

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**JAMES FEENEY**

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

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

Environmental Protection Agency office  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

on

7 March 2014

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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315 Chestnut Street  
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THE CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION  
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**Principal Investigator: (name, address, phone and email)** Frances K. Barg, PhD, Anatomy Chemistry 141-2, 215-746-1830, [fran.barg@uphs.upenn.edu](mailto:fran.barg@uphs.upenn.edu)

**Co-investigator: (name, address, phone and email):** Jody Roberts, PhD, Chemical Heritage Foundation—315 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA, 215-873-8281, [jroberts@chemheritage.org](mailto:jroberts@chemheritage.org)

**Emergency Contact: (name, address, phone and email):** Frances K. Barg, PhD, Anatomy Chemistry 141-2, 215-746-1830, [fran.barg@uphs.upenn.edu](mailto:fran.barg@uphs.upenn.edu)

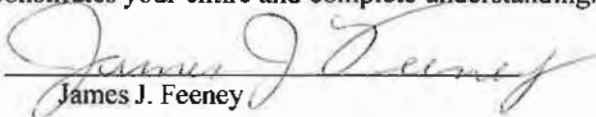
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## ABSTRACT

**James Feeney** grew up in Philadelphia and earned degrees in chemical engineering and biological sciences. He left the private sector to become a remedial project manager for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); Ambler asbestos piles became one of first projects. The piles had by that time been put on the EPA's Superfund National Priorities List (NPL), and the investigation was mostly complete. Feeney spent a year becoming familiar with the project and the prior negotiations over cleanup costs with the owners. At that point his job was to approve the design specifications of the remedies and then oversee their implementation, and he made his first trips to the sites when the work began.

Because of their differing compositions, the three piles, Locust Street pile, Plant pile, and Pipe Plant pile, had two somewhat different treatments, as Feeney describes; basically, however, the treatment was "capping," or covering the pile with a thick layer of dirt and vegetation and then adding a covering to protect against erosion and, as necessary, gabion barriers or revetments alongside waterways. Feeney goes on to detail the operation and maintenance procedures entailed, explaining that EPA will monitor the sites forever. The site was deleted from the NPL after three years instead of the usual five because it is completely contained and qualifies as a closed disposal site, but it is still inspected by the EPA. The Pipe Plant Pile, or CertainTeed Pile, consists primarily of broken asbestos cement pipe and was covered with soil and vegetation. The other two piles consist of slurry, a suspension of magnesium or calcium carbonate, which naturally forms a flat top. These piles also are covered with dirt and rocks, but they have a semipermeable cover to allow some water in to prevent drying out. Feeney points out that the slurry is the waste from processing dolomite; the asbestos came from Canada, not around Ambler, and composes only five to fifty percent of the slurry. Piles are inspected annually or semiannually. Animal burrows are filled in; trees removed; and fences, gabions, and revetments repaired. Asbestos fibers must be airborne to be hazardous. Since the piles are covered and intact, no air testing is done. The piles cannot be removed, but they are safe and continue to be monitored by the EPA. Every five years there is a review of the annual inspections; the review is published online, and there is a summary advertisement.

Feeney has several observations about Ambler. He feels that the community was less involved than others he knows of, including the nearby BoRit site, though that might be because now involvement is much easier. He says that asbestos is a unique challenge because it is not degradable; its control has different and specific regulations; this makes the choice of remediation method easier. He does not feel he knows the Ambler community well enough to generalize about lessons for others. He thinks that people's attitudes toward the EPA have changed since he first began; that people sometimes feel skeptical or even hostile about the EPA's limits and capacities. Feeney strongly emphasizes that the asbestos proportion of the waste is low, that the piles are finished and safe; that he feels no personal risk whatsoever, even when inspecting the sites. He says it is a job well done.

## **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>Three piles. Pipe Plant pile: crushed asbestos cement pipe; waste from Keasbey and Mattison Company, then CertainTeed Corporation. Plant pile and Locust Street pile: waste a slurry composed of calcium carbonate or magnesium carbonate in suspension; liquid has flat top. Plant pile ninety-two feet high, several acres in extent. Remedy: capping and erosion control devices; gabion barriers along Stewart Farm Creek for Pipe Plant pile; revetment (eight-inch-thick concrete "blanket" for Locust Street pile. Feeney's job to approve design of remedy documents, then implement construction. Began going to site occasionally at this point. Sampling of air began again when work began. Community only somewhat concerned at first; thought EPA would "fix" the problem; forgot about piles when remediation complete.</p>	
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<p>Usually a five-year review by EPA, but CertainTeed wanted early deletion from NPL. Steep sides on Locust Street and Plant piles, so trees left as anchors. Pipe Plant pile treated like landfill; different requirements; trees removed to protect barrier; crown vetch used instead. Pipe Plant pile now a closed disposal site, still under EPA containment maintenance. Plant and Locust Street piles stable; slurry tops dried out; cover of semipermeable membrane to let in small amount of water to keep slurry liquid, top flat. Then covered with dirt and rocks to keep out trees. Slurry the waste from processing dolomite; asbestos only about five to fifty percent.</p>	
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<p>Two large piles cleared and inspected semiannually with repairs as necessary. Shallow animal burrows filled in, trees removed, gabions and revetments assessed, fences repaired. Some erosion of bottom of revetment, so large rocks put in. No air testing as long as piles covered and intact; asbestos not hazardous if fibers not airborne. Only two sites in region with asbestos as primary contaminant. Asbestos not mobile; very different and specific regulations. Asbestos easier problem, therefore. Community can misunderstand EPA's role and limits, get hostile. No way to get rid of piles; they are remediated, safe, and monitored by EPA. Some areas possible to develop, but difficult, as no digging. Community not interested in much communication, so annual inspection and five-year reviews; summary press release; reviews available on line.</p>	

## General Thoughts

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Had not really noticed BoRit site at first. BoRit community advisory group (CAG) very active, so he gets many questions about piles also; all answered on line. Feels asbestos is high priority for CAG members, not so much for others; quite likely because of advent of internet. Does not know Ambler well enough to opine about lessons for other communities. Emphasizes composition of waste, that piles are finished and monitored forever. Feels no personal risk at all, even on inspection tours. Finds attitudes toward EPA changed from early days; communities less accepting of EPA's assurances, less positive toward EPA. Not unusual for municipal officials to avoid stigma of being a Superfund site. Points out that there are nine criteria for assessing an NPL site.

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