

In Memoriam

J. Michael Morrison

16 February 1952 – 17 December 2019

Michael was born in Philadelphia and was the son of James William Morrison and Joan Lyon Gibson Morrison. He grew up in the Upper Main Line area, graduating from Upper Merion High School in 1970 and from Eastern College in 1974.

His fondness for local history arose in no small part due to the influence of his grandparents, Leslie White Morrison and Lucressa Hastings Morrison who lived in a lovingly restored historic 18th-century home across the road from his parents. His grandfather had worked on the construction of the high-voltage electrical distribution lines through the Great Valley from Conowingo Dam in the late 1920s, and acquired the nickname “Slim” that followed him throughout his life, and made its way, along with his remarkable exploits, into a popular book and Hollywood movie starring Henry Fonda.

Michael generously shared the remarkable tale of Slim in a wonderful and richly illustrated presentation to the Society in September 2016, and subsequently authored “The Story of Slim, a Lineman in the Great Valley” for publication in the Spring 2018 issue of the History Quarterly.

Michael was a dedicated and published historian who served as chair of our Board of Directors in 2011, and on the TEHS Archives Committee for several years prior to becoming president. His passion for history and great enthusiasm for the Society helped us to continue to grow and develop.

Michael served as president of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society (TEHS) from his election in January 2012 until April 2016, when he stepped down due to concerns about his increasingly significant health challenges. It was a pleasure serving alongside Michael, as we worked together on a variety of projects, notably the formation of the Rediscovering Devon committee, a collaboration focused on historic preservation in Devon with representatives from TEHS, Chester County Historical Society and Devon Horse Show & Country Fair.

Prior to becoming involved with TEHS, Michael’s fascination with local

history led to a very substantial relationship with the King of Prussia Historical Society, and they published this tribute on 17 December 2019.

It is with very heavy hearts that the King of Prussia Historical Society announces the passing of J. Michael Morrison after a long battle with pulmonary fibrosis. Michael was instrumental in the re-establishment of the Historical Society in advance of the township’s Tricentennial in 2013. In doing so, he was following in the footsteps of his grandmother, Lucressa Morrison who was one of the original founders of the society in 1953, owner of the King of Prussia Antique Store, and one-time post-mistress. Michael’s encyclopedic knowledge of Upper Merion history was key to his authorship of the book, Upper Merion: The First 300 Years. He was a sought-after expert speaker on many topics of local history, and was always eager to share his passion for the preservation of our history. Michael will be greatly missed but his legacy will live on in the King of Prussia Historical Society about which he was so passionate and so proud.

The Historical Society of Montgomery County awarded the 2018 Ella Aderman Acorn Award for Preservation of Montgomery County History to J. Michael Morrison in recognition of his significant contributions toward preserving the history of Montgomery County through his strong efforts with the King of Prussia Historical Society.

In the course of working together in various capacities, we became good friends, and I will continue to treasure the time we spent together, as well as his generous contributions and valuable insights.

— John O. Senior

Three Presidents — Michael Morrison (RIGHT) took the leadership reins from Roger Thorne (CENTER) in January 2012, after Roger’s nine years of outstanding service as president. Michael served as TEHS president until April 2016, when he stepped down due to challenging health considerations, and John O. Senior (LEFT) took on the role of president. In this 2014 photo, Michael and John are presenting former president Roger with the S. Paul Teamer Award for meritorious service. John and Michael were recipients of the award in 2016 and 2018 respectively.



Recollections of a Friend

When I first met Michael, we were both part of a group that became immersed in the history of the Devon Horse Show and Country Fair, and for whatever reason, the personalities clicked. Everything we undertook together was rewarding, and it came together easily.

In late 2016, Pattye Benson of the Tredyffrin Historic Preservation Trust asked Michael to give a presentation the following spring on the Devon Inn, and I offered to help him with the research. Michael's gentle enthusiasm for history made it fun, and we never anticipated how much information we would uncover. The presentation for the Trust was held at Jenkins Arboretum in May of 2017 with a standing-room-only audience, and we could tell that people were fascinated by the story and wanted to learn more. It was then that he started talking about a book.

Sadly, Michael's health was slowly deteriorating, but he did give the Devon Inn presentation again at the Society's November meeting. Throughout 2018, he and I continued to unearth new photos and tidbits about the Inn with the help of members and new friends we had met along the way. When Michael felt well enough, John Senior and I would often meet with him. We'd always discuss the book, even though we quietly knew that it was less and less likely that he would ever publish it.

Michael's last few months were very difficult, and he spent time in and out of intensive care at the hospital. Amazingly, he would never lose his quiet sense of both humor and humility. On the morning of December 16, 2019, Michael let me know that he was on hospice and at peace. In their last conversation, John had promised Michael that he and I would see the Devon Inn project to completion.

— Meg Wiederseim



(ABOVE) Members of the Rediscovering Devon Committee at the Chester County History Center in October 2013. (L-R) Fran Jacobs II, Bobbi Cowley, Meg Wiederseim, Lynne Anderson, Michael Morrison, Ellen Endslo, John O. Senior. (BELOW LEFT) Michael talking with the audience at the June 2016 Member Excursion to the Old Roberts School. His grandfather "Slim" Morrison can be seen in the slide projected on the screen to his left. (BELOW RIGHT) Michael leading the June 2013 Member Excursion to Historic Yellow Springs. *Photos courtesy of John O. Senior.*



In 2019, Michael prepared an autobiographical overview focused on his historical interests. It provides valuable perspectives in his own words, albeit in the third person, and while he was not able to accomplish the forward-looking objectives described at the conclusion, we are grateful that we were able to continue his work on at least the Devon Inn project, and hope that he would be pleased.

J. Michael Morrison

J. Michael Morrison was born and raised in King of Prussia, Pa. His keen interest in local history comes honestly; his grandparents settled there in the 1920s, opening an Antique Shop, and running the Post Office. He grew up learning the family business and studying local history at an early age. He has spent many years compiling stories, artifacts, and photographs of King of Prussia, carrying on the legacy of his grandparents.

Michael is a 1974 graduate of Eastern University in St. Davids, Pa. After college, he spent nearly ten years in the hospitality industry, primarily in restaurant management. His love of history and interest in design and architecture led to a new career in kitchen, bathroom, and architectural interior design. Subsequently, his many years of work in Historic Restoration and Architectural Design have given him a unique perspective as it relates to the identification of historic locations at risk or long since lost to progress.

Motivated by a desire to raise awareness about the need for historic preservation in his hometown of King of Prussia, Michael undertook the writing of his first book. Realizing that most of the town's significant landmarks had disappeared, and the handful that were left faced a bleak future, he compiled *Images of America*. By taking on this project, and sharing some of the trove of photos he has compiled, Michael was able to offer a glimpse of King of Prussia as it once was, and to contrast it to what it had become; a town at that time hosting well over one million visitors a year.

Michael followed up his 2005 book *Images of America* with *Then and Now* two years later. This sequel of sorts set out to tell the story of how King of Prussia had changed from a sleepy hamlet established in 1713 to thriving business and shopping mecca with an estimated 10 million visitors each year. The confluence of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, the Schuylkill Expressway and State Route 202 has led to nearly unrivaled growth that quite literally swallowed the little hamlet that once thrived at the very spot where these highways now converge. As of 2019, this onetime farming community and little country town now boasts 22 million annual visitors.

A website called Historic Reesville (with Reesville being the original name of the town) was an outgrowth of these two books. It, too, was a look back at the ever-evolving face of King of Prussia, and invited visitors to the site to share stories and memories.

Another project contemporary with Historic Reesville was the Upper Merion Today website, an online news outlet designed to keep local residents informed about what is going on in the area, as well as featuring restaurant reviews, an editorial blog, recipes, a general store, with a little taste of history thrown in.

With the approach of Upper Merion Township's 300th birthday, a call went out in 2010 for a group of volunteers to form a township committee to plan a grand celebration. One

of the first to step up was Michael Morrison. As the de facto township historian, Michael was a key member with much to contribute. He, along with former Upper Merion High School Principal, Francis Luther, and township librarian, Marianne Hooper, spent two years researching and writing a new more in-depth account of the history of the township. The resulting book, *Upper Merion Township: The First 300 Years* was published in early 2013 and was a bestseller among both current and former residents.

In addition to writing a new book for the Tricentennial, Michael was able to pursue his dream of reactivating the long dormant King of Prussia Historical Society that had originally been founded in 1953 by a committee that included Michael's grandmother, Lucrezia Morrison, owner of the Antique Store and one-time post mistress back when King of Prussia was just a small town.

The historical society had been active through the year 2000 when the King of Prussia Inn was picked up and moved from its stranded position in a median island in the middle of Route 202, to a new home a mile away on Bill Smith Boulevard. One of the last and most storied buildings in the township was saved, but sadly, the historical society had faded away.

What better time to drum up interest in the rich history of the township than the milestone celebration of the township's 300th birthday? Michael and a few other historically minded residents successfully revived the King of Prussia Historical Society, which has been an active ongoing organization ever since.

Michael's original Historic Reesville website was incorporated into the new website of the historical society. Many people came forward with stories, photos and memorabilia to begin rebuilding a tangible as well as a virtual collection. The King of Prussia Historical Society continues to grow, offering educational programs, township tours, genealogical research and so much more.

Michael Morrison continues his involvement as a current Board Member for The King of Prussia Historical Society, and is a former Chairman of the Board of Directors and an acting archivist for the Tredyffrin-Easttown Historical Society, Life Member of the Historical Society of Montgomery County, and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. He is also a lifetime member of the Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges. He continues to research history and often serves as a keynote speaker for local businesses and other organizations.

Most recently, he was working on two books: one on the Devon Inn and another on Historic Reesville, which was the original name of the village of King of Prussia. As he always has, he continues to hope that his efforts will continue to inspire others to take an interest in our past, help preserve our local heritage, and enlighten its future.