

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## Thanksgiving then and now

We all know the American middle class grew and prospered from the period after World War II until the late 1970s.

Americans of all income groups enjoyed unprecedented well-being, including most Pottstown residents. By the early 1970s, when I moved here, anyone willing to work could find a good-paying job at Bethlehem Steel or Firestone, buy a nice house, and have money left over for an annual vacation. But nearly all our heavy industries closed, and working class incomes have stagnated for the last 35 years while those in the top tiers have seen their incomes soar.

It's easy to think most of us are worse off than previous generations, but this ignores the enormous improvements in life we quickly take for granted.

Consider the Norman Rockwell "Thanksgiving" painting of 1943, a time that Americans look back upon with great fondness.

In fact, everyday life was much more Spartan. More than a fifth of Americans still lived on farms. Less than a fifth of farms had electric lights, and only a tenth had a flush toilet.

Even in Pottstown borough, out-houses were common because much of the town lacked sewers. Many streets were unpaved.

More than half of homes did not have a refrigerator. People had radios, not televisions, and many didn't have phones. Calling long distance was enormously expensive, and most long-distance travel was by train. Only the rich could afford plane travel, and only the super-rich vacationed abroad.

Antibiotics were almost unknown prior to World War II. The development of penicillin during the war cut infant mortality dramatically and eliminated many life-threatening infections.

Social Security, which was in its infancy in the 1940s, has dramatically reduced poverty among the elderly, and the enactment of Medicare in 1965 extended health care to all elderly.

The percentage of young people going to college has skyrocketed.

Cars were a luxury in the 1940s, and few houses were the single family detached homes on large lots that predominate today.

Today, 63 percent of Americans own their own homes, up from 44 percent in the early 1940s.

In the 1940s, hand-laundry was common, and even washing machines had hand-wringers.

The typical house gained washers and dryers, then dishwashers, then color televisions, and then microwaves.

As late as the 1970s, few houses and cars were built with air conditioning. Now it's everywhere.

Computers, smart phones and the rise of the Internet have been truly transformative. Email allows anyone with a computer to send and receive messages to people all over the globe — practically free.

Cell phones allow people to talk to others anywhere, any time, and these evolved into smart phones that enable users to also send text messages or emails, or to look up information on the web just as they could on a computer.

So there are plenty of reasons to be thankful. But, curiously, surveys show Americans are no happier than they were before prosperity blossomed starting in the 1950s.



Commentary by  
Tom Hylton



**NORMAN ROCKWELL painted Freedom from Want, above, in 1943. It's become known as his Thanksgiving painting.**