

137 MONUMENT AVENUE

Borough of Malvern—Chester County—Pennsylvania—19355

“Josiah A. Roberts, of Malvern, has commenced to build a new house, which is intended for his own residence.” So stated the *Daily Local News* July 27, 1885. He was already an established businessman as the owner of a nursery, which he had started in the Paoli area on his parents’ farm. Josiah had moved his business in 1869 to West Chester Intersection, renamed Malvern in 1873, to land near the train station. He had bought 20 acres in Intersection that year from a Philadelphia widower, Robert McCarroll, and his family for \$4,210. (1,3,5)

Josiah and his sister, Hannah W. Roberts, who was younger by about five years and kept his home, moved into the existing house at what is now 192 West King Street. This house is located on the south side of the street, west of the Malvern Shopping Center, and was on the property Josiah had purchased. (2)

Advertisements for his Paoli Nursery showed Josiah sold such items as fruit, shade, and evergreen trees; berries, rhubarb, and asparagus; and cabbage, tomato, pepper, and sweet potato plants. His West Chester Intersection/Malvern Nurseries offered the same selections. Josiah sold off lots from these 20 acres in the succeeding years, sometimes building single and double homes and business structures for rent, as well as for sale, on many of the parcels. (3,5)

Josiah’s father, Jacob Roberts (b.6 mo. [June] 16.1810 [the way a Quaker would write a date]), was one of nine children of Isaac and Alice Comfort Roberts of Whitemarsh Montgomery County. He married Phebe Williams (b. 8 mo.27.1810), a daughter of Jesse and Hannah Williams of Plymouth Montgomery County, reportedly on the sixteenth day of third month (March), 1837. (3,5) Around 1844, they bought a farm of some 27 acres in the northeast section of Willistown Township, in the area generally identified as Paoli.

This farm was bounded on the west by Grubb Road, on the east by land of H. Galloway, on the north by the Paoli Road and Pennsylvania Railroad land, and on the

south by Devon Road. (4) The southern exposure of this land faced what became the location of the General Anthony Wayne Junior High School in the late 1950s, later changing to the General Wayne Middle School, and presently, the General Wayne Elementary School in the Great Valley School District.

Jacob and Phebe had four children who survived into adulthood: Josiah (b. 1837), Joseph (b. 1840), Hannah W. (b. 1842), and Sarah W. (b. 1847). Although detailed, concrete information about all of them is scarce, photographs, obituaries, news articles and advertisements, organizational minute books and histories, cemetery headstones, estate documents, and Pennsylvania and Federal census records do provide a glimpse of their individual and collective lives.

Additional information came from the personal journals of David Evans, a Quaker businessman who was a major owner/developer of the land holding Malvern Borough's homes and businesses. He kept a journal from 1835, when he was 17, until 1898, a few months shy of his death at age 80.

Jacob and Phebe belonged to Goshen Friends' (Orthodox Quaker) Meeting, located at the southeast corner of Paoli Pike and Route 352. Quakers believed in the equality of the sexes long before that issue evolved into the suffrage movement and many other subsequent social and financial causes. The Friends considered Phebe a minister, although not in a paid, professional position seen in most Christian churches.

A Quaker minister was allowed by consensus of a meeting to visit the homes of members and non-members, to help those in need throughout the neighborhood, and to speak and pray ("appear in supplication") during meetings (services) and funerals. While speaking, a minister might recite a Bible verse or a line or two from some other Quaker's sermon. He or she might impart some advice to all present, or to some specific sub-group, such as the young people. Jacob was known for his self-deprecating humor at being the husband of the well-known and much beloved Phebe. Her deeds and interests, as well as those of other Roberts family members, were frequently described by David Evans in his journals.

Noting her speaking at a Monthly Meeting early in 1845, Evans wrote that she "spoke a few words very acceptably" and described her as "a sincere Christian I believe." Through the years, she met with families associated with Goshen, Whiteland, Malvern,

Abington, Gwynedd, and Concord Meetings. After Phebe's visit at his sister's house in Willistown Township in February 1853, David wrote, "I believe she is a rightly exercised and truly good woman." (DE)

Contacts by the Roberts family with David Evans and his extended circle of relatives and friends went beyond meetings. For example, he noted in April 1863 that after a funeral, "we had the company of our friends Jacob and Phebe Roberts to dinner." Visits for sharing talk and Biblical wisdom, sometimes with tea or dinner, by all or some of the families' members, continued through the years between the Evans' and Roberts' homes. (DE)

Sometimes Phebe's sister, Abigail W. Hall, spoke and prayed at meetings, as she was also a minister. As he did about Phebe, David Evans described Abby as speaking "very acceptably to us at meeting." Another phrase Evans commonly used about either or both Phebe and Abby speaking and/or praying was that they "had excellent service." Only once did David make an entry about Phebe's physical state, other than her aging. He wrote that he and a neighbor visited Jacob and Phebe in January 1877, following Phebe's slipping on ice and breaking her arm. (DE)

From infancy to well into their adulthood, it appears that Josiah's brother Joseph and sister Sarah lived at home on the farm with their parents, yet frequently engaged in activities in the area by themselves. Hannah and Josiah shared housing quarters in Intersection/Malvern for 25 years, she serving as his housekeeper until her death. In fact, after David Evans' wife of 17 years died of cancer in 1878, he invited his sister-in-law, Sarah House, to come to Malvern to keep his house.

Evans' nephew and niece, William Penn and Sarah "Sallie" M. Evans, shared a house for a number of years in Malvern at the southeast corner of Roberts Lane and Channing Avenue, across Channing from their Uncle David, until Sallie's death from lung disease in 1881. At least in the Malvern area, it was common for brothers and sisters/sister-in-law to share living spaces and companionship.

Prior to Sallie's death, her doctor recommended she take a therapeutic trip to the Mountain House at Cresson, Pennsylvania, in the Altoona-Johnstown area. Hannah W. Roberts accompanied her by train from Malvern for a two-week stay, which didn't make Sallie any worse or any better. Hannah was at her bedside when Sallie died.

Hannah shared the joyous times with the Evans family as well. She and David accompanied his nephew William to Wilmington, Delaware for a visit with William's intended wife, Mary Tatum, and her family in May 1882. Hannah and William, assisted by two unnamed women, took a group of 90 children for a visit to the Philadelphia Zoological Garden and a ride on the Schuylkill River in August 1882. (DE)

All four Roberts siblings participated in a December 1882 meeting to organize a set of lectures at Malvern Hall for that winter. Malvern Hall, a two-story frame building located on the south side of East King Street where it intersects with Bridge Street, was a gathering place for numerous entertainment and civic events in Malvern's early years. Hannah and Sarah belonged to the Malvern Reading Circle, composed of Friends [with an upper case F, usually meant Quakers], such as David and William Penn Evans, who rotated reading works aloud published over the years by a number of well known and lesser-known Quakers. Meetings were held in members' homes. (DE)

Hannah and Sarah were active participants in the Malvern Friends Library, begun in 1873 at Josiah's home on West King Street. Two decades later, this organization evolved into the Malvern Public Library. In November 1890 Hannah was elected President of the Friends Library and a member of a committee of three to buy books. (DE) At that time, the library was located in a room in the Malvern Friends' School, now a private residence, at the northeast corner of Roberts Lane and Woodland Avenue.

The four brothers and sisters shared not only their birthright Quaker heritage, but also the values of hard work, community service, and appreciation of and provision for educational and cultural opportunities. They also believed in generosity of time and goods to individuals and organizations while, at the same time, being financially prudent and wise. The four never married. (3,5,DE)

Josiah's aunt, Abigail W. Hall, age 71, also of Malvern, and one of Phebe's sisters as mentioned earlier, was struck down by what appears to have been a stroke in mid-May 1883. Various friends and neighbors helped Abby's husband Isaac by sitting through the nights with her. She lingered for seven months, until December 29, 1883, losing her physical health but holding on to her mental faculties for most of that time. In her

obituary, it was said that “her ministry, while not redundant, was concise, searching, and to the point.”

In addition to her local relatives and friends at the funeral, there were two railroad carloads of those from Philadelphia and one from West Chester. “Eleven speakers eloquently testified to the great worth and pure character of the deceased.” (3,5)

David Evans noted that after her January 2, 1884 funeral, "Not many went to the ground [Goshen Friends' burying ground] as a large number came by cars [trains] and the day after noon was cold & blustering. Very few of the relatives of the deceased got out of their carriages at the grave on acct of the damp ground from the rain in the forenoon and the high cold wind in the afternoon." Another sister of Phebe Roberts, Sarah Williams, died July 1, 1884. At the time, Sarah was staying at the Malvern house of her widower brother-in-law, Isaac Hall. (DE)

David Evans noted on First Day [Sunday] August 3, 1884, that Phebe “gave us a touching and affectionate little exhortation...” He added, “She proceeded in a sometimes faltering voice in view of her recent bereavements and the knowledge that her own time draweth nigh...” For the first time on November 16, 1884, Evans added the word “aged” before Phebe’s name in his journal.

One might wonder what physical, speech, or behavioral characteristics she exhibited, as well as what words she used, that might have prompted him to write that and similar descriptors a number of times during the succeeding years. (DE) He was 66 at the time, only eight years younger than she.

In September 1885, the *Daily Local News* reported “The new house of Josiah Roberts, Malvern, is now up to the second story.” An October notice said, “Josiah Roberts’ new house at Malvern is nearly under roof. When finished Mr. Roberts will have one of the finest brick houses in Malvern.” On November 20, 1885, it was noted that the house was “now ready for the roof.” David Evans’ journal entry March 17, 1886, noted he called on Josiah and Hannah “at their new and handsome house.” (3,5,DE)

Evans noted October 10, 1888, that “Phebe’s communication today was exhortation to all of us to keep on the watch and have our lamps trimmed and burning for

we know not what hour the Master calleth and blessed is he who shall be found so doing.” In August 1889 David wrote, “Dear aged Phebe spoke as if she felt the shades of evening closing in around her and that her friends should be warned (?) by her advice while she yet remained with them to yield their hearts to the proffers of Divine love and mercy...” He wrote on January 25, 1890, “Our dear ancient Friend Phebe W. Roberts is with us this evening to lodge.” (DE)

On April 12, 1891, Evans described Phebe as “...in her 82nd year and feels that her work in this world is drawing to a close to which she feelingly alluded in the few remarks she made at our sitting.” “Phebe spoke twice and seemed a good deal broken down from age & weakness and anxiety for the salvation of those present—she said it might be the last opportunity she would have with us,” he wrote March 13, 1892. However, conditions had changed enough by June 19, 1892, that he wrote, “A full meeting—80 present about half of each sex...Phebe W.R. & Jacob were there and she spoke in a clear and strong voice as before she was sick...” (DE)

Nevertheless, on August 28, 1892, Evans noted that “Jacob & Phebe Roberts both absent from meeting on acct of increasing age and feebleness.” Jacob, described in the newspaper as “...one of the oldest and best known citizens of Willistown Township,” having lived there since 1844, died at age 82 on January 12, 1893, “...from a stroke of paralysis.” Many relatives and friends attended his funeral at the Malvern Friends’ Meeting and interment at Goshen Friends’ burial ground. (3,5,DE)

Later that same year, David noted on August 17, 1893, that “We learn that Phebe W. Roberts widow of Jacob Roberts and a venerable & highly valued minister of our meeting passed peaceably away this afternoon in her 82nd year, about 5 oclock (*sic*).” She was described in a newspaper as “...a noble Christian woman, and throughout her entire life she took delight in preaching the Gospel and caring for the needy...” Following the funeral at the Malvern Friends’ Meeting where many local and regional ministers spoke, reportedly “at least 500 people” also attended her burial at Goshen Friends. David Evans wrote the day after, with what seemed to be a poignant wistfulness, “The old folks are passing away.” (3,5,DE)

Within months, the Roberts family lost one of its younger members. David noted that John G. Haines called on him and his sister-in-law March 21, 1894, “...to inform us

that our esteemed friend Hannah W. Roberts quietly passed away at ten minutes past 8 o'clock (*sic*) this eve at the age of 52 years." [This may sound like a quibbling point, but she was 51 when she died, in her 52nd year. It is because these distinctions are made separately or in combination in death notices and funeral announcements that death ages can be confusing to researchers.] Two weeks before, she had taken ill with the grippe, or influenza. In spite of doctors' care and prescriptions, she could not be healed because her heart had been affected.

Hannah was described in the newspaper as "...a noble woman. She was quiet and unassuming in her manner and her pleasant smile and cheerful words gave evidence of love toward all people...She did not live for herself alone, but was always interested in the welfare of others." (3,5,DE)

By the time of the compilation of the 1900 census, brother Joseph, then age 60, and sister Sarah W., then age 52, had moved into Josiah's house. Also in residence, as he had been since 1884, was their Uncle Hiram, one of their late father's brothers. At that time, he was listed as an 83-year-old day laborer. The household in 1900 also included an Irish servant, 26-year-old Mary Gibsen. (1900 US Census) [For informational purposes, most of the 1890 census records, including those for Pennsylvania, were destroyed by a fire at the Commerce Department, Washington DC January 10, 1921. With the establishment of Malvern as a borough in 1889, those records would have provided invaluable information.]

Sister Sarah W. Roberts passed away January 17, 1903, at age 55. Although there are no known obituaries, it can be assumed the funeral was held at Malvern Friends' Meeting, with verified burial at Goshen Friends. The least is known about Sarah. In addition to her participation in Quaker meetings and concerns, she helped with many details for the Malvern Friends' School, built in 1889, according to David Evans. She kept house for the Roberts men and provided help for others when needed. A Quaker historian wrote in a Malvern Friends' Meeting history that Sarah took up Phebe's mantle as a Recorded Minister after Phebe's death. (3,5,DE)

Hiram Roberts died August 6, 1904, at age 87. In the 20 or so years he lived at his nephew Josiah's home, "He was much interested in the organization of Malvern as a

borough and contributed liberally toward its maintenance. His genial character and interest in those about him won for his [*sic*] many close friends to whom he was always known as ‘Uncle’ Hiram.” (3,5)

Josiah and Joseph continued to live in the Monument Avenue house and work the Malvern Nurseries. After a two-week bout of pneumonia, Josiah died March 29, 1913, at age 75, leaving Joseph as the last member of the immediate family. A nurse had been hired to care for Josiah during his illness, with Dr. Wm. T. Sharpless as his consulting physician and Dr. Clarence S. Kurtz as attending physician. (3,4,5)

As reported in the papers after Josiah’s death, “If a young man wished to start a business in Malvern or if a young doctor wished to start practicing there and was without funds, Mr. Roberts was always the helping hand. In many instances he built houses and places of business for these men and gave the properties over to them. After they became established and they desired to buy the properties he would sell it to them for exactly the same amount that it cost him.” He had donated the southwest corner property at King Street and Warren Avenue to the National Bank of Malvern (est. 1884) for its new building, which opened in 1887. It is still in use as the main branch of that institution, under the management of the descendants of Charles C. Highley, the first clerk of the bank.

In addition to the nurseries, one newspaper wrote that Josiah, “Being fond of poultry, ... kept a fine line of fowls, including Light Brahmas, Plymouth Rocks and other strains, and with these he carried off the honors of many shows.” He was one of the overseers of the Malvern Friends’ Meeting and served two years on the original borough council. Numerous relatives and friends came to Malvern and Goshen for the funeral and interment, many speaking and praying. (3,5)

Josiah thought of others in death, as in life, with bequests of \$500 each to the Barclay Home and the Chester County Hospital, West Chester, and \$1,000 to the Westtown Boarding School, the interest to be used where “most needed in repairs or improvements.” In his handwritten will, he also left \$100, the interest “to keep the Roberts lot at Goshen graveyard in good condition,” and \$400, “the interest of which to be used for repairs to Friends meeting house in Malvern, Pa.” The brick house at 137 Monument Avenue was valued at \$10,000 at the time. (4)

A cousin, Jane L. Roberts, had assumed the housekeeping duties for Josiah and Joseph sometime after Sarah's death in 1903. She is listed on the 1910 census. Reportedly, nagging stomach problems led to Joseph's death September 6, 1918, at age 78. Joseph, like Josiah, had served on Malvern Borough Council. He had led the push for the Temperance Hotel in Malvern at the southeast corner of East King Street and Channing Avenue. He had the support of many citizens in the annual battles to keep Malvern dry, free of all alcoholic beverages. As noted in his obituary, "He could always be counted upon for and in any public or charitable movement." Joseph, too, had wisely invested his inherited and personal funds, as well as his good will.

Jane L. Roberts, and more than fifteen other Roberts and Williams cousins benefited from his careful investments, as delineated in the three legal-size pages of his typewritten will. In addition, he made bequests of \$2,000 each to the Homeopathic Hospital (founded in 1913 in West Chester and is today's Paoli Hospital), Chester County Hospital, and Barclay Home of West Chester, and the Friends Asylum for the Insane at Frankford in Philadelphia. He also gave \$1,000 each to the Colored School and the Colored Shelter for Orphans at Cheyney, Delaware County, and to the Goshen Monthly Meeting of Friends, held at Malvern, to keep the Goshen Friends' graveyard in repair.

To Westtown Boarding School, he bequeathed \$15,000 "...for the schooling of those students in Primary Branches, whose parents, or one of them, are or were, when living, members of the Society of Friends...no one [student]...for a period of more than two years." To the Malvern Public Library, Joseph gave "...the Double Frame Cottage on Warren Avenue and West of Broad Street, Malvern—[at the southwest corner] the enclosed grounds go with the Cottage;--the income of which is to be used for the purchasing of books of a moral and instructive nature, and for fuel also."

Joseph Roberts' executors sold "...the brick mansion, frame barn and other buildings...", along with other lots, to livestock dealer John McPhillips for \$7500 January 23, 1919. When it came to money, David Evans and the Roberts brothers were considered among the wealthiest in the area. The estate of Quaker businessman and prominent Malvern developer David Evans, who had died July 4, 1898, was valued at \$36,110.³⁶ During David Evans' lifetime, he had occasionally been publicly described

as wealthy with tones of derision and dismissal. Negative descriptions did not appear to be ascribed to either Josiah or Joseph Roberts. Josiah's personal and financial holdings and real estate after his death in 1913 were appraised at \$78,827.31. Joseph's estate in 1919 was valued at \$109,766.83. (1,4,5)

Thus ended the lineage and legacies of the immediate Roberts/Williams families in Malvern.

John McPhillips and his wife, Ella, sold the property to electrical contractor Raymond Cox, and his wife Gertrude, in 1925. The First National Bank of West Chester [presently the First National Bank of Chester County] owned the property from 1935 to 1946, when H. Barclay and Margaret Z. Hargreaves purchased it. Janet M. and James W. Harper bought the property for \$55,000 in 1972. Henry and Felicity Briggs bought it in 1993, with Felicity selling it for \$815,000 to Jack and Samantha Weikert in 2007. (1)

Compiled and written by Nancy B. Schmitt, Consultant

Malvern Historical Commission

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Editor, *A Century in Malvern* (1989) - Author, *Malvern Items: 1870-2006* (2006)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- (1) Deed research at Chester County Recorder of Deeds Office and Chester County Archives and Records Services, West Chester PA
- (2) *History of Malvern*, George N. Highley, et. al., copyright 1964, page 10
- (3) Chester County Historical Society (CCHS), 225 North High Street, West Chester, PA: clippings files and cemetery records *
- (4) Chester County Archives and Record Services, Government Services Building, 601 Westtown Road, Suite 080, P.O. Box 2747, West Chester PA 19380-0990: Wills and “Inventory and Appraisement of all the goods, chattels and credits” and other estate papers of Josiah Roberts—April 10, 1913 and Joseph Roberts—September 19, 1919
- (5) Malvern Historical Commission clippings and property files, located in the Malvern History Center, McGuigan Hall, First and Warren Avenues, Malvern PA 19355 *
- (DE) Unpublished journals by David Evans, transcribed by Nancy B. Schmitt in the mid- to late-1980s, are located at and owned by the Chester County Historical Society *

*Many of the clippings and records located at and copied for a fee at CCHS, a copy of Nancy B. Schmitt’s transcription of the David Evans journals, and estate papers located at and copied for a fee at the Chester County Archives are available for study at the Malvern History Center. Information on properties considered Historical Resources in the borough is also available at the Malvern History Center.

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