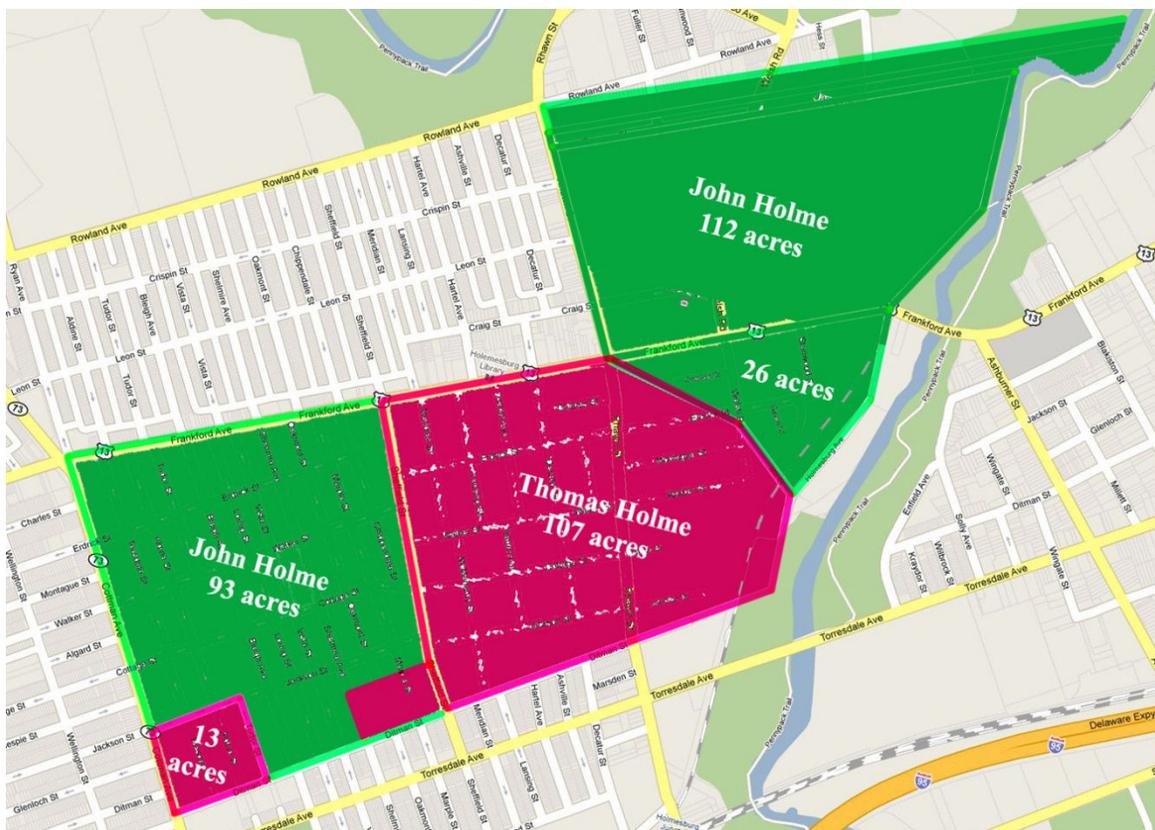


1696 survey map for Peter Dale 235 acres bordering Pennypack Creek

In 1702, John Holme (born circa 1673 and no relation to Thomas Holme, Surveyor General, who had no sons that bore children) married Peter Dale's widow, Martha. John Holme had done masonry work on the bridge and may have known Martha through the Pennepack Baptist Meeting farther up the Creek. John's father, John I, had arrived in the colony in 1686 and was an early and influential judge on the provincial council. He married the widow of Nicholas More of Moreland Manor and President of the Free Society of Traders, which was to have been the commercial arm of the Quakers. His son, John Holme II, upon marriage to Marha Dale, became operator and owner of the Pennepack Mill and of the 240 acres. His son, John Holme III (born at Pennepack Mill Sept 20, 1706), came into possession of the 240 acres when John II died in 1741. John III built Box Grove, the circa 1750 Holme family mansion, still proudly standing in excellent condition at 8047-49 Walker Street.

When John Holme III died (July 12, 1775), he left the 240 acre tract to his sons John IV (born Feb 14, 1743) and Thomas (born Jan 16, 1749) to be shared equally. (During the Revolution, John IV was a major in the Pennsylvania Militia, Thomas was a captain, and their older brother, Enoch, was an ensign or 2nd lieutenant.) It wasn't until 1790, that John and Thomas formally divided the 240 acres, essentially down the middle at approximately today's Sheffield St. John took most of the lower half towards the Township Line Road (Cottman Ave) and Thomas the upper towards the Creek, including the Box Grove estate. (Their father, John III, had sold the family interest in the mill and mill commons in 1765 to Ellis Lewis.) The upper section bordering the Pennypack was the larger and more lucrative. To equalize the partition, Thomas took a 13 acre square at the southeast corner (today's Cottman & Ditman) and John got a valuable 26 acre triangle in the northwest corner along the Bristol-Frankford Road running down from today's Rhawn St at an angle more or less following Mill St to the Pennypack. This section would become the early village of Holmesburg.

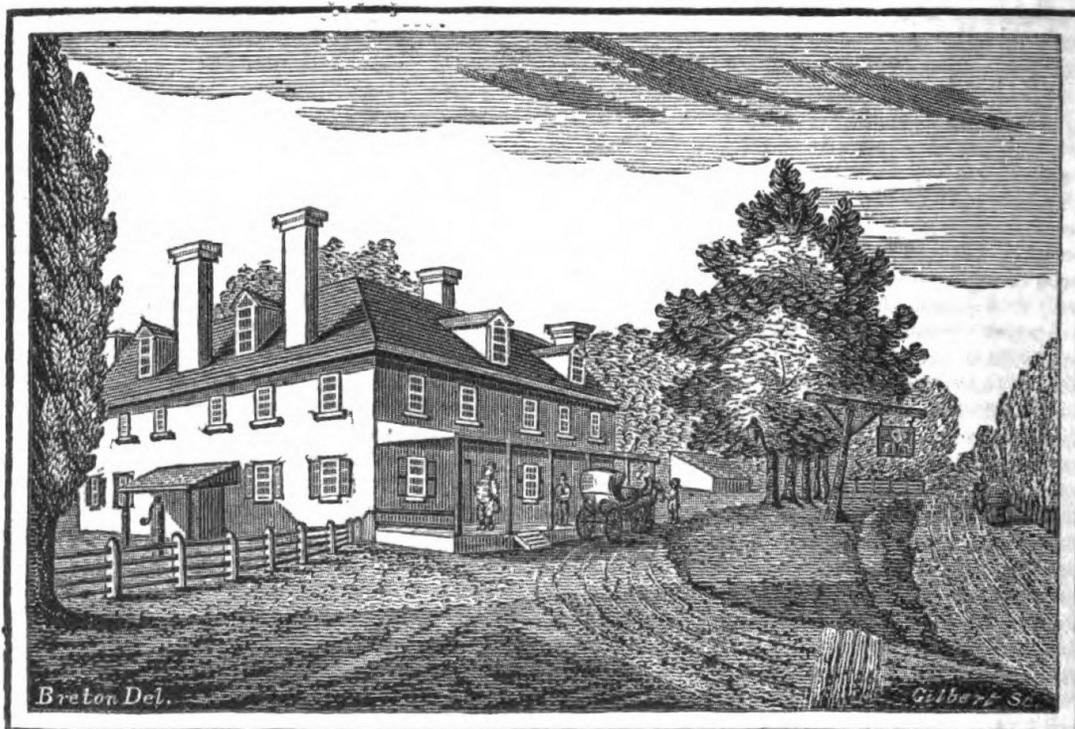
In 1783 John purchased 112 acres from Peter Rambo on the northwest side of the King's Highway, encompassing land bounded roughly by today's Frankford Ave to Rowland Ave and Rhawn St to the Pennypack. An approximation of the Holme brothers' 1790 holdings on today's map is below; John in green, Thomas in red.



1790 land holdings of John and Thomas Holme



J Hill's 1808 ten-mile radius map shows the lands of J Holmes and T Holmes. The 10 mile radius terminates at about today's Sheffield Ave. The name Holme was frequently misspelled Holmes. Surveyor General Thomas Holme suffered the same fate. Notice the Spring Brook designation for land John Holme sold to David Lewis in about 1800.



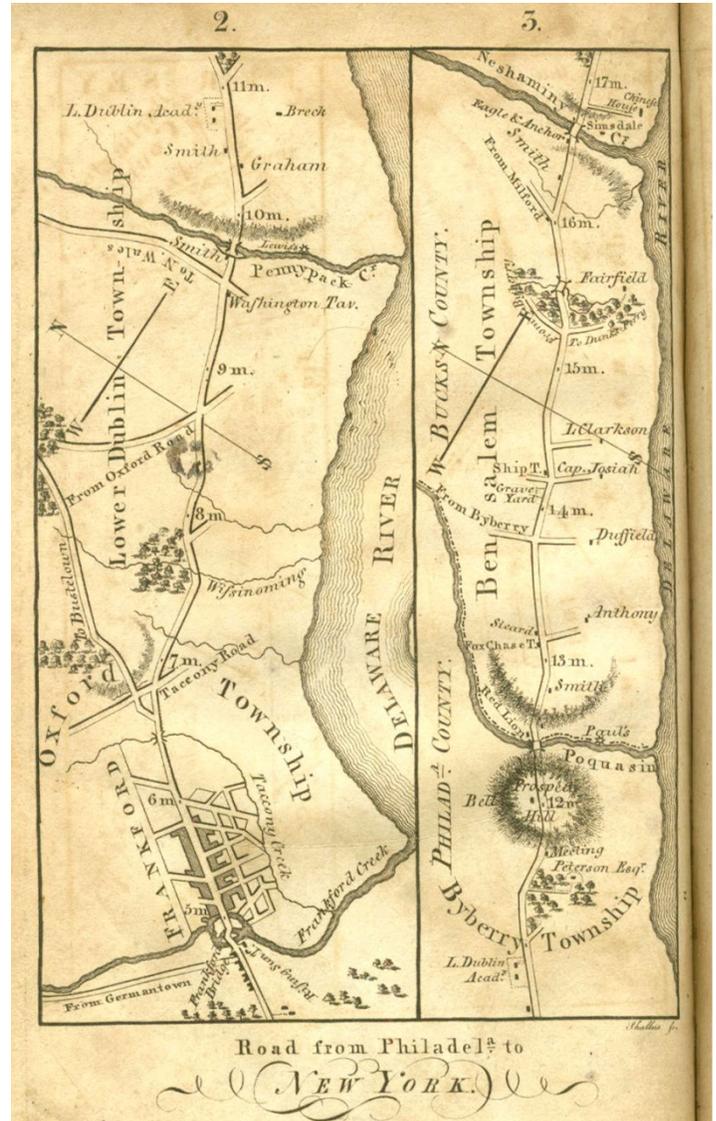
WASHINGTON INN, HOLMESBURGH.

Circa 1800 drawing

In his will of 1773, John Holme III left his son Thomas the Box Grove mansion. For his son John he built a large house on the King's Road. After the war, Holme expanded it and turned it into an inn. As shown on the 1789 New York to Philadelphia road map, below left, the inn was simply known as Holmes's in 1789. Following the patriotic fervor of the times, Holme renamed it the Washington Tavern as noted on the 1802 Philadelphia to New York map, below right. At the turn of the 19th century, the village growing around the Pennepack Mill and the Washington Inn was often referred to as Washingtonville or Washington Village, after the inn.



1789 Colles Road Map – New York to Philadelphia



1802 Carey Road Map – Philadelphia to New York

The Washington Village or Washingtonville designation was short lived (probably no more than 10 years) and may never have come into general use. An obituary appearing in 1793 in the Gazette of the US notes the death of Jane Holme of Pennipack, Philadelphia County. She was the wife of John III and the mother of John IV and Thomas. Pennipack or Pennipack and other variations had long been used to identify the settlement forming around the 1697 bridge and mill and it was still in use in the 1790's. One of the few extant official uses of Washington Village appears on a deed dated Nov 3, 1802 involving land sold by John Holme to Samuel Livingston; land that would become the site of Emmanuel Episcopal Church, founded in 1832.

Died the 18th inst. in the 85th year of her age, Mrs. JANE HOLME, relict of Mr. JOHN HOLME, of Pennipack, Philadelphia County; a woman in whose character were united the Christian, social and domestic virtues in an eminent degree. Her funeral was attended on Sunday last, and a sermon adapted to the occasion delivered by the Rev. Dr. Rogers in the Baptist Church, Lower Dublin, from these words-- "Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice."

Newspaper obituary of Jane Holme

Three entries on the 1798 Direct Tax List (the first Federal US tax after the Revolution), below, are revealing. The second entry denotes a structure as the "Sign of the Genl Washington on Bristol road on J Holme's land". It is occupied by Hump J Waterman and owned by John Holme and is "Part new. The whole in good repair – plain finished – a plain piazza in front – 2500 Dol[lars]." It was a 99' by 19' two-story stone structure with 46 windows and 540 panes. The 1798 tax was known as the "window pane tax". Taxes were partially levied on the number of window panes, which supposedly indicated the wealth of the owner. (It was almost immediately repealed.)

This was the Washington Inn. John Holme was no longer living there. Humphrey Waterman (who, in 1799, would build the Green Tree Hotel, still standing at the SW corner of Rhawn and Frankford) was the proprietor. The first entry shows John Holme residing in and owning a very substantial 55x19.5 2-story stone house with a 15x19.5 stone kitchen and 15x18 2-story stone milk house; "New and in good repair". The exact location of the house has not been determined. It was "on the Bristol Road joining land of Andr Lycan", which would place it on the west side of the Bristol Road across from the Inn. It may have been at the NW corner of Welsh and Frankford where the Griffith-Peale house is today. But that house is thought to have been built around 1810. Additional research is needed.

The third entry is the Box Grove mansion owned and occupied by Thomas Holme, John's brother. The 2-story brick and stone house measured 40'x30' and was "in Midling repair" in 1798. It had 19 windows with 333 panes versus John's 29 windows with 404 panes. Sibling rivalry may have been expressed in window panes.

John Holme	same	1	55 by 19 1/2	Stone	2	29	404	80	On Bristol road joining Andr. Lycan & others.	New and in good repair a good piazza in front. House plain finished 2500 Dol.
			Kitchen 15 by 19 1/2	Stone	1					
			Milk house 15 by 18	Stone	2					
			Chair house 14 by 20	frame	1					
Humph J Waterman	John Holme	1	99 by 19	Stone	2	46	540	80	Sign of the Genl Washington on Bristol road on J Holme's land	Part new. The whole in good repair - plain finished - a plain piazza in front. - 2500 Dol.
			Stable 12 by 19	Stone	1					
			Stable 12 by 24	Stone	1					
93										
Thos Holme	same	1	40 by 30	Brick & stone	2	19	333	80	Near the Washington & John Holme & others.	House in Midling repair Smoke house ordinary - House plain finished 1800 Dol.
			Milk house 10 by 12	Stone	1					
			Smith house 9 by 11	frame	1					

1798 Direct Tax List – John and Thomas Holme

About this time (circa 1800), John Holme had a lumber yard behind his Washington Inn, which he appropriately called the Washington Lumber Yard. It doesn't seem to appear on the 1798 tax list, perhaps because there was no building on the site. It was thought to have extended back to Lumber Street (today's Erdrick St) and Welsh Road. One can imagine a sign hanging at Welsh Road on the Bristol Road advertising the Washington Lumber Yard. Around 1801-02, Holme changed the name to the Holmes Burg Lumber Yard.

Change and growth were in the air. It was the turn of the 19th century and America was a proud, free, and independent new nation of growing cities and towns. Two important local happenings would cause the name Holmesburg to stick.

One local factor was the new Lower Dublin Academy school house about a mile up the Bristol Road, built in 1798 to replace the old log school house. The Trustees of Lower Dublin Academy had been incorporated in January 1794 to build a new school to accommodate the growing student population. The brothers John and Thomas Holme were among the charter Trustees. As youngsters they had attended the old 1723 log school house, which had come into existence from a bequest in the Surveyor General Thomas Holme's will of 1694 leaving "£4 for the good of Dublin Township, either for school purposes or to put out some honest man's son of the age of 16 years, to a trade, etc." The bequest was not satisfied until 1723 when Holme's grandson, Thomas Crispin, and his sisters gave two acres of land for a school - at today's Willits and Academy Roads - and the log house was built.

The new 2-story stone school building had essentially been completed by 1798-99 but the number of subscriptions was not sufficient to meet the expenses incurred. As was often done in those days, a lottery was instituted by the Trustees to satisfy the debt. As a consequence of advertising and explaining what the lottery was all about, the Surveyor Thomas Holme's name and his importance in the early days of the province was on people's minds. The lottery went public in 1801 and the Holme name was in the news. Whether the Holme of the Holmes Burg Lumber Yard was identified with the Surveyor or with the inn keeper and lumber yard and land merchant was immaterial. The name Holme was a well known entity for whatever reason and closely associated with the locale.

The second factor coming into play was the establishment of the Frankford-Bristol Pike in 1803. Toll Gate #3 on the Pike from Philadelphia to New York was at the south end of the Pennypack bridge at the intersection of the road leading down to the old 1697 mill. This had long been a stopping point with a black smith shop and plenty of water for horses. It now had a toll gate. (The term turnpike comes from a long straight tree branch or pike being swung or turned to allow traffic to pass.) The turnpike company paved the old King's Highway and the village growing around the inn up the hill took on a new life and a new name. Holmesburg was here to stay.

And John Holme's wheeling and dealing days were in their prime. Between 1799 and 1810, there were dozens of land transactions, large and small. More mills were starting up and the old settlement was jumping and expanding. And then it was suddenly all over for John Holme. He died at the age of 67 in 1811 and, although he and his wife Ester (Swift) had ten children, he left no will and his family seems to have rapidly dissipated.

His brother, Thomas, on the other hand, enjoyed the pastoral life of the gentleman farmer, dying in 1826 at the age of 77. His half of the original 240 acres lay pretty much intact. His son, George W Holme (1789-1864), a mainstay in the community in the early and mid 19th century, gradually sold off much of the remainder of the original 240 acres of land. He donated the site of the Holmesburg Baptist Church (est 1823) on the Bristol Pike. Then, in 1886, as a consequence of old will settlements, George's son, Furman, was forced to break up the ancient Box Grove estate leaving only the old Holme family mansion and property. The last member of the family sold the house in 1928 and left the neighborhood.

John and Thomas Holme and their wives, and their mother and father are all buried in the old Pennepack Baptist Cemetery on Krewstown Road, close to the church on the south side. The earliest burials there go back to 1692.