Lenni-Lenape Indians lived among this area’s rich woods and creeks for centuries. In the summer they came to catch fish in the creeks. In the winter they moved further west to hunt deer. They gathered food from the forest and grew crops of corn.

As Europeans began to explore and colonize America, the Lenni-Lenape became familiar with them and the goods they brought to trade. Few understood that these settlers would change the Lenni-Lenape’s lifestyle forever. As more Europeans came to live here, they forced the Lenni-Lenape further and further west. By 1740, almost all were gone from this area.

1200

1215 Magna Carta guarantees Englishmen basic rights.
1426 Gutenberg invents printing press.
1492 Columbus makes first voyage to the New World.
1517 Martin Luther launches Protestant Reformation.
1585 Sir Walter Raleigh tries to establish colony in Virginia.
The English explorer Henry Hudson became the first European to see this area in 1609. He paved the way for Dutch, Swedish, and English settlers. Settlers named the Delaware Valley for Lord de la Warr, the governor of the Virginia colony.

In 1681, King Charles II granted William Penn the right to found the colony of Pennsylvania. It included present-day Thornbury. Penn, a pacifist Quaker, hoped to create a place where people could practice democracy and religious tolerance. He quickly sold large parcels of land to people who became known as First Purchasers.

George Pearce was a First Purchaser in this area. His wife was from Thornbury, Gloucestershire, England. This is the likely origin of Thornbury’s name.

“My God that has given [Pennsylvania] to me through many difficulties will I believe bless and make it the seed of a nation.”

From William Penn’s letter to Robert Turner, March 5, 1681.

Replica of Henry Hudson’s ship, the Half Moon. Courtesy New Netherland Museum.

Portrait assumed to be that of Henry Hudson. Courtesy The New York Public Library.


Penn’s treaty with the Indians, oil on canvas painting by Edward Hicks, 1830-35. Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

In the 1800’s, Chester Creek drove Thornbury Township’s economy. Water-powered mills ground flour, cut lumber, and made other goods to supply local farmers. Only remnants of those mills still exist.

John Taylor’s ironworks, Sarum Forge, power from a watermill helped produce wrought iron, and later, iron bars that could be made into useful products like nails. Ironworks like Sarum Forge did such brisk business that they competed with iron imports from Britain. Because of this, Britain forbade the building of any new ironworks.

Delaware County’s jagged Boundary
In 189, the state government divided Chester County in two, creating Delaware County. The line separating them ran right through Thornbury. Landowners along the border could choose the county to which they would belong. Their individual choices created the jagged township boundary that still exists today. See boundary on map above.

Map of Thornbury
Map of Westtown and Thornbury 1870s
Chester County Archives & Records Services
Chester County Archives & Records Services

Petition for a road to Sarum Forge, February 1775. A road was central to the success of the forge.
Chester County Archives & Records Services

Saw and grist mills appear in the Chester Creek Valley.
1701–1707 A survey shows eight landowners in the area: John Taylor, Randolph Vernon, Elizabeth Hickman, John and Thomas Cheaney, William and Joseph Brinton, and John Pyle. Ben Franklin begins publishing Poor Richard's Almanac.
John Taylor erects Sarum Forge, one of the earliest ironworks in Pennsylvania.
Liberty Bell is made to commemorate 50-year anniversary of Pennsylvania's original constitution.

View of Locksley Mill

1700 1750 1800 1850 1900 2000
Squire Thomas Cheyney may have changed the course of the Revolution. He warned General Washington about enemy movements at the Brandywine River. Though Americans lost the Battle of the Brandywine, without the information, the whole war might have been lost, too.

Mary “Polly” and Persifor Frazer
The British captured Persifor Frazer at Brandywine, and tried to storm his home to take supplies. His wife Mary defended her home and her husband’s reputation as a Patriot. Throughout the war, she took supplies to troops at Valley Forge and even “spied” — she smuggled information from her jailed husband to General Washington.

Anne and Joseph Hemphill
Anne Hemphill’s husband Joseph was fighting for the Patriots when British soldiers invaded their home (today’s Sweetwater Farm). They forced Anne to stay up all night cooking for them. The next day, they tried to drive away with all her food — but Anne climbed onto their wagon. She told them they would have to take her too.

The soldiers left the food behind.

1776 – 1799

Squire Thomas Cheyney may have changed the course of the Revolution. He warned General Washington about enemy movements at the Brandywine River. Though Americans lost the Battle of the Brandywine, without the information, the whole war might have been lost, too.

Mary “Polly” and Persifor Frazer
The British captured Persifor Frazer at Brandywine, and tried to storm his home to take supplies. His wife Mary defended her home and her husband’s reputation as a Patriot. Throughout the war, she took supplies to troops at Valley Forge and even “spied” — she smuggled information from her jailed husband to General Washington.

Anne and Joseph Hemphill
Anne Hemphill’s husband Joseph was fighting for the Patriots when British soldiers invaded their home (today’s Sweetwater Farm). They forced Anne to stay up all night cooking for them. The next day, they tried to drive away with all her food — but Anne climbed onto their wagon. She told them they would have to take her too.

The soldiers left the food behind.
In the 1800’s, changes swept across the nation, from technology to religion.

As industry exploded, the Willcox family bought Sarum Forge for its Glen Mills operations. Some of the paper they made became U.S. currency.

Rail service revolutionized transportation. Its arrival in Thornbury in 1858 was good for business. It became much easier to transport goods to and from Philadelphia.

People across America found renewed interest in religion – including here in Thornbury. Residents established several new churches.

People also rethought social issues. Philadelphians opened the House of Refuge, the first facility for court-referred young men in the country. It moved to Thornbury in 1892. Today, it is the well-respected Glen Mills School. Soon after, a similar school for girls, Sleighton Farms, opened.
Hometown Heroes: The Civil War

At the start of the Civil War, as in the rest of the country, emotions ran high in Delaware County. When President Lincoln called up the war’s first Union soldiers, many men from Delaware County volunteered. No one knew what a long, bitter, bloody war it would be.

Willcox Mills, at the former site of Sarum Forge, produced many kinds of paper – including those used for bank notes and currency. The Mills may have made the paper on which Union currency was printed – the money that financed their side of the war.

The Willcox Mills also gained worldwide fame for its invention of an anti-counterfeiting process involving “localized fibers”.

Thornbury’s Joseph Pratt, First Lieutenant, Company D, 124th; Captain, Company I, 29th Penna. Emergency

James Wilcox, proprietor of Willcox Mills.

African American Civil War veterans laid to rest at the AME church.
Middle class African Americans thrived in Southeastern Pennsylvania - long before it was common in other parts of the nation. The famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass made many of his speeches in the area. Thornbury citizens elected a black judge, Squire Hazzard, in the late 1800's.

Quaker attitudes of tolerance, and job opportunities such as those at Thornbury’s quarry, allowed African Americans to prosper. They maintained a strong community at the Thornbury African Methodist Church, whose roots go back to before 1834.

In 1902, The Institute for Colored Youth found a new home at George Cheyney’s farm. Founded in 1837, it is the oldest historically black college in the United States. Today, students know it as Cheyney University of Pennsylvania.
An Era of Community

Throughout the 20th century, the people of Thornbury sought stability in small-town life. The rural area continued a culture of neighbors helping neighbors.

Residents built schools and churches. A great place for communal life, Brinton Lake Colony and Tanguy Homesteads developed cooperative communities here.

A Letter Home

The defining events of the century touched the lives of Thornbury residents. During World War I, a soldier from Thornbury described his life to his mother:

…It is raining and I am living in a tent and it is not all together too waterproof.

Let us hope that we still continue to keep [the Germans] on the move…
At the start of the 21st century, Thornbury’s rural landscape is becoming more developed as life in the area shifts away from farming. Local residents and leaders seek to balance plans for the future with respect for the township’s compelling history.

The township first settled by six First Purchasers has an estimated population of 3,230 according to census statistics for the year 2000.

Native Americans, traders, millers, farmers, leaders, soldiers, and families have all called Thornbury home. They have left a legacy of nearly 500 historic resources in the township.

By knowing who came before us, we can better understand who we are today. The lives of the past have laid the groundwork for those of the present.

Thornbury’s story continues…