

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**JOHN ZAHARCHUK**

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION AND ACTION FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH  
IN AMBLER (REACH Ambler)

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

Ambler Boiler House  
Ambler, Pennsylvania

on

22 January 2014

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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THE CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION  
Center for Oral History

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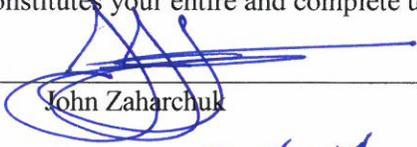
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## ABSTRACT

**John Zaharchuk** grew up in Newburgh, New York. He attended Bucknell University and obtained a Master's in Business Administration from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He and his wife-to-be, who lived in Upper Dublin Township, used to meet at the Ambler train station, eventually marrying and moving to Fort Washington, Pennsylvania. Zaharchuk thus became familiar with Ambler as he drove between home and work. He discusses the depressed and depressing state of Ambler at the time, saying he would never stop for food there. He first began to notice businesses returning in the mid-2000s, and he says that now there is such a resurgence of vitality in the town that parking is a challenge.

When his children's school was looking for a new building, Zaharchuk suggested the old boiler house on the Keasbey & Mattison factory property; he had been thinking about the building for development. When the school rejected the idea, Zaharchuk gave up for a while. A successful project with a similar property in Wilmington, Delaware, and a friend who insisted that he must reconsider, finally convinced Zaharchuk. With Borough officials he gathered private and public investors and held informational meetings for local residents. Although they wanted the boiler house saved and were supportive of his ideas, the residents were leery of the asbestos, so Zaharchuk's project removed it all, even having to clean each brick by hand. The Ambler Boiler House is a successful Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) building whose environment attracts tenants and where Zaharchuk plans to keep his own office; its green features include a geothermal system, windows, and building automation.

Zaharchuk is currently building a series of apartments on another piece of the Keasbey & Mattison property. The major contaminant there is magnesia, which has determined the footprint of the building. Asbestos would have been easier to deal with, as it requires only capping to be safe and stable. Zaharchuk is also talking to other property owners in the area, especially the BoRit site, with a view to developing more of Ambler. He says that Ambler is only about half redeveloped, and that his experience with contaminated property is valuable. After the first remediation in Ambler when people first learned about the dangers of asbestos, investors kept away, contributing to Ambler's economic decline, but people no longer fear remediation, and they want more improvement. In fact, says Zaharchuk, a challenge these days is to find parking in the up-and-coming Ambler.

## **INTERVIEWER**

**Lee Sullivan Berry** earned a master's degree in medieval studies from the University of Notre Dame, and a bachelor of arts degree in religious studies from the University of Pennsylvania. As a staff member in the Center for Oral History, Berry conducts background research and oral-history interviews, edits transcripts of completed interviews, and coordinates with interviewers and interviewees to finalize transcripts. She was the lead interviewer for the REACH Ambler project and has presented her work at meetings of the American Society for Environmental History and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

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<p>Born Newburgh, New York. Undergraduate at Bucknell University; graduate degree (MBA) from Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. When senior in college would meet wife at Ambler train station. Moved to Fort Washington. Drove through Ambler between work and home. Renovating own home, frequented Deck's Hardware.</p>	
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<p>Would never stop in Ambler for food in early 1990s. Drive through Ambler unenticing, unattractive. Businesses, restaurants returning in mid-2000s. Now much activity, pedestrian traffic. Incomers from neighboring wealthier townships with no town centers.</p>	
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<p>Had known about BoRit; thought seventeen-story building not appropriate for Ambler. Began looking at Boiler House in 1999. Asbestos easiest contaminant to deal with, as inert when capped. BoRit not stable because of nearby Wissahickon Creek. Children's Montessori School looking for new site; he suggested Boiler House, but school rejected idea. Sean McCloskey and movie <i>Spellbound</i>, in which Ambler girl's hometown represented by ruined and toxic Boiler House.</p>	
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<p>Had done successful project in Wilmington, Delaware, with similar kind of property. Investment money crucial to project; got local and state governments involved. Working with Borough officials. Seventeen-story high-rise project nearby negative advertising for his project. People worried about encapsulation, so all asbestos removed from Boiler House. No dealings with CAG, but much dissemination of information through meetings; emphasis on insurance. Original purpose of Boiler House. Other contaminants all capped on site. No opposition for Boiler House.</p>	
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<p>Ambler Crossings: more of Keasbey &amp; Mattison property being developed into apartments. Expects success, especially as new housing nearby all sold before finished. No bust despite BoRit. Thinking about BoRit site; has experience in developments with environmental problems. Talking to property owners. Capping asbestos best and cheapest solution. Magnesia the contaminant, but outside the footprint of building.</p>	
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<p>Details of Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and insurance requirements. Removing asbestos from bricks labor-intensive and costly, but otherwise not too much contamination. Green features: geothermal system; windows; building automation. Won Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) designation. Tenants choose building for environment, not necessarily convenience.</p>	

## General Thoughts

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Lifelong residents not concerned about asbestos unless already affected by illness. Town economically depressed when factory left; residents would not want environmental cleanup problems. Knowledge about toxicity of asbestos quite recent; only since 1980s. Flooding not an issue. Ambler very supportive; wanted Boiler House saved. Town still only half developed; hopes to see much more improvement. Keeps his own business in Boiler House. Town's main challenge is parking.

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