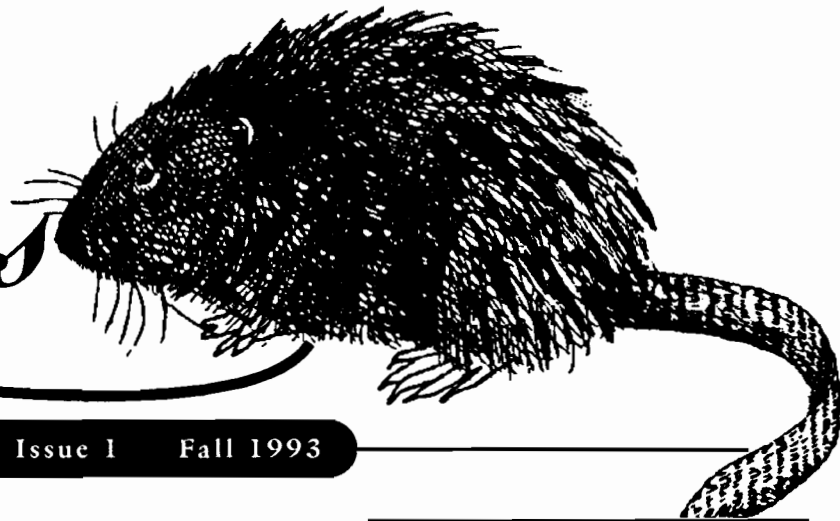


Port Pennings



Volume 1 Issue 1 Fall 1993

Introduction

Many exciting things are happening in and around Port Penn from our Marshland dinners to our festivals, to the progress on Greenways along our coast to folks interested in Historic Preservation—all focus on the special character of Port Penn. The Port Penn Area Historical Society wanted to share with you—our members, our neighbors, friends, and supporters of our dinner the latest happenings.

This is our first newsletter. We are delighted to have one of our board members and long-time supporter, Bernie Herman pen an article about the Eakin-Zacheus House. Our thanks to Becky Herman for her assistance in the layout of this newsletter.

Please mark your calendars for future events. We would love to hear from you, your suggestions and comments. If you would like to volunteer for any of our events, have a special story to tell, a letter to the editor you want to share, please let us know.

Thanks for taking the time to share your interest with us.

Sidney Craven, Vice-President
The Port Penn Area Historical Society

Hello and Greetings!

This newsletter marks a new beginning. New beginnings seem to always be in store around Port Penn. Since the Division of Parks and Recreation acquired the old schoolhouse from the Port Penn Area Historical Society in 1990, many new developments have occurred. Each summer the Division has added interpretive programs which focus on the original intent the Society had in mind: To educate the public about the interconnection between Delaware's nature resources and its traditional heritage.

Since 1992, the Delaware Folklife Program, within the Division, has been involved with this development. We have conducted interviews with many people on the traditional practices associated with fishing, trapping, and hunting in the surrounding Port Penn area. In addition, we have continued the cooperative involvement that the Society started by developing relationships with granting organizations, state and local agencies to produce Wetland festivals, hold trapping and skinning demonstrations, as well as develop interpretive trails and restore vernacular outbuildings. All in all, the Folklife Program and the Division continue to work hard toward sound resource management, interpretation, documentation and presentation of what Bob Beck had called, "Port Penn's way of life—yesterday and today." We hope to continue this work with the community's involvement and best in interest in mind. Please call us at 739-4413 if you ever have any questions or suggestions toward these goals.

Gregory Jenkins, Manager
Delaware Folklife Program
Division of Parks and Recreation

Port Penn Area Dates to Remember

November 16, 1993

Port Penn Area Historical Society
Town Meeting
7:30 p.m.
Port Penn Fire House
PUBLIC INVITED

December 18, 1993

Christmas Dinner
for members and their guests.
6:30 p.m.
ChesDel Restaurant

January, 1994

Members
Watch for letter of the important
events for 1994 and membership dues
information.

January 4, 1993

Port Penn Area Historical Society
Quarterly Meeting
7:30 p.m.
Port Penn Presbyterian Church
Open to the public—
PLEASE JOIN US!

April 6, 1994

Port Penn Area Historical Society
Quarterly Meeting
7:30 p.m.
Port Penn Presbyterian Church
Open to the public—
PLEASE JOIN US!

April 30, 1994

Port Penn Area Historical Society
Marshland Shad Dinner
Port Penn Fire Hall

*New memberships are accepted at
any time during the year!*

Preservation Delaware, Inc.

Preservation Delaware, Inc., a new state wide historic preservation group, has undertaken a study of the Port Penn area. Our project is to gather information on land use patterns, special historic structures and to determine the best ways of protecting the character and open space surrounding Port Penn.

Working in conjunction with the Brandywine Conservancy, we plan to hold a town meeting on November 16, 1993 to get some input from area residents and to share our preliminary findings. We will be sending out a mailing ahead of time. We look forward to seeing everyone there.

Trail Mix

Port Penn is very lucky to have a wonderful hiking trail located directly across the Port Penn Interpretive Center on Route 9. The trail winds past an authentic floating fisherman's cabin and a muskrat skinning shack, structures that were common to our wetland community, to a boardwalk over a beautiful cattail marsh containing a wide variety of vegetation and wildlife. Continuing past the boardwalk, the trail goes through wooded sections, past old hedgerows and fields planted with grains to provide food and cover for wildlife. On some of my trips on this trail, I've seen deer, rabbits, snapping turtles, ducks, geese, great blue herons and many different types of shorebirds. Further along, the trail leaves the fields and woods behind and comes to a dike you can walk over. To the west is a huge marshy impoundment that is the home to many aquatic plants and animals and to the east is the Delaware River, a major shipping route. An observation platform is a swell place to sit and contemplate the sights, sounds, and smells of this magnificent area. The view from the tower late in the day as the sun is setting with an orange sky reflected on the great expanse of marsh, the trees in the background appearing a dark silhouettes and the great blue herons starkly standing waiting for a fish to go by is breathtaking. So come out and enjoy this special place but please remember, this environment is fragile. We must all work to protect our new trail and the historic structures on it.

Linda Beck, Treasurer
The Port Penn Area Historical Society



The Eakin-Zacheus House, Congress Street

[note: The following account of the architecture and early history of the Eakin-Zacheus House is the first in a projected series of essays on the historic buildings of Port Penn. Each issue of the newsletter will contain a similar history of one of Port Penn's early dwellings. The information for all these "portraits" comes from the Delaware State Archives and the close examination of the buildings as they stand today. From time to time a short essay may appear on some other aspect of Port Penn's physical history. Such explorations will cover David Stewart's original town plan and a recently located 1839 map of the town.]

Located at 103 South Congress Street, just south of the intersection of Congress and Merchant streets, the Eakin-Zacheus House stands as a well preserved example of Port Penn's earliest architecture. Modern composition siding and later trim cover a sawn plank house with braced frame addition built at the end of the 18th century as a village dwelling which simultaneously served as a store and tavern. The house is identified on the Beers's Atlas of 1868 as the property of C. Zacheus. The 1870 manuscript census returns for Port Penn list Conrad Zacheus (age 57, no occupation, and likely widowed) along with three family members including his daughter who kept house.

The Eakin-Zacheus House is a two-story sawn plank and frame dwelling that reflects three major building episodes. Built at the close of the 18th century, the house faced Congress Street on lot number 77. The original log house possessed a 26 foot front pierced with a central door flanked on either side by a single window. Extending back 18 1/2 feet, the house was built of regularly sized 8 1/2 by 3 1/2 inch pit sawn* planks joined at the corners with full dovetail notching. Wooden pins driven into the upper and lower surfaces of the planks stabilized the wall as it was raised. The spaces between the planks are infilled with riven (split) construction scrap and packed with clay mortar. As first built, the exterior surfaces of the planks were left exposed to the elements, while the interior surfaces on the second floor (where the planks have been exposed during recent renovations) were simply whitewashed. The house was covered with a "square" or gable roof seated on a raising plate secured to joists projecting beyond the face of the building to form a plain box cornice. The original roof lacked collar or tie beams* and appears to have been wood shingled. A full cellar runs under the entire first period house. Built of rubble stone and brick, the cellar possesses a relieving (supporting) arch against the south wall and a corbeled (stepped) chimney support in the opposing northwest corner. As built, the Eakin-Zacheus House was a two room plan with interior dimensions of 17 1/2 feet by 12 1/2 for a common room and 17 1/2 by 11 feet for the inner room or parlor. Original interior finishes are masked on the ground floor by later applied wall board, but on the second floor original surfaces including vertical, beaded partition walls and fireplace paneling survive. Originally painted green, the second floor finishes exhibit all wrought (hand forged) nail construction.

The second period of the Eakin-Zacheus House's development dates to the early 1800s and took the form of a two-story braced-frame wing appended to the south gable of the original house. The wing consisted of heavy principle post* construction. The posts, wall plates*, and roof plates* all jugged into the interior and were either finished or cased with neatly planed boards. The original finishes for the wing as well as the source for heating its interior are currently unknown. The third period of the Eakin-Zacheus House involved a number of late 19th and early to mid 20th-century improvements including refinishing earlier interior surfaces with sawn lath and plaster and wall board as well as covering the exterior with buff colored, brick textured composition siding and adding porches. At present (1993) the house is undergoing a fourth period of significant change which includes extensive renovation.

The Eakin-Zacheus House dates to the first period of Port Penn's development at the close of the 18th century. Sited on a lot overlooking Congress Street and out toward the Delaware River, the house reflects the character of the town's earliest

history. The lot was conveyed by Dr. David Stewart, the son of Port Penn's founder, to John Eakin (also Aitkin, Aikin) in 1804. Eakin, however, appears to have built at least the plank house and tavern before his land purchase was recorded. Certainly, the manuscript census records for Port Penn in 1800 record John Eakin living in his house with seven other individuals including a free African-American. John Eakin's residence is confirmed by the 1797 tax lists where he was assessed for a lot containing a total of three houses; in 1816 his assessment included two lots. The lot where Eakin lived was improved with a house, tavern, and stables. The other lot contained only a tenement in the occupation of Josiah March.

Eakin's inventory taken in 1816 suggests several possibilities about the history of the present building. One possibility includes the multiple functions of the structure as a combination tavern, retail store, and residence. First, the inventory begins by listing the contents of a small retail store (likely the ground floor of the south frame gable wing) where Eakin sold a variety of textiles, cheap ceramics, and sundries. Second, the inventory specifically mentions the contents of the bar along with 13 chairs and at least three tables apparently located on the ground floor of the two-story plank portion of the house. Third, the upper story of the plank house contained a variety of beds and bedding, tables, and other equipment. The number of beds and associated household objects suggest that while some of the upstairs rooms were set aside for family occupation, other spaces provided accommodations for travellers. The inventory and a later orphans court property valuation also identify numerous outbuildings related to the three functions of retail, entertainment, and domestic life including a kitchen, "out cellar," and "a stable & meat house thatched all of wood." The store contents, reference to a bar, numerous outbuildings, and an extensive listing of beds, chairs, and tables all suggest a building that contained a ground floor store and tavern with upstairs provisions for accommodating overnight guests. What remains difficult to determine is the question of whether or not the family was resident in the building. The fact that the inventory does not imply the existence of a second household in another building and that a well defined group of domestic artifacts are found upstairs further support the likelihood that the family occupied the second floor front rooms over the principle ground floor room and bar of the plank building.

The use of a plan more often associated with 18th and early 19th-century ordinary rural houses and the presence of rough construction and finishing techniques, identify the decidedly local, vernacular quality of the Eakin-Zacheus House and connect it to the vernacular building traditions that characterized much of Delaware's post Revolutionary ordinary architecture.

Bernard L. Herman

Glossary

Pit sawn: building timbers were shaped either by hewing or sawing. Pit sawing was a process of cutting timbers to size by laying the log to be cut across an excavated pit or a tall wooden trestle and cutting it with a long cross-cut like saw. Pit sawing always required team work with a person on the top and the bottom. Pit saw marks or kerfs exhibit a distinctive irregularity along the timber edges where the sawyers had to step back as they moved their saw along the length of the log.

collar or tie beam: roof framing often utilized a cross piece known as a collar or rafter tie to connect the two opposing rafters and stiffen the overall roof frame. Collars, which were typically joined to the rafters with half dovetail or simple lap joints and pegged or spiked in place, gave such roof frames a distinctive A shape.

principle post: early timber frame buildings in the lower Delaware Valley relied on heavy upright timbers designed to support the overall frame.

These heavy timbers were typically set at the corners and, in larger buildings, at intermediate points in the wall. The upright timbers between the principle posts are known as studs and functioned as nailers for the application of siding.

plate: frame buildings required horizontally laid timbers to support second story floor joists and the roof. Wall plates typically were placed in the front and rear walls of the building at floor level where they supported the upper story floor joists. Roof plates were set atop the wall frame and carried the joists that supported the rafters and roof. Carpenters commonly laid a board or small square timber (usually no more than 4 inches square) over the ends of the roof joists where they lapped over the wall and formed a cornice. These smaller roofing timbers are known as false or raising plates. Both wall and roof plates were supported by the principle posts.

Robert A. Beck

Robert A. Beck, President of the Port Penn Historical Society and long-time Delaware Conservationist, died on June 26, 1993 from complications of a lung transplant in the University of Virginia Hospital, Charlottesville, VA.

He was instrumental in the purchase of the 1886 Port Penn school-house which was converted into a museum depicting the community's early reliance on fishing, trapping and



hunting. The Port Penn Museum was recently contributed to the state by the Port Penn Area Historical Society who have expanded it into an interpretive center.

Mr. Beck was a member of the Delaware Coastal Heritage Greenway Advisory Council, helping to establish a Greenway Trail with an observation platform overlooking a cattail marsh and the Delaware River, a boardwalk over the marsh, and renovation of an authentic muskrat skinning shed and floating fisherman's cabin in Port Penn. This Greenway Trail, the Port Penn Interpretive Center and the town of Port Penn, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on November 20, 1978, all tell a unique story about the environment and the early way of life in the Port Penn area.

A memorial service was held for Mr. Beck on Saturday, October 2 in Port Penn on the boardwalk overlooking the marshland that Mr. Beck loved.

Membership Application

Port Penn Area Historical Society

P.O. Box 120

Port Penn, Delaware 19731

Name _____

Telephone _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership Category

- Individual \$5.00
- Family (Child under 18) \$10.00
- Joint (Husband and Wife) \$7.50
- Life \$100.00
- I/we would like to volunteer help with Port Penn activities.

The Port Penn Area Historical Society Newsletter is interested in your comments and ideas. Please write or call.

Please return this card with your remittance to the above address.

For information call: (302) 454-2100 or (302) 834-7346



The Port Penn Area Historical Society was formed in 1981 by the following founding members:

- Linda L. Beck
- Robert A. Beck
- Gertrude Thelma Bendler
- Alberta L. DiVirgilio
- Carolyn S. Foraker
- Margaret Foraker
- Patricia A. Schaffer
- Julia L. Sidwell
- William S. Sidwell
- Margaret T. Zacheis

The current officers of the Society, whose terms will expire in 1994 are:

- Sidney Craven, Vice President
- Clyde A Roberts, Vice President
- Alberta L. DiVirgilio, Corresponding Secretary
- H. Virginia Spicer, Recording Secretary
- Linda L. Beck, Treasurer

All the above officers serve on the Board of Directors which also include:

- Kim Burdick
- Bernard L. Herman
- David G. Orr

The office of President left vacant by the death of Robert A. Beck on June 25, 1993, will not be filled until his term expires in 1994, as a mark of respect, gratitude, admiration and affection. His passing leaves officers and members of the Society with a deep sense of sadness.

Port Penn Area Historical Society

P.O. Box 120

Port Penn, Delaware 19731

