

PORT PENNINGGS

Spring 2013

Serving the Port Penn Area Community since 1981. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, care for, maintain, instruct and encourage public interest in all matters, facts and things of any nature relating to history.

Dear Friends,

As I reflect about 2012 and anticipate 2013, I think of a quote from Marcus Garvey, "A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots." As the Port Penn Historical Society, we are always thinking of ways to remember and relearn our heritage and roots. We also think about the present, about what we can do to improve our community and draw us together. We are beginning a new membership year and I want to invite you to attend a membership meeting or contact us so that we can hear your ideas for projects and events. As always, your dues help support our annual budget used for our projects and events; it would be impossible to carry on without your help.

We will remember 2012 as a busy year in Port Penn:

- The painting and restoration of the Port Penn Interpretive Center was completed. Thanks to all who contributed.
- We continued our oral history project, interviewing Port Penn residents about their lives here. In 2012 we interviewed Betty Blansfield, Ruth Jones and William Morrow. We are working on getting these interviews up on our website. Thanks to Laura Lee, Linda Orr, Linda Beck and Emily Irwin for conducting the interviews and to Emily for transcribing the interviews.
- Three new entrance signs to the village were installed.
- We held another Diamond State Base Ball Club game in October. The sun was out, the dogs were on the grill, and the teams played some serious vintage baseball. Our thanks to the following people who made the event a success:

Members of the Port Penn Volunteer Fire Company
Sean Johnson & Stephen DiVirgilio, Cutting Edge of Delaware
John Buchheit & Dale Slotter, Crabby Dick's, Delaware City
Becky Webb & Laura Lee, Division of Parks & Recreation
Dr. William Duncan & LTC Wiley Blevins, DE National Guard

Commander Joe Cummiskey, VFW
Shoprite's Kenny Family Foundation
Anthony Branda, WSFS Bank, Delaware City
Port Penn Presbyterian Church
Members of the Port Penn Historical Society

As we move into the new year we will be busy in Port Penn:

Mark your calendars! On Sunday April 7th we will be holding a Marsh Feast Fund Raiser at Kelly's Restaurant. The menu will include snapping turtle soup, choice of muskrat or boneless baked chicken breast, parsley potatoes, stewed tomatoes, collard greens, corn bread and dessert for \$15. Keep your eyes open for the Marsh Feast flyer and ticket information coming to you soon.

We will have a new intern from the Delaware Division of Parks & Recreation working at the Interpretive Center this summer. The intern will be developing new programs for the center as well as greeting and guiding guests. The Society will be purchasing new computer equipment for the Center. Many thanks to Dave Hyson for his years of service at the Center.

This newsletter, *Port Pennings*, has been published since 1993. This year we are changing our format, and we need your feedback – do you like it, do you prefer the old format, is it better in color, how can we make it better. Thanks to Julie Harrington for the design, and for bringing it all together.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I want to thank you for your continued support, and invite you to become a hands-on member. Throughout the year there are opportunities to volunteer. Please call 302-834-7525 if you are interested, or check out our website at www.portpenn.org

Regards, Wes Jones
President



2013

**Dates To
Remember:**

**2013 Historical Society
Marsh Feast
Fundraiser**

Sunday, April 7th

**1-2:30-4 p.m. seatings
at Kelly's Restaurant**

Information will be mailed
or go to www.portpenn.org

**Historical Society
Quarterly Meetings**

Port Penn Interpretive
Center @ 7:00 p.m.

• **March 14** •

• **June 6** •

• **September 5** •

• **December 5** •

Open to the public.
PLEASE JOIN US.

Our sincere thanks to those who contributed their oral histories in 2012



Betty Blansfield

Retired from the US Postal Service after 36 years of service, she served 22 of those years as the Port Penn Post Master.



Ruth Anne Jones

Long time guiding light of St. Daniel's United Methodist Church and a great cook, her specialty being pies and cakes.



Bill Morrow

Farmer, hunter, trapper and way back, a minor league baseball player.

One of the good things about growing up in Port Penn was that no-one was from the wrong side of the tracks, simply because there was no railroad. Or was there?

Let's take a trip back in time to before any of us were born. The year is 1917, and the world has been at war in Europe for 3 years. On April 6, 1917, the US declared war on Germany, and the immense job of converting a peace-time economy to a war-time one began. The railroads were nationalized and improved, and daylight savings time was introduced to help conserve fuel. And of course powder from the area's manufacturers (DuPont, Atlas, Hercules) had to be loaded into ammunition and bombs, and gotten to the ocean for transport to Europe.

In early 1918, the Army contacted the Marlin-Rockwell Corporation with a proposal to establish an experimental loading plant for the loading of aerial bombs. By May of that year the United States Government signed a contract with a subsidiary, the Marlin-Rockwell Loading Company, to construct a loading facility and also provide shipping facilities.

A rural marshy site consisting of 200 acres was purchased (with another 656 acres on option) along the Delaware River just north of Port Penn. Chosen for its proximity to Wilmington and its workforce, and the Atlas Powder Company's Perryville (Maryland) plant, the site was isolated with little population at risk in the event of an explosion.

Approximately 2,000 local workers were on site during the summer of 1918, building roads, grading the terrain, repairing the breached dike along the Delaware River (destroyed that spring in floods), and constructing bunkhouses and a wharf. Never completed, the loading plant consisted of mostly undeveloped land and temporary buildings including 30 workers' bunk houses, an administration building, and a commissary. The power house and dock were begun, but not finished.

One of the few completed projects was an access railroad built to haul in materials for the plant construction. Prior to the completion of

this railroad all the materials for the plant had to be either shipped through the canal to the dock at St. Georges or by rail to the station at Mt. Pleasant, and then trucked over unimproved roads.

The Mt. Pleasant to Port Penn Railroad was constructed in August and September 1918. The 8.5-mile access line tied into the Delaware Branch of the Pennsylvania Railroad (now Norfolk Southern) at Mt. Pleasant, a small crossroads village with a railroad station, located at the intersection of Summit Bridge Road (U.S. 301) and Boyds Corner Road. The railroad ran almost due east until it crossed Rt. 13, then turned north and crossed Port Penn Road near Dutch Neck Road. The line then

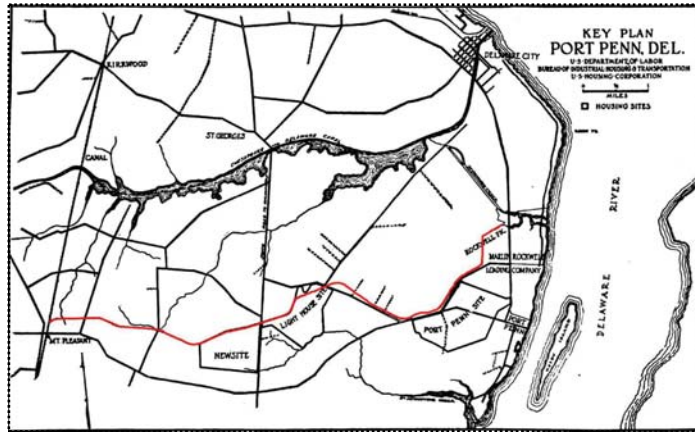


Figure 1

The Port Penn Railroad line running from Mt Pleasant east to the ammunition plant site north of Port Penn (1918)

paralleled Port Penn Road until turning north to follow Thorntown Road. The line then turned north again just before the Ashton House and terminated at the plant site near the Thousand Acre Marsh. (See Figure 1.)

The line followed the high ground along the drainage divide between Scott's Run to the north and Augustine Creek to the south, along farm property boundaries when possible, and avoided water bodies. The line was built as a single-track, standard-gauge railroad with a 65-foot right-of-way. The grade consisted of a slightly raised earthen berm with limited ballasting. Earthen fill excavated by steam shovel and hand labor adjacent to the track formed the raised grade, leaving a borrow pit running for stretches along the length of the corridor. The rails used were fabricated by Bethlehem Steel for the Russian government to build its Trans-Siberian Railroad, but a halt was put on shipping due to the Russian Revolution, and the rails were never delivered. The U.S. government then purchased the rails to use for army construction. The right-of-way was fenced in after the tracks were laid to keep farmers' horses and cattle from getting on the track.

The railroad's life was short. In November 1918 the armistice was signed, and the ammunition plant was still incomplete. However, the line was used heavily prior to the end of the war, transporting construction materials to the bomb loading plant site. In the



Figure 2

Aerial photo from 1954 showing Port Penn Road and the Dilworth farm. Thorntown Road comes in from the upper right. The remains of the railroad show as the curved line just above the Dilworth House, and follow Thorntown Road.

few months it operated a variety of freight was hauled by the railroad, mostly material to build the facility's buildings and sewer and water systems. Some machinery for the bomb loading plant and equipment for the proposed power plant were also delivered, as well as supplies and equipment for outfitting the bunkhouses, administration building, and commissary. No bombs or explosives were ever delivered to the site. Even after the armistice the line was used, with approximately 500 rail carloads of freight delivered; this freight was unloaded and stored until army salvage decided what to do with it.

After the war ended the access line and the plant site were turned over to the Philadelphia Ordnance District Salvage Board. The line was used to haul materials off the site during demolition and dispersal of the plant materials. The tracks were dismantled after the site was cleared out, and the right-of-way returned to the original property owners.

The route of the Mt. Pleasant to Port Penn Railroad is still discernible in aerial photos from 1954 (see Figure 2), despite the tracks having been dismantled over three decades earlier. It appears as a linear feature in some portions with the appearance of a road or farm lane, and in other places as a field boundary. In most cultivated fields the line is absent altogether, having been plowed under after removal of the line.

During a recent field trip to Mt. Pleasant several members of the Port Penn Historical Society discovered old rails and ties left from where the rail line branched off from the main tracks (See Figure 3). Nearer Port Penn the most noticeable remnants are at the Dilworth farm. Here the railroad berm is very obvious (see Figure 4), as is a ditch where the rails ran.

So Port Penn did have a railroad! While it was never of much use in the war effort, the very fact that it was built and used shows how much

the affairs of the world intruded on the fairly sleepy backwater of Port Penn in the early part of the 20th century.

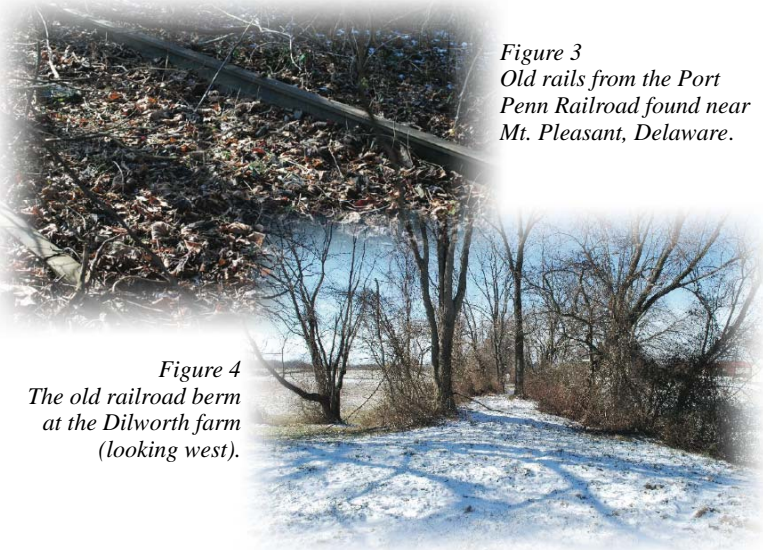


Figure 3
Old rails from the Port Penn Railroad found near Mt. Pleasant, Delaware.

Figure 4
The old railroad berm at the Dilworth farm (looking west).

Acknowledgements:

Much of the material presented here is from a study by Delaware Department of Transportation for the Route 301 highway extension project, available at: http://www.deldot.gov/archaeology/us301/term_2/index.shtml. Thanks to Wayne James for allowing photography at the Dilworth farm. Figure 1 courtesy of DelDOT. Figure 2 courtesy of Delaware DataMIL. <http://datamill.delaware.gov/geonetwork/srv/en/main.home> Figures 3 and 4 courtesy of Wes Jones.

Wes Jones currently lives and works in Wilmington but has an interest in the Port Penn area, and has been involved with the Society for several years. He enjoys researching and uncovering interesting historical facts that may have been long forgotten.

New Port Penn Entrance Signs



Great Blue Heron
Ardea herodias



Snapping Turtle
Chelydra serpentina



Atlantic Sturgeon
Acipenser oxyrinchus



Muskrat
Ondatra zibethicus

Port Penn Interpretive Center Programs, Summer 2013

Rt 9 and Rt 2 (Port Penn Road), Port Penn, Delaware 19731 • 302.836•2533

Program Information 302.834.7941

The Port Penn Interpretive Center tells the story of the historic wetland communities along the shores of the Delaware.

Programs are free to the public.

The Center is open from 10am to 4pm Fridays through Sundays and holidays, from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day.

e-mail: DNREC_FortDelawarePrograms@state.de.us

Program Offerings:

New! MarshTails Story Time

for kids preschool to 2nd grade

Friday afternoons at 2pm, followed by a craft activity

June 7	Box Turtle at Long Pond
June 28	Come Out, Muskrat
July 19	Make Way For Ducklings
August 9	Henry the Impatient Heron
August 23	Bat Loves the Night

Family Wetlands Walk

Saturdays June 15 & 29, August 3 & 24 2 p.m.

Join our park naturalist on a wetlands scavenger hunt for furry and feathered creatures, insects, and much more!

Town Tour

Sundays July 7 & 28, August 11, September 1 2 p.m.

Join us in a walk through town to learn about the buildings that shaped Port Penn, with a few ghost stories thrown in. A kid's scavenger hunt makes it fun for all ages.

Delaware Ghost Stories with Ed Okonowicz

Friday, July 12 7 p.m.

From Fort Delaware to the Cape May-Lewes Ferry Terminal, Delaware's history is filled with mysterious legends and ghost stories. Join Ed Okonowicz and hear the state's ten best haunted and historic tales.

Birds in Flight

Saturday, July 13 2 p.m.

Bring your family for an amazing immersion experience where birds take flight around you and provide some up close encounters. Learn about conservation practices, and how to make our earth a better home for the birds.

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2013 Membership Application

Please return this form and check to:

Port Penn Area Historical Society • P.O. BOX 120 • PORT PENN, DE 19731-0120

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____ E-Mail _____

Membership Categories: Individual \$15.00 _____ Joint \$20.00 _____

Family \$25.00 _____ Life Membership \$200.00 _____

_____ I/We would like to volunteer to help with PPAHS events.

The Port Penn Historical Society is interested in your comments and ideas.

Please contact us at the above address or send us an e-mail: info@portpenn.org

