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New Exhibition at Mercer Museum Tells the Story of Doylestown's Early Healthcare Champions

DOYLESTOWN, PA – In partnership with Doylestown's Village Improvement Association (VIA), the Bucks County Historical Society (BCHS) is proud to present a new featured exhibition, *The Dusty Road to Doylestown Hospital: The Early Years of the Village Improvement Association*, this fall in the Mercer Museum's Martin & Warwick Gallery. The exhibition will be included with museum admission and runs through December 31, 2023.

Opening at the Mercer Museum on Friday, September 29, 2023, the exhibition celebrates the centennial anniversary of Doylestown's first hospital and the vital role played by the Village Improvement Association and the VIA's founding women in its formation.

Doylestown Hospital's origin is unique in this country's history, as it began in 1895 when a group of local women mobilized to improve the health and wellness of their community and ultimately founded the VIA. Concerned about their families after dusty Bucks County roads caused a variety of health-related issues, fourteen women gathered on April 26, 1895, and formed the Village Improvement Association dedicated to improving the quality of life in the Central Bucks community. Early on they arranged to eliminate dust in the streets and later established the first visiting nurse service in Doylestown. In 1923, they founded Doylestown Hospital. Doylestown Health continues to be governed by the VIA to this day, and Doylestown Hospital remains the only hospital in the country founded and still governed by an independent, secular women's organization.

Cory Amsler, BCHS Vice President of Collections & Interpretation, states, "We are excited to present this exhibition in collaboration with the Village Improvement Association. The story of the founding of Doylestown's first hospital is remarkable and a testament to the perseverance of a small group of dedicated and astute women a century ago."

In this exhibition, visitors will learn more about the well-educated, cultured, and politically astute Doylestown women who sought to make a difference, finding a meaningful outlet for their leadership and organizational skills at a time when such abilities among women often

went unrecognized. Sometimes faced with opposition and even ridicule, the women of the VIA persevered in their efforts, eventually establishing two successors to the first hospital in 1938 and 1975. Drawing upon their identities as women and their personal experiences with loss and grief, the founders of the VIA forged a tradition of compassionate health care that endures today.

Helen Hammes, President of the VIA, notes, "The Village Improvement Association of Doylestown, established in 1895, has a long history of initiatives to improve the health and welfare of our expanded community. One major effort led to the establishment of Doylestown Hospital in 1923. We are thrilled that the upcoming Mercer Museum exhibition will bring to life some of these amazing founders. Visitors will learn that through establishing a strong partnership with the community, they were able to accomplish many improvements in their neighbors' health and welfare."

Joy Nash, playwright of *Voices: A History of the VIA of Doylestown*, adds, "The exhibition tells the story of the forgotten women who helped to shape Doylestown into the caring community it is today. The foresight and contribution of the VIA founding mothers is unmatched in our country. I hope everyone comes to the Mercer Museum to learn more about these amazing women."

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About the Mercer Museum & Fonthill Castle

Located in Doylestown, Bucks County, PA, the Mercer Museum and Fonthill Castle are historic castles celebrating the legacy of Henry Chapman Mercer (1856-1930), American archaeologist, anthropologist, ceramicist and scholar. Both sites are operated by the Bucks County Historical Society (BCHS).

The Mercer Museum, one of Bucks County's premier cultural attractions and a Smithsonian affiliate, features both local and national seasonal exhibits as well as a core museum collection of over 17,000 pre-Industrial tools. This permanent collection offers visitors a unique window into pre-Industrial America through sixty different crafts and trades and is one of the world's most comprehensive portraits of American material culture. The museum also features a research library that is a center for local history related to Bucks County and the surrounding region, with its roots dating back to the founding of the Bucks County Historical Society in 1880.

Fonthill Castle was built between 1908-1912 and was the home of Henry Chapman Mercer. Mercer built Fonthill Castle as his residence and showplace for his collection of tiles and prints. The castle serves as an early example of reinforced concrete and features forty-four rooms, over two hundred windows, and eighteen fireplaces. Fonthill Castle's interior features Mercer's renowned, hand-crafted ceramic tiles designed at the height of the Arts and Crafts movement.

The Mercer Museum is located at 84 South Pine Street, Doylestown, PA, 18901. Fonthill Castle is located at 525 East Court Street in Doylestown, PA, 18901.

The Mercer Museum & Fonthill Castle are open Tuesdays – Sundays from 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. For up-to-date ticket and schedule information, please visit mercermuseum.org.

For additional information, please contact:

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