

Port
Pennings

Fall, 2000



From the President

by Bill Balascio

Another year is winding down and it has been an eventful one for our society. In one of the most significant developments, we have become active in the local open-space preservation movement, and will remain active throughout this political season. It is our goal to help preserve the area that surrounds the village of Port Penn, and we are holding discussions with local farmers and state officials, working towards that purpose. I again urge you to join in the discussion and become involved in any way you feel comfortable.

If you have passed through town recently, you will have noticed the wood carving that is taking shape in front of the Port Penn Interpretive Center. Our society has received grants from the Welfare Foundation, Inc. and the Longwood Foundation, Inc. for a portion of the cost of this project and we are funding the remainder. This life-size carving of a waterman should be complete sometime in October, and already shows all the sign of being a remarkable piece of work. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Kim Burdick for writing the grant applications, the Trustees from both foundations for approving the grants, John Ringer for heading the committee that arranged for this work, and Mike Miller and his associates at Parks and Recreation for all the help that they have provided. I am sure that this carving will become a notable and much admired addition to the village.

In other news, the Marshland Dinner was again a success—Thanks to Helen Reader and the many people who helped! While that success may not be unusual, we did have many new faces at the dinner this year thanks to the involvement of many students from Hodgson VoTech. It was an experience they enjoyed and the school plans to continue.

The year is not over yet. After years of discussion we are making good progress on our tree planting project. We hope to plant this fall. Perhaps some of those trees can be planted in the memory of the members of our society that we have lost over the past year, Bill Sidwell, Doris Duncan, and Harvey Moore. We are saddened that they are no longer with us and would be well served to remember their contributions to our society and community.

Remembering
Fishing on the
Delaware River

By Clyde Roberts and Mike Miller

Living along the Delaware River defines the economy of Port Penn and many similar small towns. We all know that day-to-day life has changed in Port Penn through the last decades. Some reasons for this change are local, such as the pollution and later clean up of the river. Other reasons for change are regional or global, such as differences in transportation, market demand, and the growth of cities and suburbs over small towns.

Yet preserving a sense of that past is what interests us all in Port Penn. Many people remember when fishing was mainstay of both the economy and one's dinner table. Clyde Roberts recently shared some reminiscences about the role fishing took within the village, and how both fishing and the village have changed.

Roberts points out that, in the days of sail and oars, many people would go out on the river to harvest fish. There were as many commercial working boats in town as there were automobiles. Guyverson, Zacheis, Johnson, and Yearsley were some of the names in commercial fishing. Many

(See Remembering on back page.)

Port Penn
Area Dates
to
Remember

Area Historical Society
Quarterly Meetings

January 3, 2001
7:00 p.m.

Port Penn
Presbyterian Church

April 4, 2001
7:00 p.m.

Port Penn
Presbyterian Church

July 18, 2001
7:00 p.m.

Port Penn
Presbyterian Church

Open to the public.
PLEASE JOIN US.



A Brief History of the Cleaver House

by Kim Burdick

One of the most handsome buildings in Port Penn is Linden Hall, known locally as the Cleaver House. Linden Hall, a five-bay red brick building constructed c1814 by Joseph Cleaver for use as a dwelling and commercial enterprise, is located at the intersection of Market and Congress Streets.

Earlier buildings in Port Penn, constructed during the era of David Stewart, were predominantly wood frame structures, and houses in Port Penn and throughout St. Georges Hundred were typically laid out in a hall/parlor plan. In contrast, the Cleaver House was designed to look like two adjoining urban brick town houses, which would be impressive if seen in New Castle, Wilmington or Philadelphia.

Joseph Cleaver was the son of Port Penn resident William Cleaver, (formerly of New Jersey), who settled near the corner of Market and Congress Streets in 1803. The land had originally belonged to Mary Stewart Cox and was the first of several plots of land the Cleaver family would acquire from the descendants of Dr. David Stewart. In 1830, Joseph Cleaver acquired a plot of land next to his father's house. Kelli Dobbs of the University of Delaware speculates that collateral for the construction of Linden Hall may have come through the 1826 marriage of Joseph Cleaver and Catherine Biddle of Mt. Pleasant. (The 150-acre Biddle Farm, which belonged to Catherine, was assessed at \$5,250 in 1853.)

Joseph Cleaver was an industrious entrepreneur and from Linden Hall, which had river access, he bought, sold and shipped local goods to the larger ports of Wilmington and Philadelphia. He also maintained a general store, a wharf, and a productive grain shipping business with a grain storage building located across Market Street from Linden Hall. Cleaver was listed as the first postmaster of Port Penn and was also a lawyer, the founding board member of Farmer's Mutual Insurance for Appoquinimink and St. George's Hundreds, and an influential board member of a local bank. In 1845 the tax records of New Castle County show he owned nine properties and had acquired stocks, bonds and silver plate worth \$12,549.

Although Linden Hall appears to be a very grand home, it was designed from the beginning as a townhouse and business under one roof. The double façade with its house and store entrances gives Linden Hall a grand appearance. If you look at a photograph the demarcation between the two parts of the building is clear, with three upstairs windows for the house and two for the store and offices. To your left as you enter Linden Hall you will find the part of the building where the Cleaver family lived; to the right, the commercial half of the building.

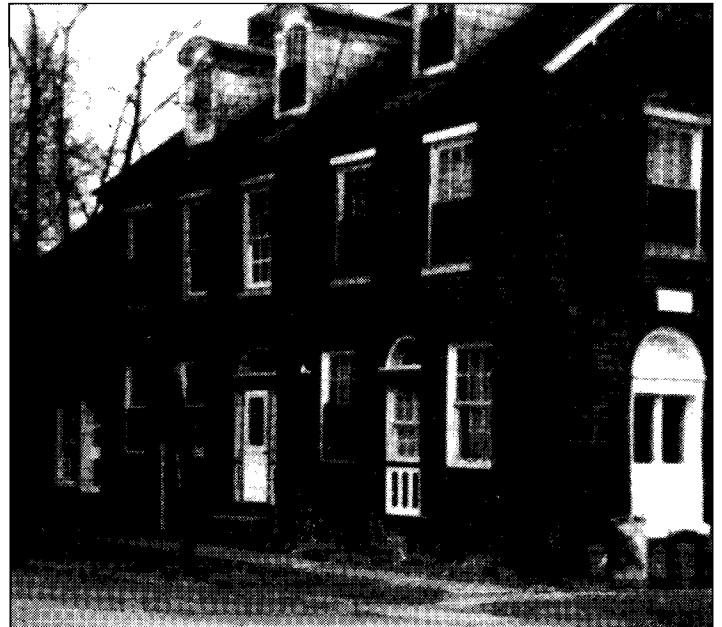
The annex on the north side of the house is not part of the original building, although archaeological investigation shows there was an early wing added to the building which may have been used for Joseph's son, Samuel's B coal and grain business. (In 1861 Catherine Biddle Cleaver's tax assessments listed a "brick house and store" for \$3,000. By 1872 the brick dwelling and store had increased in value to \$3,500. Kelli Dobbs speculates that this jump in value may have been caused by the building of the addition for Samuel.)

When Joseph Cleaver died in 1858, an official room-by-room inventory was conducted by several neighbors. The inventory lists the contents of the dwelling spaces and commercial portions of the building and gives a very complete picture of how the building was used in its heyday and the types of things Port Penners could buy from Joseph Cleaver. The inventory lists "Store Goods" including almost \$1,000 worth of cloth, silk, linens, hosiery, boots and shoes and approximately \$600 worth of grocery items including potatoes, corn meal, cigars, dishes and hardware. It appears from the inventory that the whole right-hand side of the building, both upstairs and down, was taken up with business-related materials and storage.

Catherine and six of their seven children were still living in the house. The household portion of the inventory shows that the

front parlor contained a table, chairs, carpet and oil cloth. The back parlor was a dining room with table, twelve chairs, a secretary, glassware, queensware and silver. Upstairs, one of the bedrooms contained a bed, dresser, two wash bowls and pitchers and foot tub. The inventory also lists three white curtains in this room. The back bedroom contained a single bed and wash stand; a third contained two beds and two wash stands. One of the rooms on the third floor, listed as "the 2nd garret room," also contained a bed and bedding.

The cellar is shown to have contained pickled pork, tallow, empty jars and barrels. Several outbuildings also appeared in this inventory, including a carriage house, old storehouse, wagon and lumber houses and a storehouse on the wharf. The wagon and lumber houses are thought to have been across Market Street from Linden Hall.



Historic photograph of Linden Hall before later 20th-century changes. The large door on the left opened into a formal entry; the two doors to the right provided access into the Cleaver office.

By the time Joseph died, the family owned much of the land in the Port Penn area. Joseph's wife Catherine owned the house. The remaining property was inherited by his children. The oldest son, Samuel was twenty-eight when his father died and it appears he was operating his coal and grain business out of Linden Hall and nearby buildings. Twelve years later his youngest brother, twenty-two year old Henry, was listed as operating the family store. Personal tax assessments show that Samuel and Henry ran these endeavors as separate business entities. The goods he insured were similar in nature to those listed in his father's inventory; cloth, shoes, hardware and groceries.

Catherine Biddle Cleaver died in 1886. A transcription of her will shows little change in the contents of the house since her husband's death. Possibly their oldest son, Samuel, was ill at the time as he was not listed as executor of his mother's will and died only two years later. An inventory of Samuel's goods lists many things associated with a stable and his granaries but few personal items.

When Catherine died the house passed to her children in equal shares. Samuel, Henry and Sarah Cleaver were still living in Linden Hall and Catherine left most of her possessions to her executor, Henry and to her daughter, Sarah. The will mentions that Henry Cleaver received a parlor carpet, sofa, six hair cloth chairs, a what not, and five venetian blinds. The things his sister inherited included a center table and a hair-covered rocking chair.



First floor doorway with its fanlight. The fanlights in the Cleaver House admitted light into the entry hall and office.

Henry bought out his siblings' shares of Linden Hall and remained there until his death in 1931.

The Cleaver building was acquired by the Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation in 1994 and plans are being made, in cooperation with the Port Penn Area Historical Society and the Center for Historic Architecture and Design at the University of Delaware, for its careful restoration over the next three to five years. It is anticipated that the refurbished building will be used as a folklife archive and offices. Audiovisual interpretive material on Port Penn and the marshland culture will be presented to the public at the house.

Kim Burdick has been a member of the Port Penn Area Historical Society for nearly twenty years and is currently serving as a board member. She has been a free-lance consultant on many projects related to Delaware's folklife and local history including The Coastal Heritage Greenway and The Delaware Folklife Project. She has served on The Board of Advisors, National Trust for Historic Preservation since 1991 and is a founding board member of Preservation Delaware. She is a Year 2000 Hagley/Winterthur Research Fellow in Arts & Industry and she is working on a biography of Louise duPont Crowninshield.

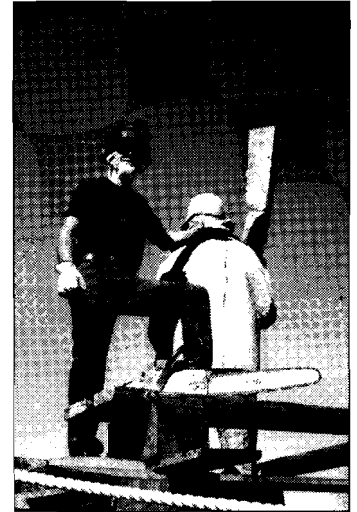
Sculpture of Waterman Emerges at Port Penn Interpretive Center

By Linda L. Beck

People entering the village of Port Penn this summer have been watching with interest a tall man intently wielding a chain saw carving a huge white oak log into a rough interpretation of a waterman holding an oar. The artist, Jacquin Smolens, intends to finely tune his work with a chisel and plans to include small marsh animals and a sturgeon at the base of the sculpture.

Smolens prefers to portray his figures in life size and examples of his work can be seen on the waterfront docks in Maryland at Rockhall and Georgetown. He also likes to work with natural shapes and abstract designs.

Society member, John Ringer, an old friend of Smolens, suggested the Historical Society consider commissioning a piece of public artwork to be displayed outside in the village. Work on The Waterman, slated for completion by mid-October, commenced early this summer after a suitable log was located in Gap, Pa.



Jacquin Smolens poses with his sculpture in progress.

Smolens interest in sculpture grew out of an association at a very young age with Wharton Esherick, a wood sculptor. When Smolens was seven years old, his mother, Amy Potter Cook, a painter, was hired for several summers by Esherick to care for his children. He became a life long friend of Esherick and helped the artist by taking his work to exhibits, something Esherick didn't like to do.

While continuing his artwork, Smolens learned professional tree surgery and worked in this business for over 25 years learning about wood and the tools of the trade. The tree surgery business provided a ready source for various types of wood which Smolens collected for future art projects.

Smolens is building a studio in Rockhall, MD which should open around Thanksgiving. He hopes to have one or two apprentices serving under him. His wife, silversmith Lisa Lerner, will also use the studio to create her hand forged silver.

The Waterman will become part of the lasting legacy of Port Penn exemplifying the tie of Port Penners' lives to the life of the wetland and the river. It's fitting that the sculpture be unrefined, a bit coarse and simple. It aptly fits in with the humble traditions of our past.

Membership Application

Port Penn Area Historical Society
P.O. Box 120
Port Penn, Delaware 19731

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____ Fax _____ Email _____

Membership Categories Individual \$5.00 Joint (Husband and Wife) \$7.50 Family \$10.00 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 form with your remittance to the above address. For information call: (302) 762-6472.

Preservation Coalition Update

Readers of Port Pennings newsletter know about the Port Penn Preservation Coalition, formed to ensure that "sprawl" development doesn't demolish the historic character of the Port Penn Area (bounded by Rte 13, the Cheapeake and Delaware Canal, the Delaware River, and—approximately—Bayview Road). The Historical Society is one of the founding members of the Coalition, along with the First Presbyterian Church of Port Penn and the Port Penn Civic Association. A basic means of accomplishing our goals is to ensure that landowners in the area have viable alternatives to "development," such as farmland preservation programs. This venture into the political system is new ground for many of us and we have a lot to learn. Still, we have already made progress: The St. Augustine Agricultural District has been established, beginning with land owned by Delaware Wildlands. An application has been made to the Delaware Department of Transportation for a "scenic easement" program. The Preservation Coalition is already getting good cooperation from several State agencies, and we hope to establish a similar cooperative relationship with New Castle County. We made a big step forward when the Delaware General Assembly passed House Concurrent Resolution 55, entitled:

(top on next column)

**REQUESTING
ACTIONS FOR
PRESERVATION OF
FARMLAND AND OPEN
SPACE IN LOWER
NEW CASTLE COUNTY,
AND CREATING A
PORT PENN AREA
PRESERVATION TASK
FORCE TO SUPPORT
THIS EFFORT AND
PROVIDE FURTHER
RECOMMENDATIONS.**

The Task Force, with representatives from the community, state and county agencies, and non-governmental organizations, is charged with making recommendations to the General Assembly for a "comprehensive preservation program." Thanks to Rep. Richard Cathcart and Sen. James Vaughn for sponsoring the resolution. Members of the Historical Society, wherever they may live, have already demonstrated a friendly interest in Port Penn. They can help now by telling their political representatives, and candidates for public office, that they support the preservation of the Port Penn Area. Your voice can help! For more information contact Alan Muller at 302-834-3466, Bill Shea at 302-834-3793 or Bill Balascio at 302-762-6472.

Remembering...from page 1

other Port Penners took to the rowboats available at Fisher's Wharf to catch what they could for their households. "It's amazing to think of how we used to do it," mused Roberts. "if the old fishermen could see what we do now, they wouldn't believe it."

With sail and oar, fishermen were limited to a single net of perhaps 1,000 foot length. That's all the small boats with their limited power could handle. Today, it is common for a vessel to run five or six nets of up to 3,000 feet each. "Maybe that's why we don't have the abundance of fish we used to. It could be that we have too many fishermen after too few fish." The efficiency of the boats and nets used today could contribute to that as well.

The shad, herring and sturgeon fisheries all had great commercial value. One good roe sturgeon could pay a household's bills for a year. Today, sturgeon have returned to the river yet are few in number. Shad and herring have both shown population increases, yet neither population is large enough to support commercial fishers today, or even the fishermen of yesterday. There are simply too few fish available to make the costs of operating a vessel worthwhile.

These changes relate to other changes we experience today, as well. Up until about World War II, Port Penn was a complete small town with stores, taverns, canneries, a commercial wharf, and citizens who not only knew each other but often worked together.

Today, many small towns have lost most, if not all, of these characteristics.

Knowledge of this change encourages us all to maintain the work of preserving and interpreting Port Penn's stories for the future. Few places have kept a sense of their past as Port Penn has, even as we face new challenges and unexpected events. Remembering fishing along the Delaware River is one way for us to remember the meaning of places like Port Penn, one way for us to capture and keep the value of our village.

Clyde Roberts is a founding member of the Port Penn Historical Society and has served as President and on the Board of Directors. Clyde has been an active member of various regional fishery panels and commissions and is currently a member of the Delaware Finfish Advisory Council. He has fished commercially on the Delaware River and is an avid sports fisherman. Clyde has served on the Historical Society's Annual Marshland Dinner committee for many years and handles the procurement of all the shad and roe served at the dinner.

Mike Miller, Delaware's Folklife Program Manager since 1996, previously served as Folk Arts Coordinator in South Dakota. He was a NEA Arts Administration Fellow in 1995. Mike has brought a great depth of knowledge in his sensitive interpretation and expansion of displays and programs at the Port Penn Interpretive Center. He is working diligently to seek funding for the restoration of the Cleaver House. He serves as the Division of Parks liaison to various organizations in Port Penn and we are indeed fortunate to be the recipient of his interest and time.

Port Penn Area Historical Society
P.O. Box 120
Port Penn, Delaware 19731

Address Correction Requested