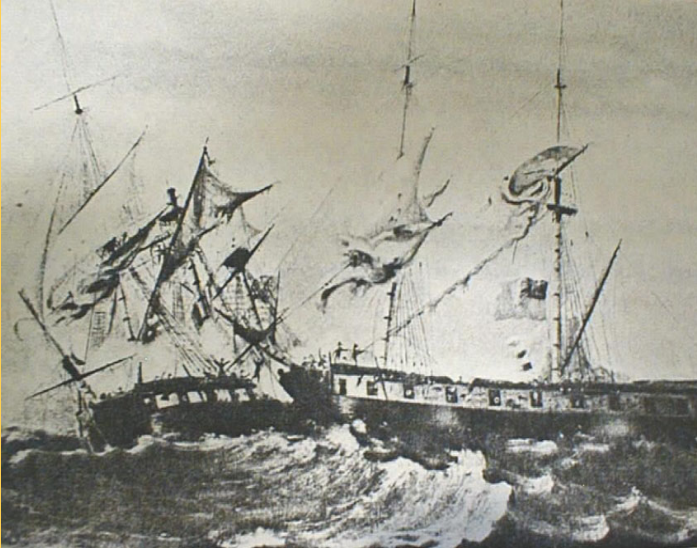


DENNIS TOWNSHIP MUSEUM and HISTORY CENTER

“Not Just for Barbecue”

Fall/2011



Naval engagement on Delaware Bay quothere.

WAR COMES to DENNIS CREEK”

--Dateline Dennisville, July 29, 1813—The war against Britain came to the Jersey Cape this sunny summer afternoon as the British frigate *Junor*, along with the sloop of war *Martin*, engaged the American sloop of war, *Buffalo*.

Throughout the past year, rumors have run thick about the planned British blockade of the mouth of Delaware Bay, an enemy effort to cut off vital shipping for the port of Philadelphia. Fishermen have persistently reported the presence of British war ships hovering menacingly off the coast of New Jersey.

A report of the recent naval encounter, filed by Captain Samuel Angus, commander of the American flotilla, describes the engagement.

“Laying off Dennis Creek, I witnessed an enemy sloop of war chasing a smaller vessel near the Overfalls.

I immediately got underway and brought him to action.”

“After a cannonade of nearly two hours duration, the enemy sloop, and accompanying frigate, finding our shot to tell on their hulls, manned their launches. They succeeded in boarding and capturing one of our gun boats but not without a gallant resistance.”

“However, we drew close enough to destroy three of four enemy launches, inflicting heavy casualties.”

“The sea being calm, the remaining enemy managed to escape, but they have paid dearly for their temerity.”

The original report of Capt. Angus appeared in the August 6 (1813) edition of the “Universal Gazette”.

It has arrived in this newsletter by way of the “Cape May County Magazine of History” (June 1940).

Ship building, logging, shingle mining. There were plenty of jobs in Cape May County in its early days, many of them using readily available wood. If you couldn’t build a house or a ship with it, you could burn it and earn a living that way.

Another industry that once thrived in the region was charcoal burning.

The last known charcoal pit in the county was built in 1940 at Belleplain by Samuel Nichols. In so doing, the 81 year old Nichols was carrying on a tradition that traces its origins back 5500 years to the Egyptians. In fact, historians assert that charcoal “fueled the Bronze and Iron Ages”.

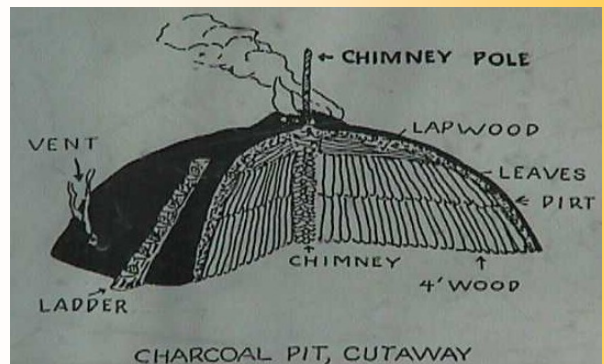
It’s been used in the manufacture of iron, glass, and gun powder. The Egyptians employed a liquid version in their complex embalming process.

Charcoal burning distills wood to its carbon form. Charcoal burns hotter and cleaner than wood.

The “pit” used to slowly transform wood into charcoal isn’t a pit at all. No hole in the ground, the charcoal pit is built on level ground by piling logs on top of one another in triangles. An Indian wigwam shape results. Air is provided to the burn chamber through gaps between the piled logs.

How high is the pit upon completion?

High enough that the tender (the charcoal maker was actually called a “collier”.) required a ladder to carry wood to the opening at the peak of the kiln. He dumped the wood into the kiln then packed the pile with dirt. Once he finished that, he added sand to cover the contents of the kiln.



Be sure to visit the museum the first and third Saturday of the

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“All Aboard for Cape May, Next Stop, Dennisville”

Those folks you hear clamoring for Route 55 to be extended into Cape May County to make it easier for visitors to get here aren't the first travelers to experience difficulties reaching the area.

Since the earliest days of settlement, travel to and from the cape was difficult.

For the longest time, there was no official overland transportation. The trip from Philadelphia down the Delaware River and along the bay required two days. And such trips were scheduled sporadically at best.

In the late 18th century, two stage coach routes reached into wild and desolate Cape May County. One of these, the Tuckahoe Stage, ran from Philadelphia to Tuckahoe and then to Cape May. Mail traveled by way of Bridgeton with major stops at Port Elizabeth, Dennisville, and Millville.

It wasn't until 1863 that the first railroad, the Cape May and Millville, ventured into this area.



Seville became an integral stop, serving as terminal for mail, freight, and passengers heading to other points in the region. Stages ran to Dennisville, Beesley's Point, Goshen, and Townsend's Inlet (present day Clermont and Swainton).

South Seville had grown to be a town of considerable size by then. The year round population was 500, enough to warrant a post office of its own.

Clermont became a popular stopover for sea bound tourists. Taking the South Seville stage to Clermont, tourists could enjoy hotel rooms and service, meals, and a daily fishing excursion for the weekly price of \$10. For those who didn't want to fish, the hotel provided shuffleboard and pool.

(continue page 3)

The West Jersey and Seashore Railroad assumed control of the service in 1879. The new operators were eager to expand service to recently established seasonal communities at Ocean City and Sea Isle.

South Seaville was again selected as a junction but local residents feared disruption caused by the traffic would harm their community so a site one mile to the north was selected. The residents were right about one thing, the increased passenger traffic. For instance, 36,817 people rode the Sea Isle rails in 1883, more than three times as many as the previous year.

A second railroad line was built into the county in the last decade of the 19th century.

The South Jersey Railroad ran from Philadelphia through Winslow Junction, then into Tuckahoe. It terminated at Sea Isle City. That line was extended to Cape May in 1894.

Was the coming of the railroad a significant event in the lives of people back then?

Crowds gathered as the 15 ton iron engine, "Old Congress" huffed into Cape May, fires burning in its furnace box, wood smoke billowing out of her stack.

Church and school chimes clanged. The fire departments rang their bells in celebration. Boys sat on their horses or climbed out on tree limbs to catch a glimpse of the resort's first train. Ladies waved fans and parasols and men tossed their hats into the air as a great "Huzzah" rose from the crowd.

And how was the ride to Camden in those days?

"The coaches are horse cars secured to flatbed cars." One observer noted. "The train races along at unheard of speed of 20 miles per hour and we reach Camden in a miraculous time."

A mere six hours.

As rail travel increased in popularity, the companies that operated the service grew more profitable. They also grew larger, some assuming proportions that made them that era's version of our time's "companies that cannot fail".



The West Jersey line came under the control of the mammoth Pennsylvania Rail Road while its counterpart, the South Jersey, consolidated under the name Pennsylvania/Reading Seashore Lines.

Mail train service to the county stopped in 1949. Mail employees went on strike a year earlier stopping the flow of mail. The Postal Service hired independent truckers to haul mail from the Philadelphia area. They continued to use trucks after the strike was resolved.

With the growing popularity of the automobile and construction of better roads such as the Garden State Parkway, and Atlantic City Expressway, the writing was on the wall for passenger rail service. In 1960, the Pennsylvania Reading line petitioned to abandon service from Philadelphia to towns in south Jersey and along the shore.

The Public Utility Commission allowed a partial cut back but the end of the rail road in Cape May County was coming.

Today, New Jersey Transit operates daily service between Atlantic City and Philadelphia at 30th Street Station, with numerous stops along the way.

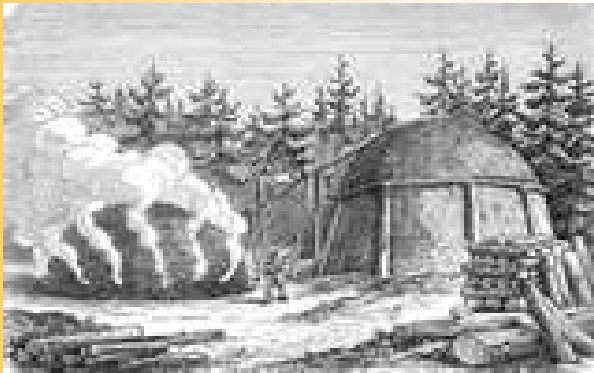
But there is no longer any regular passenger rail service here.

That was just the beginning of the process. Over the next few days, wood is added to the kiln and the fires were constantly tended to maintain a slow burn. In all, two weeks were needed to complete a burn. A cord of wood could produce as much as 40 bushels of charcoal.

And which wood burns best?

Locally, oak and pine and wild cherry were the woods of choice.

Iron masters and blacksmiths were big users of charcoal up through the first half of the 19th century. In fact, most of the iron produced in the US until the Civil War relied upon charcoal as a starter fuel.



In addition, households used the finished product in their wood stoves for cooking and heating.

As with many "cottage" industries, charcoal burning declined in the latter half of the 19th century with the arrival of the industrial age, fueled by coal and later oil.

Sources: "Charcoal Burning, an old Cape May County Industry" ("Cape May County Magazine of History"/1950)

"Fuels for the Fires: Chronicles of Early American Industries" (Connor Prairie).

A word about my sources for this newsletter. Volunteering at the museum has revealed a wealth of local history that I didn't know existed. Recently, Dennisville resident Jack Connelly donated a set of "blue books", the annual magazine of the Cape May County Historical Society. Thanks Jack! The books are being well-thumbed and put to good use.

ANY STUDENT DOING RESEARCH ON LOCAL HISTORY SHOULD STOP BY THE MUSEUM AND CHECK OUT THE BOOKS AND DISPLAYS. Feel free to e-mail us at dennistwpmuseum@comcast.net to inquire if we might have what you're seeking.

FREE Coffee! Stop by the museum and enjoy the exhibits while sipping a cup of everyone's favorite hot beverage.



The Dennisville Historic Home Owners Association is a non profit corporation organized to study the history of Dennisville and the surrounding area and to encourage the preservation of the historic homes in the village and in the township so that future generations will be able to view them and learn about the history of the area. Originally accounting for 69 structures, the village of Dennisville is included as an historic district on both the national and state registers of historic places. Currently the DHHOA is in the process of re-surveying the Dennisville Historic District and the areas immediately surrounding the existing district. Please see [Historic District Re-Survey page](#).



Historic Dennisville Christmas House Tour
Saturday, December 17, 2011
5pm to 9 pm

THE MUSEUM WILL BE OPEN DURING THIS YEAR'S TOUR.



Holly Tree Inn, a favorite with train travelers to the Jersey Cape

DENNIS TOWNSHIP CHRISTMAS PARADE
Thursday, December 1 at 7 pm n historic Dennisville
The museum will be OPEN