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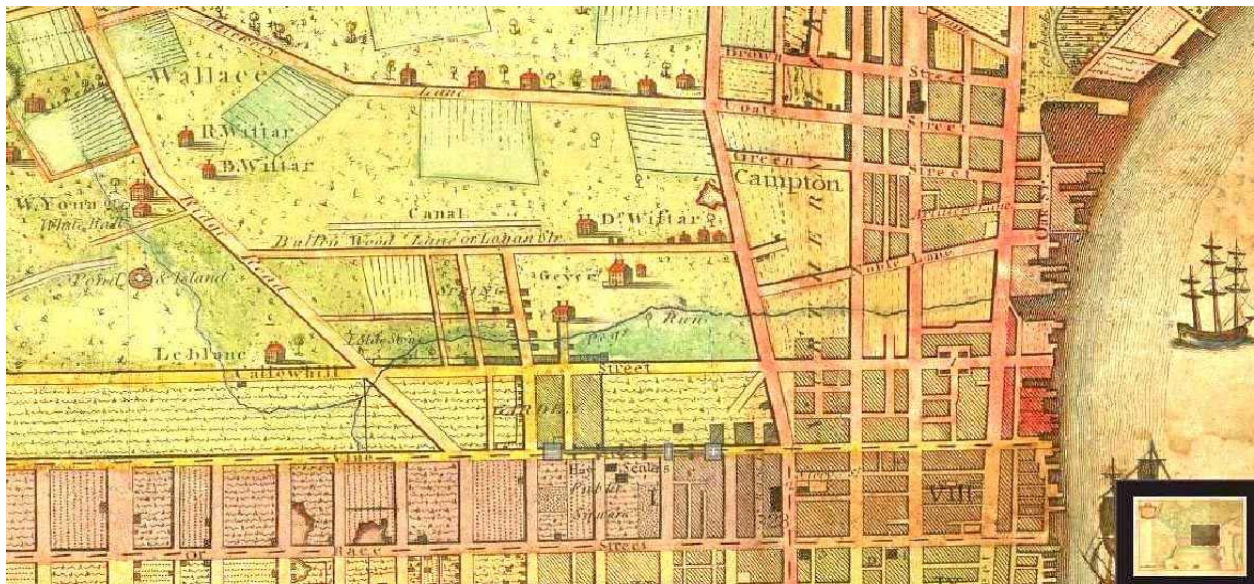
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**Philadelphia's Willow Street: The Curious Curvaceous Chronicle
of Cohoquinoque Creek (a.k.a. Pegg's Run)
By Harry Kyriakodis**

Many Philadelphians are aware of the story of Dock Street, which was originally a tributary of the Delaware River called Dock Creek.¹ That wide and deep stream figured prominently in the early history of the city until it was culverted section-by-section during the 1700s, with a thoroughfare then laid on top. This happened to many other tributaries of the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers all over Philadelphia in later years. One of these forgotten streams once followed the path of Willow Street, a rare curvilinear street near downtown Philadelphia.

Very much ignored today, Willow Street is a modest two-lane road that winds its way eastwards from Ninth Street through what is sometimes referred to as the Callowhill Industrial District. It ends at Second Street, having been cut off from the Delaware River waterfront in the 1970s by Interstate 95. Willow Street parallels nearby Callowhill Street, but it just doesn't fit neatly into the regular city street grid that traces its roots back to the late 17th century, when Thomas Holmes laid out the city of Philadelphia for William Penn.

Not to mention that Willow Street is a wavy street in a city known for not having wavy streets. The reason for the waviness is that Willow Street follows the course of Cohoquinoque² Creek, a stream that emptied into the Delaware in earlier times. This once-prominent waterway flowed west-to-east along the southern part of Northern Liberties about a block and a half north of the original northern boundary of Philadelphia (i.e., Vine Street). The Cohoquinoque became a sewer in the early 1800s, then also a road, then a railroad right-of-way, and then a road again!



PART OF 1794 MAP, SHOWING PEGGS RUN

Accounts vary, but Cohoquinoque Creek arose around the present-day intersection of Fifteenth and Spring Garden Streets (and perhaps as far north as Fairmount Avenue), and was also fed by a well-known spring in the Spring Garden District near modern-day Ninth and Spring Garden Streets. The creek was later known as Pegg's Run:

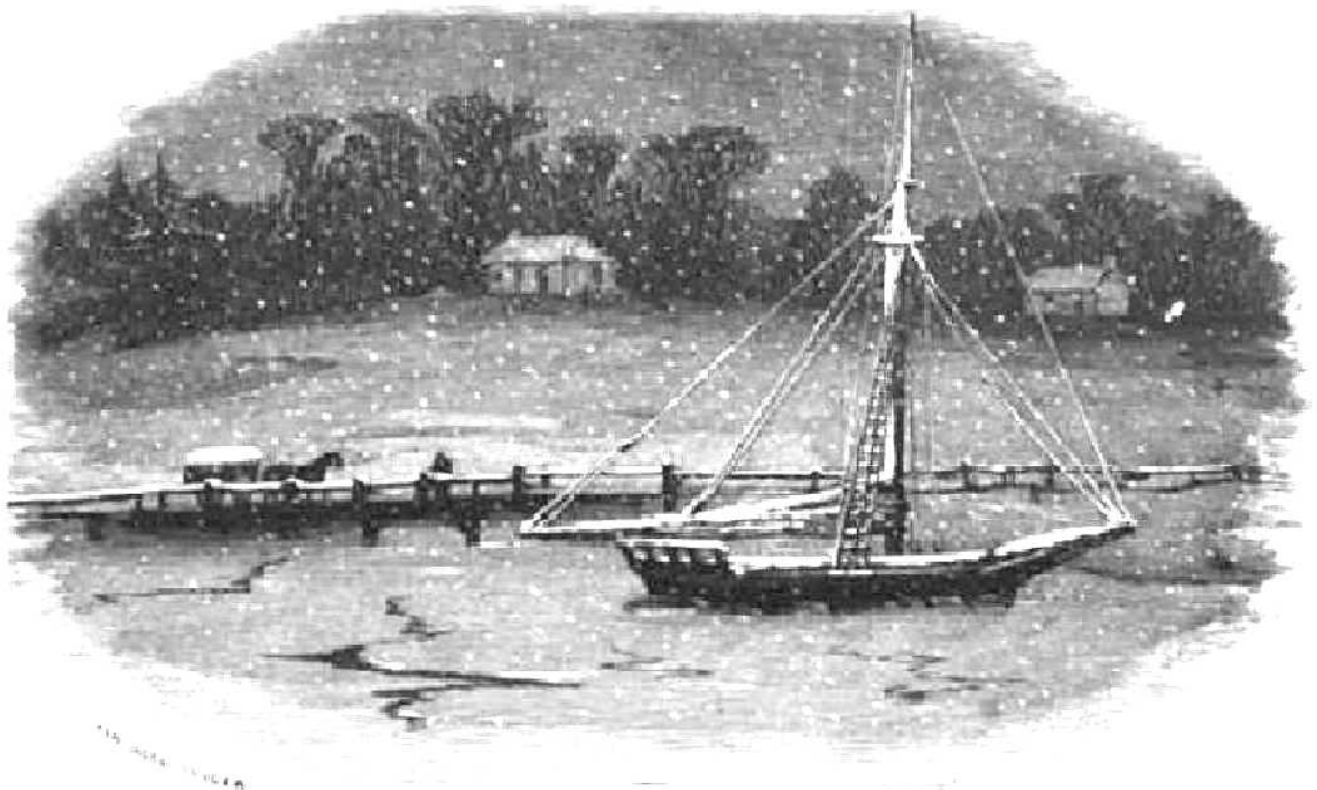
Pegg's run [obliterated] ran a course, which is now mainly occupied by Willow Street. One branch commenced at Fairmount Avenue west of Fifteenth Street, and then ran south-east nearly to Vine; thence north-east above Callowhill Street and east

of Tenth, where it was joined by a branch which rose west of Eleventh Street between Green Street and Fairmount Avenue. The united streams flowed eastwardly to the Delaware. This creek was called Cohoquinoque in a patent to Jurian Hartsfelder for the whole of the Northern Liberties in 1678. It was called Pegg's run after Daniel Pegg, an Englishman, who was the purchaser of Hartsfelder's land. On Scull & Heap's map it is called Cohoquenoque; on Hill's, Cohoquinoque.³

The first substantive commentary about and research into this stream was done by Philadelphia annalist John Fanning Watson, who delved into the Cohoquinoque's early history in his *Annals of Philadelphia*, first published in 1830. This is the start of several pages recounting the full story of Pegg's Run up until Watson's time:

PEGG'S RUN, Etc.: No part of Philadelphia has undergone such great and various changes as the range of commons, water-lots, &c. ranging along the course of this run, primarily known under the Indian name of Cohoquinoque. A present beholder of the streets and houses now covering those grounds, and the hidden tunnel now concealing the former creek, could have no conception of things as they were, even only 30 years ago. The description is unavoidably complicated.⁴

If only Watson knew how "unavoidably complicated" the story of Pegg's Run would continue to be.



SLOOP OF WAR WINTERING IN PEGG'S RUN —Page 156

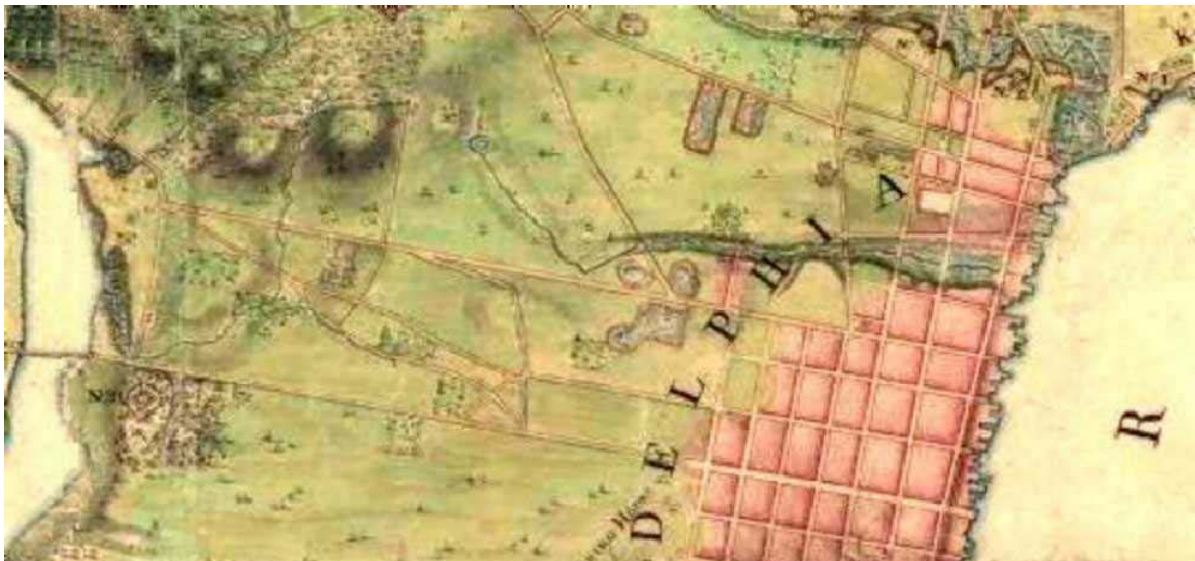
"SLOOP OF WAR WINTERING IN PEGG'S RUN," FROM WATSON'S ANNALS

According to Watson, Cohoquinoque Creek was deep enough to be navigable by small craft. Farm products were routinely floated on flat boats to the Delaware River for a short trip

downstream to get to street markets in Philadelphia. Young people would row their way up Pegg's Run as far as the Spring Garden spring on moonlit nights. Watson further wrote that a wooden causeway known as Poole's Bridge⁵ was built over the stream at Front Street in the 1740s. Several people straying from the causeway lost their lives in the mud, since the land on both sides of Pegg's Run was low and swampy around this locale. Other bridges followed on Second Street and other roads. Further west, wide meadows and cornfields lined the Cohoquinoque's banks. Benjamin Franklin reputedly conducted his celebrated kite and key experiment in 1752 somewhere near the creek along modern-day Ridge Avenue.⁶



**"PEGG'S RUN" WITH POOLE'S BRIDGE CARRYING FRONT STREET,
FROM WATSON'S ANNALS**



FROM A 1777 MAP OF PHILADELPHIA, SHOWING PEGG'S RUN RATHER PROMINENTLY



PEGG'S RUN, NORTHERN LIBERTIES —Page 436.

**"PEGG'S RUN, NORTHERN LIBERTIES" FROM WATSON'S ANNALS,
SHOWING TWO BRIDGES: ONE FOR FRONT STREET (POOLE'S BRIDGE
ON THE RIGHT) AND ANOTHER FOR SECOND STREET**

The name "Pegg's Run" was derived from Daniel Pegg, a Quaker brickmaker who once possessed nearly all the land in the Northern Liberties of Philadelphia County south of Cohocksink Creek.⁷ Pegg in 1686 acquired three hundred and fifty acres of marshy ground in that vicinity from one Jurian Hartsfelder, who held a patent on the land dating to 1676, years before William Penn's arrival in the New World.⁸ Called Hartsfield, the tract included all the ground between the Cohoquinoque and Cohocksink Creeks extending westward about as far as Ridge Road (Ridge Avenue today). This ground eventually became the Northern Liberties District and a portion of the Spring Garden District of Philadelphia County.

It's uncertain exactly when Pegg's Run was covered over and made into a city sewer. One account states that the stream was enclosed as far west as Franklin Street⁹ by 1811 and further west to Ninth Street by 1824. Another report says that the commissioners of Northern Liberties ordered that a culvert be constructed along or atop the creek in 1826 from Oak (or Beach¹⁰) Street (near present-day Delaware Avenue) to Sixth Street. Then again, a 1810 map shows a labeled Willow Street all the way to just past Sixth Street.

Whatever the case, the creek had become tremendously polluted even as early as the late 18th century, with numerous tanneries and other early Philadelphia industries located along its embankments. The following three accounts indicate how bad the situation was:

[1:] A small stream of water, called Pegg's Run, passes through a portion of the Northern Liberties and Spring Garden, which, until a few years ago, was left open and unimproved. The bottom of the stream was miry, and, at low tide and in hot and drougthy weather, was often destitute of sufficient water to carry off its contents. Receiving the offals of very many slaughter-houses, lanyards, glue, starch, dressed skin, and soap manufactories adjoining it, as well as the contents of two culverts, of a large number of privies, and of the gutters of the numerous populous streets and alleys it crosses, it became highly offensive, and the source of noxious exhalations. This stream, which plays a conspicuous part in the history of one of the epidemics,

and was correctly pronounced the greatest nuisance in Philadelphia, attracted finally the attention of the public and council, and has since been culverted.¹¹

* * *

[2:] [I]n reference to the development in Duke Street, (then Artillery Lane,) Northern Liberties, he alludes to its proximity to what was called in a petition of that time, "the greatest nuisance in Philadelphia," Pegg's Run, and describes it "as an open culvert or common sewer, passing through the closely built parts of Penn Township, Spring Garden, and the Northern Liberties, to the River Delaware. In its course, it receives the contents of the gutters of the numerous populous streets and alleys it crosses, and two culverts from the city also open into it. Along its borders are situated a number of manufactories of glue, starch, dressed skins, and soap. About fifty slaughter-houses, and the privies of most of the adjoining dwellings, the refuse, fermentable and putrescent matters of which are all emptied into its stream. Except during the heavy rains, or immediately after them, the stream is barely sufficient to carry along, with a sluggish current, the mass of decomposing, offensive substances that compose it, for in fact, it seems more like liquid mud than water."¹²

* * *



FROM JOHN A. PAXTON'S 1810 MAP SHOWING PEGG'S RUN AND WILLOW STREET

[3:] Pegg's Run, formerly the Cohoquinoque, was the site of the present Willow street. The reason why so many leather dressers are located on it, and near it, is, that before Pegg's Run was culverted, tanners and leather-dressers sought that neighborhood in order to discharge their dyes and other liquids into the creek; and subsequently, when the culvert was built, they obtained entrances into it. In consequence of this advantage the ground in that neighborhood was sought by leather-dressers; and when a fashion in some lines of business is established, it is very hard to break it...

Willow street (formerly Pegg's Run) was opened by order of the Court of Quarter Sessions by proceedings which commenced in June, 1828, and by which there was an assessment for damages, which was confirmed in September, 1829. The surface of Willow street is sustained by a culvert, which was built over the course of the stream called by the Indians "Cohoquinoque," and is in modern times known as Pegg's Run. It empties into the Delaware at Willow street wharf.¹³

So after the sewer was built, the abattoirs, tanneries, dye makers, and other shops and factories along the Cohoquinoque's former banks continued to discharge their wastes into the enclosed stream and out to the nearby Delaware River.

The full length of Willow Street was placed atop the culvert by 1829. Train tracks were laid on the street around 1834 by the Northern Liberties and Penn Township Railroad. This line ran from the Delaware River to Broad Street and connected to the Philadelphia and Columbia Railroad, which came into the city from the west and ran atop Pennsylvania Avenue¹⁴ to Broad Street. Commonly called the Willow Street Railroad, the line was also known as the Delaware and Schuylkill Railroad:

Delaware and Schuylkill Railroad.—The meetings in favor of a Delaware and Schuylkill Railroad produced an effect in 1829, when, on April 23, an act was passed to incorporate a company to build a railroad in the northern section of the county of Philadelphia, from the river Delaware to the Schuylkill, or to terminate at the junction with the Columbia and Philadelphia Railroad. The corporation was to be called the Northern Liberties and Penn Township Railroad Company; capital stock, eight hundred shares, at fifty dollars per share. Authority was given to make the railroad over any expedient route, beginning at the west side of Front Street, at or near Willow Street, in the Northern Liberties, and running on or in the neighborhood of Willow Street, westerly, to the western boundary of the Northern Liberties district, and then by such route as the commissioners of Spring Garden might permit, until the Columbia Railroad was intersected, with authority to carry the road farther on to the Schuylkill River, north of Vine Street. Exceptions were that the road



**1875 MAP SHOWING WILLOW STREET AS A RAILROAD RIGHT-OF-WAY
SURROUNDED BY FACTORIES AND ROW HOUSES**

should not be carried through the city property at Fairmount without consent of Councils, nor through the property of the Lehigh Canal and Navigation Company, which was at that time on the Delaware, in the neighborhood of Willow Street wharf. This project languished for three years. New commissioners were appointed to dispose of the stock, and general authority was given to construct the railroad anywhere north of Vine Street. Eventually the company decided on placing the rails upon Willow Street as far west as the culvert extended. At Ninth Street, James Street opened west about the western line of the culverted street. Here a straight connection carried the railroad to Broad Street, where it intersected the Columbia or Pennsylvania Railroad at what was called Pennsylvania Avenue, and north of Callowhill Street, so that it did not occupy any public streets, except at crossings.

This railroad was finished and opened from Broad Street to the Delaware River in April, 1834, and on the 23d of that month public notice was given that pleasure-cars would run at stated periods from the Third Street hall to the Schuylkill bridge at Peter's Island. They were drawn by horses, and this may be said to have been the first passenger railroad, according to the modern idea, in the city. The depot of this company at Willow Street wharf was completed and ready for use about the beginning of January 1, 1835. The store-house was fifty by one hundred feet. At the wharf, which was two hundred feet long, there was a depth of twenty-seven feet of water, so that vessels of the largest size could lay to and discharge cargo and take in merchandise brought by the railroad.¹⁵

In the 1850s, the entire single-track route—heading west from the Delaware River—became part of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad. The Reading apparently owned the Willow Street wharf, under which the sewer drained into the Delaware. The wharf was across from the Reading Railroad's freight yards on Delaware Avenue north of Callowhill Street.¹⁶ A freight depot was at the foot of Willow Street too.



***CURVY WILLOW STREET IS PLAINLY EVIDENT IN THIS 1930s OVERHEAD IMAGE;
NOTE THE FACTORIES AND RAILROAD SIDINGS FLANKING THE STREET***

This is not the only railroad activity that Willow Street saw. Early on, the Philadelphia, Germantown and Norristown Railroad connected to the Northern Liberties and Penn Township Railroad at Ninth Street.¹⁷ Furthermore, the Philadelphia and Trenton Railroad was supposed to reach Willow Street from the north and terminate—or, more accurately, begin—at the northwest corner of Third and Willow. The line was proposed in the 1830s but was never built. In the mid-1850s, however, the North Pennsylvania Railroad did construct a large freight and passenger depot at Front and Willow Streets. Named "Cohoquinoque Depot," this served as the North Pennsylvania's southern terminus for only a few years (until 1864) before the railroad built a new terminal further north.

The land on either side of Willow Street became densely filled with residential and industrial buildings by the mid-1800s. Occupying a good part of the Northern Liberties and Spring Garden Districts of Philadelphia County, the region had first been settled in the early 1800s by wealthy Quakers who had moved out of the congested original part of Philadelphia. As such, this quarter prospered as the most immediate suburb of Philadelphia north of the city proper.¹⁸

By the 20th century, however, this locale was squarely at the center of Philadelphia's tenderloin/skid row district. Abandoned houses and factories made the area look run down, so much so that city planners in the 1950s and 1960s considered it very blighted. Yet unlike Society Hill about a mile south, the shabby but still-functioning neighborhood was not considered for rehabilitation.



And so, hundreds of 19th century dwellings and commercial buildings were condemned and demolished in the late 1960s as part of the Franklin-Callowhill East Urban Renewal Area project.¹⁹ This federally-funded effort encompassed a rectangular zone from Second to Ninth Streets between Callowhill and Spring Garden Streets, comparable to a square mile. Some twenty city blocks were included in this undertaking. All of Willow Street ran right through it.

Many streets were also removed from the Philadelphia street grid in this vicinity. One of these was truly historic: the Old York Road, which ran diagonally through the area since it predated the city grid.²⁰ Yet Willow Street was left alone. This is because the sewer, out of necessity, had to stay in place. The Willow Street sewer thus saved Willow Street from being obliterated.

The goal of the Franklin-Callowhill urban renewal project was to create large tracts of open land for use as an inner-city industrial park. But the resulting Callowhill Industrial District was ultimately unsuccessful, as Philadelphia's de-industrialization was fully underway by the 1970s. What is left now is an urban wasteland of expansive parking lots and large unfriendly structures. The area is deserted and rather frightening at night. Again, all of poor Willow Street runs through this zone.

The railroad tracks on Willow Street were removed during the redevelopment project since they had been abandoned by the failing Reading Railroad. The street was then repaved with concrete. Today, this concrete has many wide cracks and is sinking in numerous places, indicating that the roof of the sewer—or the entire 8-foot diameter structure itself—is subsiding.

The Willow Street sewer drains much of lower North Philadelphia, more or less between Vine Street and Fairmount Avenue east of Broad Street. About a mile long underground, it flows into the Delaware River north of Callowhill Street. The closed nightclub Katmandu once occupied the pier under which the sewer still enters the river. The natural mouth of forgotten Cohoquinoque Creek, however, would have been a block or so to the west, near Front Street.

NOTES:

¹ The Native American name of Dock Creek was Cooconocon or Coconoon. It was named "Dock Creek" by European settlers because it was where a public dock was situated.

² "Cohoquinoque" was the name of a nearby Indian village. Spelled various ways (Cohoquenoque, Cohoquonoque, Cohoquinoke), the word is said to be derived from a Lenni-Lenape word meaning "grove of long pine trees."

³ 1879 *Public Ledger Almanac*, at 9.

⁴ John Fanning Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia, and Pennsylvania, in the Olden Time; Being a Collection of Memoirs, Anecdotes, and Incidents of the City and Its Inhabitants From the Days of the Pilgrim Founders...* (1830), at 379.

⁵ Local citizens were proud of this early structure according to Watson. Sluices under the bridge permitted water to flow freely to the Delaware. Front Street was later shifted a bit to the east and a replacement bridge was built.

⁶ Many spots in Philadelphia have been proffered as the site of Franklin's experiment. Several of these places lie along the corridor of 10th Street. The alleged location that receives the most attention in literature is the vicinity of Ridge Avenue and Buttonwood Street, near 10th or 11th Street, where there was once an open field or "commons" on high land. Buttonwood Street is two blocks north of Willow Street.

⁷ Yet another Delaware River tributary, Cohocksink (or Cohocksinc) Creek was about a mile north of Cohoquinoque Creek. The two streams have been confused for centuries due to their similar Indian names. (Spelled various ways, the name "Cohocksink" is said to come from a Lenape word for "pine lands.") Like the Cohoquinoque and the Cooconocon (Dock Creek), Cohocksink Creek has its own fascinating drawn out history. It too is now a city street and sewer, although it was also once an industrial canal. Its current name is thus Canal Street. Whereas Pegg's Run was fairly straight, the Cohocksink meandered quite a bit. This is why Canal Street snakes its way through Northern Liberties.

⁸ The land along the Delaware River that became Philadelphia was under Swedish control from 1638 to 1655, when it passed to Dutch control, and then English control in 1664.

⁹ Franklin Street no longer exists in that neighborhood. It was once between Seventh and Eight Streets.



CURVILINEAR WILLOW STREET IN THE 21ST CENTURY

¹⁰ Segments of Beach Street still exist on either side of Spring Garden Street between Front Street and Delaware Avenue.

¹¹ René La Roche, *Yellow Fever, Considered in Its Historical, Pathological, Etiological, and Therapeutical Relations; Including a Sketch of the Disease as it has occurred in Philadelphia from 1699 to 1854...* (1855), at 27-28.

¹² *Report of the Philadelphia Relief Committee Appointed to Collect Funds for the Sufferers by Yellow Fever, at Norfolk & Portsmouth, Va., 1855* (1856), at 27-28. The Philadelphia Relief Committee took most of the language within this quote from an article entitled "An Account of the Yellow or Malignant Fever Which Appeared in the City of Philadelphia in the Summer and Autumn of 1820 with Observations on That Disease," by Dr. Samuel Jackson, beginning on page 313 of volume 1 of *The Philadelphia Journal of the Medical and Physical Sciences* (1820), at page 355.

¹³ John Fanning Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia, and Pennsylvania, in the Olden Time; Being a Collection of Memoirs, Anecdotes, and Incidents of the City and Its Inhabitants, and of the Earliest Settlements of the Inland Part of Pennsylvania*, 3 vols. (1879), vol. 3, at 302. This edition of *Watson's Annals* was revised and augmented by Willis P. Hazard years after Watson's death, with volume 3 written entirely by Hazard.

¹⁴ Pennsylvania Avenue once paralleled Callowhill Street west of Broad Street and corresponded to Willow Street east of Broad Street. It was removed from the city grid in the 1890s when the railroad tracks were submerged into the uncovered subway that still remains in that part of Philadelphia west of Broad Street.

¹⁵ John Thomas Scharf & Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884*, 3 vols. (1884), at 2180.

¹⁶ Note that the waterfront east of Front Street along the entire Philadelphia riverfront was continually extended eastwards into the bed of the Delaware River. More than a full city block around the area where the Cohoquinoque once entered the Delaware is now land fill ("made earth" is the correct term). The original Willow Street wharf was therefore covered over and filled in long ago, replaced by other docks and the like further east. The periodic widening of Delaware Avenue contributed to this oft-repeated process.

¹⁷ The Philadelphia, Germantown and Norristown Railroad became the Ninth Street Branch of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad. The route still exists as the SEPTA Regional Rail main line through North Philadelphia.

¹⁸ The Northern Liberties and Spring Garden Districts were consolidated into the City of Philadelphia in 1854, as were all surrounding districts, townships and towns within Philadelphia County under the Act of Consolidation (P.L. 21, No. 16) of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

¹⁹ Managed by the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority, this was actually a joint and concurrent program consisting of the Callowhill East Urban Renewal Area and the Franklin Urban Renewal Area. Countless residents and businesses were displaced as a result of this misguided urban renewal project. The "Franklin" very likely refers to Franklin Street, which once ran through that locale between Seventh and Eighth Streets.

²⁰ The Old York Road (originally York Road) or King's Highway was built in the 18th century to connect Philadelphia with New York City. A short unmarked segment does remain in that locale, intersecting Willow Street midway between Fourth and Fifth Streets. This remnant of Old York Road retains its Belgian block surface from over a hundred years ago.

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