Rockland Township
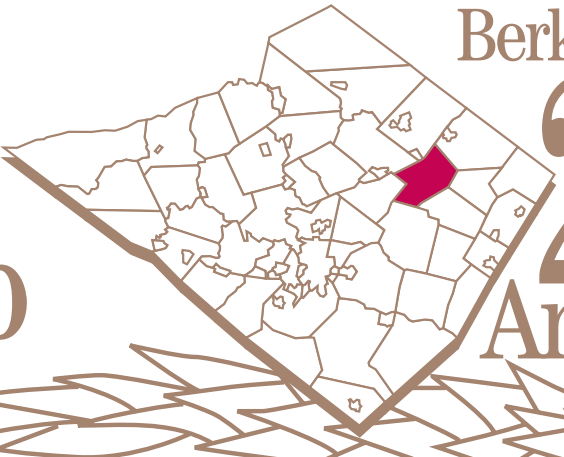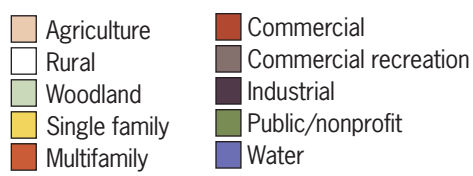
Berks County's 250th Anniversary

Next week:
Ruscombmanor
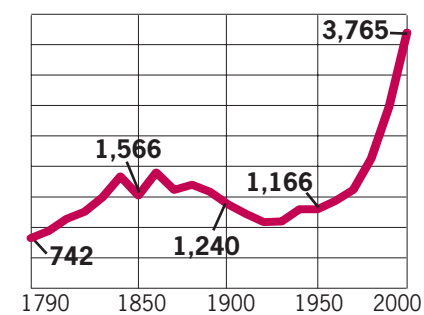Township

Facts & figures

Settled: 1712
Incorporated: 1758
Origin: Oley Township
Founder(s): Henry Vanderslice
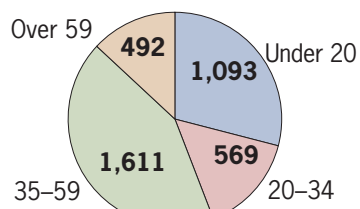**Total area:** 17.1 square miles
Land usage:

- Agriculture
- Rural
- Woodland
- Single family
- Multifamily
- Commercial
- Commercial recreation
- Industrial
- Public/nonprofit
- Water

People:
- Population (1790-2000)

3,765
1,566
1,166
742
1,240

1790 1850 1900 1950 2000

- Age groups

Over 59: 492
Under 20: 1,093
35–59: 1,611
20–34: 569

- Poverty level: 2.4%

Economy:
- Median household income $38,210
- Median home price: $104,000
- Households: 1,592
- Total assessed property value: $170,390,400
- Largest employer: Rockland Elementary School

Government:
- School district: Brandywine Heights
- Top elected official: Larry Dey, Board of Supervisors chairman.

History:
- First township officials: Jacob Sharradine, Moses Hyman, George Bieber, Jacob Godshall, Lazarus Weidner, Peter Reiss, William Barto, Henry Mertz, George Angstadt, Jacob Hunter and Henry Hossman, oversaw the township 1758-1776.
- Namesake: The rocky terrain
- Early churches: Christ Lutheran Church (also known as Mertz Church and Bieber Creek Church), 1735; St. Pauls Lutheran and Reformed Church, 1833; New Jerusalem Church, 1840.
- Oldest building: Log house at the east end of Sally Ann Road, erected in 1750.

Points of interest:
- Lime Kiln, at end of Bick Road.
- Sally Ann Furnace
- Rockland forges
- Dryville, New Jerusalem architecture

Did you know:
- Two prominent rock formations near Dryville are: Shott's Head, a 30 foot by 15-foot by 15 foot boulder that sits upon a smaller rock; and Guinther's Head, a collection of rocks featuring a rock 60 feet long, 12 feet high and 10 feet wide.
- Saucony Creek flows north.
- There were many lime kilns in Rockland Township. Four were built within a mile of New Jerusalem.

Quotable:
"Our township is very rural. We don't have industry. We have lots of rocks. That where the township got its name. From all of the rocks."
- **Russell W. Coffin,** township supervisor.

Photo courtesy of George M. Meiser IX

This photo of the New Jerusalem Hotel, at the east end of Pricetown Road, was taken in 1920 when H.E. Boyer was the proprietor of the establishment.

Rocky terrain inspired name

In May, 1758, Henry Vanderslice surveyed a large tract of land — 12,085 acres — in the Oley Hills for the purpose of forming a township.

In November of that year Vanderslice's township was incorporated and given the descriptive name, Rockland, inspired by the municipality's topography.

By the time of its incorporation, most of Rockland's inhabitants were German immigrants who put the area's small but strong streams to work powering a large variety of mills.

The first mill in the township was the Roth mill on Bieber Creek, put up some time around the turn of the 19th century. Other Rockland mills were used to cut marble, make paper, distill birch oil, grind various grains and saw wood. The township contained a pottery plant, and a Rockland granite quarry produced high-quality stone capable of bearing a fine polish.

The center of trade was the hamlet of New Jerusalem — so-named, it is said, because the surrounding area resembles that of the Holy City. Many mechanics inhabited the village as did a cradle maker, shoemakers, a saddler, a blacksmith, a tinsmith and a wagon maker.

Photo courtesy of Mrs. Walter Hibbert

Mellon's schoolhouse near Boyer's Junction, seen here in 1913, closed in 1959. George M. Meiser IX writes that it became a residence and a second story was added.

Rockland was also the site of several iron-ore mines and their attendant furnaces and forges including the Sally Ann furnace on Saucony Creek and the Rockland forges on Beaver Creek.

Jacob V.R. Hunter named the Sally Ann after his wife when he bought the furnace from founder Valentine Eckert.

Rockland's first village was Stony Point — now Dryville — near the East Pennsylvania Railroad. Like the township, the hamlet was named for the area's abundant rocks, but it was later renamed for Benjamin E. Dry after he became its first postmaster. Its first store was owned by Fink & Weidenhammer and its first innkeeper was John Christman, with the most notable hotel opening in 1847.

The township's qualities that inspired its name and powered its industry — the boulders and the swift-flowing streams — made development of transportation and a concentration of agriculture impossible.

Nevertheless, in the 20th century, farming became Rockland's main industry, and dairy farming its specialty.

But by the 1970s many had sold their livestock.

Twister hit Rockland in May 1804

In his 1886 "History of Berks County," Morton L. Montgomery told of a tornado that had touched down in Rockland Township:

"On Tuesday, May 22, 1804, a fearful and destructive whirlwind arose in Rockland Township, which, it was thought by the inhabitants, could hardly have been surpassed in severity. It began in the township about four o'clock in the afternoon near the mill of Frederick Miner. ... Its course was from west to east, and the entire area was marked by destruction. It hurled roofs from (several) buildings. ... Many other buildings were injured. It uprooted nearly all the fruit and other trees, turned over fences, etc. At some places large hailstones fell, destroying much growing grain. It continued about ten minutes and was accompanied with severe rain, thunder and lightning."

THEN

Photo courtesy of George M. Meiser IX

Christ Lutheran Church, also known as Mertz Church and Bieber Creek Church, was built in 1798. This photo was taken in 1907.

NOW

Reading Eagle: Richard J. Patrick

The church building was replaced in 1915.

Timeline

1712: Swedish settlers arrive in a portion of the Oley Hills that would become Rockland Township.

1745: Hans George Angstadt and his family move to Rockland and open a gun shop along Lobachsville Road.

1750: The first log house in the area is built along what would become Sally Ann Road.

1774: Henry Mertz donates three quarters of an acre for the Bieber Creek Church in Stony Point. It is the first church in the township.

1759: Henry Mertz is tax collector.

1791: Valentine Eckert erects a charcoal furnace on Saucony Creek, about a mile south of Bowers.

1816: New Jerusalem's first hotel is built.

1820: The voting site moves from Stony Point to the hotel in New Jerusalem.

1828: A post office opens in New Jerusalem.

1830: German and English immigrants in the township argue over whether English should be the primary language.

1835: Dr. George T. Marrer is the first doctor to open an office in the township.

1840: About 1,400 acres in the northwest corner of the township are taken from Rockland and added to Richmond Township.

1842: A triangular tract of about 1,200 acres in southeastern Rockland is added to Pike Township.

1850: Jacob V.R. Hunter builds a mansion for his wife Sally Ann on Sally Ann Road.

1852: A post office opens at Stony Point and the name of the village is changed to Dryville, after the postmaster.

1903: Lewis H. Angstadt builds a birch-oil distillery on a farm on Lobachsville Road. The oils are used in perfume, liquors, candy and medicine.

1916: Township supervisors meetings are held in the New Jerusalem Hotel.

1929: Rockland Township purchases its first truck, a Chevrolet.

1935: Ervin S. and Vesta I.V. Shade open a service station on Lyons Road in Dryville. Scott Youse opens a garage, selling Hudson and Rambler cars.

1950: Federal authorities raid an illegal distillery on Hertzog School Road.

1962: The Rockland Elementary Center is built.

April 14, 1967: The township planning commission meets for the first time.

1972: Rockland's remaining dirt roads are paved.

July 5, 1984: Three tornadoes cross the township. Two houses, two mobile homes and seven barns are destroyed.

1991: Rockland Township adopts an annual budget of $738,820.

2001: Rockland Township adopts an annual budget of $1,499,091.

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