



Fall 2022

NEWSLETTER

P. O. Box 102  
Laurel, DE 19956

[laureldehistoricalsociety.org](http://laureldehistoricalsociety.org)

## Historic Appointment at Laurel High School

*Trina Giles is first African-American woman to serve as principal*

TRINA GILES, a Laurel Historical Society board member, was named the principal of Laurel High School in July. Mrs. Giles is a 1994 graduate of the school. She earned her Bachelor's Degree from the University of Delaware and Master's Degree from Wilmington University. She has 21 years of experience in education with the last seven years as an administrator. Trina served as a teacher, dean of students, assistant principal, and principal in the Laurel School District. As a lifelong learner, she continues to seek opportunities to gain knowledge and improve her leadership to cultivate an educational environment for students and staff to be successful.

In her educational leadership roles, Mrs. Giles has been continually committed to establishing relationships and trust with students, staff, families, and community members.

She is a member of the Delaware Association of School Principals (DASP) and the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). She was a fellow in the first cohort of the Governor's Institute for School Leadership (GISL) program.

On a personal note, Mrs. Giles and her husband Clarence have two children, Nyra and Jamir.

Society president George Denney stated: "Trina has been a valuable member of the historical society board



for many years and serves as liaison to the Laurel School District. She coordinates student volunteers and has been responsible for many hours of student work. If you look back at previous issues of the newsletter, you'll see pictures of her working along with students. We are delighted that she has been appointed principal of LHS and wish her all the best as she begins this historic career." ✨

**IN THIS ISSUE:** Upcoming Events, Hitchens Homestead Grant, Old News, Jason Beach, Life in Laurel, Rosemont Update, Donations to Collections →

## President's Corner

George Denney

We have been delighted by the number of visitors at the museums this past summer! It's amazing to see the variety of individuals from many areas across the peninsula and beyond who have come to enjoy our facilities. In particular, the Fourth of July attendance at Rosemont exceeded all expectations. Ned lost count at the door; more than 100 people toured the house! In addition, members of the society were treated to a delicious covered dish meal along with patriotic decorations, Josh Wharton's Model T Ford, and a DJ. The entire evening was topped off by a spectacular fireworks display making this a special Fourth for all those who participated.

All of our properties will continue to be open on the first Sunday of each month, 1 – 4 p.m., through November.

It is once again time to ask you to support our annual appeal. We are grateful that the annual appeal has been increasingly successful each year. This past year we reached well over \$50,000.00 which is a lot of money, however, over \$35,000.00 is budgeted each year for maintaining our properties that house the growing Laurel collection. The rest of the funds are earmarked for minor and major capital improvements which are completed periodically. Thanks to Rep. Tim Dukes, the state legislature recently passed a \$335,575.00 reinvestment state grant for the Hitchens Homestead. This grant can only be utilized



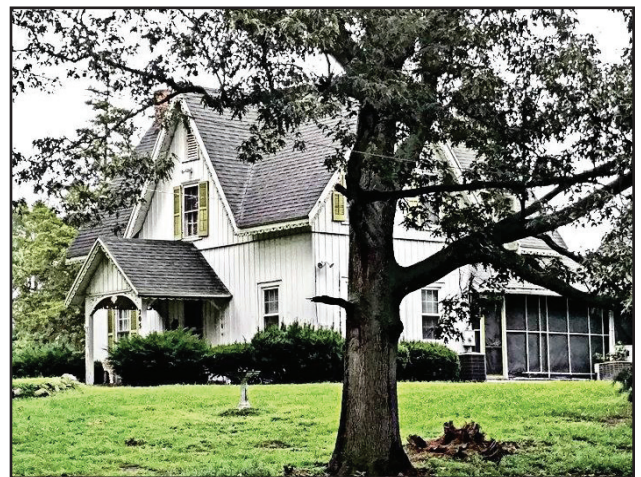
*Photo courtesy of Paula Shannon.*

for the restoration of this property and cannot be used for general operations or on other properties or projects. To date, we have not asked you for a major capital restoration gift for Hitchens. Ninety-eight percent of the work completed at Hitchens has been done by a group of volunteers, so we are excited about this grant and the possibilities of restoring Hitchens. Our goal is to be good stewards of society funds and, to that end, we have checks and balances designed to assure this goal.

Finally, we can't wait to see you at the second annual **Yuletide at Rosemont** which promises to be even better this year! 🌸

## Big News from the Hitchens Homestead

Thanks to the efforts of State Rep. Tim Dukes and State Sen. Bryant Richardson, the Laurel Historical Society is slated to receive \$335,575 from the Delaware Community Reinvestment Fund for the restoration of our Hitchens Homestead. The largest project ever undertaken by our organization, it will enable us to become a vehicle for renewed community enthusiasm and pride by creating a destination in which to showcase Laurel. 🌸





The Laurel Redevelopment Corporation  
and The Laurel Historical Society  
Present

## *Yuletide at Rosemont*

121 Delaware Ave. Laurel, Delaware  
December 3, 2022  
Join Us Between  
5:00 and 9:00 p.m.

**Laurel native Chef Matthew Whaley RETURNS  
and will provide another delicious array of food,  
creating a holiday culinary experience like no other.**

Fine Wine  
Entertainment by Phil Perdue, "The Piano Man"  
\$100.00 per person  
Tickets Limited

With a distinguished record in the catering and food distribution industry, Chef Matt's background has taken him full circle from his tenure as executive chef at Ocean City, MD's top restaurant, Liquid Assets, to New York City, where he cooked at Michelin star restaurants and the James Beard House, as well as Washington, DC's premier restaurant destinations.

Join us for an evening of food and festivities as we celebrate the revitalization of Laurel and restoration of Rosemont.

**Please contact George Denney for tickets or additional information  
at (302) 745-1963. Tickets may be paid for by check written to the  
Laurel Historical Society at P.O. Box 102, Laurel, DE 19956  
or pay online at [www.laureldehistoricalsociety.org](http://www.laureldehistoricalsociety.org)**

**Reserve tickets by November 4, 2022**

# Research Continues at Rosemont

by Ned Fowler

Work continues on discovering more about Rosemont's past. Up until now, relatively few scholarly studies have been done as respects the property's early history, chain of title, and construction. All that is about to change.

Rosemont's early ownership is complicated. Chris Slavens has done an exhaustive study of the tracts of land on which the property either sits or borders, opening windows on the early settlement of the Laurel area. From the November, 1768, auction when Nanticoke Indian reservation lands were first offered at public sale and purchased by John Mitchell to when grandson Gov. Nathaniel Mitchell finally took control, it's a long story and one we won't belabor at the moment. Suffice it to say that it is taking serious investigation to figure it all out. We're most fortunate in that the Mitchells were people of means and left a significant paper trail in the Delaware Public Archives. It will take time, but we'll "git 'er done."

Over the years, all sorts of claims have been made as to just when Rosemont was built. There's no book or ledger where we can find the conclusive answer. Thus, we are faced with deducing information from contemporary wills, deeds, tax lists, census records, plats, or anything else of relevance we happen to stumble across. One sure-fire method of solving this mystery would be by using dendro-chronology, whereby tree ring growth is analyzed to produce an exact date as to when trees were felled. This being very costly and for lack of anything better, we'll have to settle at the moment for architectural details and future finds.

The Laurel Redevelopment Corporation (LRC), Rosemont's owner, has engaged the services of Easton, Maryland-based historic preservation architect Barton Ross to come up with a restoration plan for the property, which we soon hope to have in hand. Along the way, there has also been investigative input from a structural engineer, as well as by restoration consultant Tim Adriance from Bergen County, New Jersey. From Adriance we have learned that much more of Rosemont's original interior fabric survives than what was first envisioned. The quality and extent of these details offer evidence of the prominence (and pocketbook) of the original builder.

Especially helpful has been the household inventory taken after Nathaniel Mitchell's death in 1814 (by William Ellegood and Isaac Cooper, whose family Bible passed down to his son Gov. William Barkley Cooper and

today is owned by the Society and displayed in the Cook House parlor). Found at the Archives in Dover, it gives an item-by-item accounting of what was at Rosemont during this time and how the residence was furnished. From it we can begin to envision Mitchell's landed gentry household and lifestyle. In addition to material goods, growing crops, beasts of burden, and an enslaved workforce, the Mitchells had land . . . lots of it. Compared to other Broad Creek Hundred property owners of the day, who might have had a couple of hundred acres at best, the Mitchells had nearly 2,700 acres.



As might be expected, the inventory lists items necessary to operate a large plantation: horses, milking cows, oxen, sheep, goats, and pigs. There are also carts, carriages, plows, hoes, harness, and saddlery. Listed by name are 12 slaves, including one negro man James aged 112 years and 3 manumitted. There are 8 beds, a pair of mahogany dining tables (what we would call a banquet table today), sets of 10 green and 8 yellow Windsor chairs, a Windsor settee, and a set of 6 walnut chairs. Among luxury items are gilded looking glasses, books, parlor carpeting, a mahogany knife box, 140 ounces of silver plate, plus plated candlesticks, tea urns, fruit baskets, and coasters. Also enumerated are table linens, china, glassware, and all sorts of mahogany tables. (Mahogany, by the way, had to be imported from the West Indies and, thus, was expensive, as compared to readily available local walnut and pine.) The cellar was full of provisions and libations for the well-appointed table: 15 gallons of brandy, 12 bushels of Irish potatoes, 100 lbs. of hog lard, 20 pounds of beef, 3 bushels of peas, herring, and

bacon. There are items as diverse as 63 pounds of sole leather, stills with “worms,” 3,000 feet of plank, and 20 pounds of lathing nails. It even lists crops and seed in the ground, such that we can ascertain the plantation was growing corn, wheat, and rye. Topping the list at \$100 is a four-wheeled carriage. Hot ride for the Guv!

Much is to be learned from this inventory. By counting the number of andirons present, we can determine the number of Rosemont fireplaces with reasonable accuracy. By including china and glassware in the dining room “cuppart,” we learn that there was a specific room dedicated to dining—a luxury feature considering that an 18’ x 20’ one-room structure with unheated loft above was considered a mansion house at the time. This cupboard joins one already listed in the parlor, perhaps the one in today’s dining room. We also learn of a separate “counting house” and kitchen, replete with the normal cooking ware necessary for the General’s table.

As for Nathaniel Mitchell himself, we’re just starting to get acquainted. We do know that he wintered not in Palm Beach but at Valley Forge with Washington, was captured by the British while defending Petersburg, Virginia, and was imprisoned until after Yorktown. In 1786 – 1787, he was one of two delegates from Delaware to the Third Continental Congress, in New York City, and would have rubbed shoulders with the likes of Alexander Hamilton and James Madison; yet, Laurel’s Hope Lodge kicked him out for unMason-like conduct. (He might have been too busy tending to little things like the Federal Constitution, which came out for ratification by the states during his tenure in the Big Apple, and forgot to pay his dues.

In Slower Lower Delaware, Nathaniel Mitchell and his Rosemont are a big deal. 🌿

## Life in Laurel

by Gary White

*The year: 1950.*

*The place: Downtown Laurel.*

Laurel was like a beehive on any Saturday night, people darting in and out of shops with purchases, kids buying ice cream and sodas, going to the movies. Heavy traffic cruised North and South on Central Avenue. As it was US13 the main artery from Cape Charles to Wilmington, Laurel was like a body, its life blood being its people.

*The year: 2022.*

*The place: Rosemont.*

Maybe 12 or 20 interested people gather to hear of the movies of 1950 and many other years. There would be a certain amount of trivia, pathos, and historical knowledge. Stories of World War Two, those that did not return and those that did, some with broken bodies and disturbed minds. The stories of the Homefront are very prevalent. Some persons present artifacts of historical interest of bygone days. Ancient houses, by American standards, are discussed and pointed out to newcomers, recognition of natives that achieved widespread accomplishments. All in all, the exchanges in all of the meetings are of great interest, gaining knowledge, a number of laughs and smiles all around. Please join us on the third Thursday of the month at Rosemont at 10:30 a.m. for **Life in Laurel**. 🌿

# Welcome our new members!

Dee Dalasio  
Laurel

June James  
Laurel

# New Additions to the “Family”

by Norma Jean Fowler

Below is a brief look at some of the highlighted gifts that have come into our collection since the first of the year. The range of items varies from as large as an oriental rug, to as small as a library card. If you run into any of these donors, please extend your thanks as well. To all of those who have donated items this year, we truly thank you. Space does not allow us to mention all, but please know we appreciate your support. Every donation adds to the Laurel stories we love.

- Alan Ralph
  - LHS leather Bulldog sports jacket, c.1975
  - Approximately 80 Marvil Package field baskets in excellent condition c. 1940-50
- Wendy Salisbury
  - Wooden wall thermometer from H. B. Rodney store, c. 1900
- Beverly Smith
  - 8th grade diploma from the Independence Country School near Hearn’s Crossroads, c. 1932
- Jeanne Venables Wood
  - Archive of personal items belonging to the late Senator Bob Venables, ranging from his senatorial license plate to his fishing tackle box, c.2000
- Delores Springer
  - Interior photographs of the U-N-Joy Ice Cream Parlor with owner Marvil Lynch and staff, c. 1960
- Reid Williamson
  - Laurel Public Library card c. 1960, last used by beloved LHS teacher, Eleanor Williamson
- Eva Fowler Whaley
  - Laurel High hockey jacket, c. 1998
- Danora Elzey
  - Two yearbooks from the former William C Jason High School, c. 1965



*Thermometer from H. B. Rodney’s store.*



*The late State Sen. Venables’ license plate.*

# Trap Pond's Cypress Point renamed Jason Beach

by Chris Slavens

AN OLD LOCAL PLACE-NAME has become new again. Recently Governor John Carney formally renamed Cypress Point, a popular destination for community groups at Trap Pond State Park, Jason Beach in recognition of the site's historical significance as a segregated swimming and picnicking area during the park's early decades.

The "new" name dates back to 1952, when the point was named in honor of Dr. William C. Jason, a respected black minister and long-serving president of the State College for Colored Students (now Delaware State University) who had died in 1943. State officials would later argue that the park was not officially segregated—meaning there was no rule which prohibited members of any race from using either of the park's two beaches—but newspaper articles of the period indicate that Jason (or Jason's) Beach was created specifically for black visitors.

The State Parks Commission considered changing the name as early as 1963 following a well-publicized two-act controversy in which two or three busloads of black students from Seaford were turned away when they showed up for swimming lessons during a week reserved for lessons for Laurel kids. Some of them—the number varies depending on the source—returned the next day and went for a swim at the traditionally white Headquarters Beach on the west side of the pond. The incidents raised questions about segregation in the park. Proponents of the name change argued that discarding the name of a black leader would discourage segregation, but the commission decided to keep the name, at least for a few more years. By the mid-1970s the site was called Cypress Point, and in the following decades it was used by members of all races for campouts, barbecues, religious services, family reunions, community fundraisers, and a host of other purposes.

On June 20th, Governor Carney, Representative Tim Dukes, Councilman Jonathan Kellam, and other officials and community members gathered to unveil a historical marker commemorating the site's history. New interpretive signs share additional information and locals' recollections.



Additionally, the folks at Delaware State Parks have created an excellent webpage about Jason Beach which features a 27-minute video, PDF versions of the signs, a detailed written report about the site, and audio clips of interviews with Jonathan Kellam, Howard West, Carl Stanley, Virginia Snead, and Paul Selby. Visit it at [destateparks.com/CommunityHistories/JasonBeach](http://destateparks.com/CommunityHistories/JasonBeach). 🌿

# Timmons and Truitt: Free Black Tenants Near Trap Pond

by Chris Slavens

THE RECENT REVIVAL of interest in that portion of Trap Pond State Park known as Cypress Point or Jason Beach, or, even earlier, Whaley's Point, has provided me with an excuse to share an item of local history which might not have been noteworthy enough to publish in this newsletter otherwise.

Some time ago I stumbled upon a plat of the lands on the northeast side of Trap Pond, dated 1830. Accompanying documents explain that a man named Jesse Saunders had died intestate—without a will—and his lands were surveyed by Jacob Wootten.

The resulting plat includes many details of interest, including the fact that the stream on the north side of Cypress Point was known as Benson's Drain. (More on that in a minute.) Another detail which interests me is a house located a short distance southeast of the modern activity field. It is identified as the "House Wherein Solomon Timmons (negro) Resides."



*Wooded and nameless, Cypress Point is easily recognized on this 1830 plat.*

I haven't been able to learn much about Solomon. There is little doubt that he was the same "Soloman Timmons" who lived in Northwest Fork Hundred in 1820. He moved to Broad Creek Hundred by 1830. The 1820 and 1830 census records indicate that Solomon was born before 1776. His origins are unclear, but there is a chance that he was one of two men identified only as "Negroe Solomon" in 1810; both were free heads of household in eastern Sussex County. Or, a "Solomon Negro" was enumerated in Dorchester County in 1800;

he was free, but the other four members of his household were slaves. We'll probably never know for sure whether our Solomon Timmons appears in one of these earlier records, minus a surname. It is also possible that he was a slave who was freed shortly before 1820. At the time, the white Timmons family was concentrated in Broad Creek Hundred.

We have even less to go on when it comes to his family. A free woman of color, presumably his wife, was younger than him. The couple appears to have had at least three children between 1806 and the 1820s; two boys and a girl. All of the members of the household were free.

Solomon seems to disappear after 1830. Considering his age—at least 55—he probably died before the 1840 census was taken. But what happened to his family? Black Timmonses are perplexingly absent from the records of the following decades. One of many possibilities is that Solomon's widow remarried, and the children adopted the new husband's surname.

We can assume that Solomon was a tenant farmer. A hundred or more acres of arable land surrounded his house, including at least part of today's activity field. It is probable that the laborious clearing of these fields began with William Benson (or Benston), the first English owner of the land, who acquired the 119-acre tract Teach in 1740. He willed Teach and surrounding lands to a son, grandson, and son-in-law in 1774. It was probably William who enlarged the natural gut on his side of Broad Creek, creating Benson's Drain.

Unsurprisingly, the plat of 1830 indicates that the point was wooded. Every few decades the trees were harvested and hauled to one of the nearby sawmills. It is fun to imagine that Solomon's children played and fished along the edge of the mill-pond—then named for Joseph Betts, but soon to be known as the Trap mill-pond. Might not they have been especially attracted to that sandy point of land which juts into the pond? Little did they know that the backwoods location was destined to become a favorite destination for picnics, swimming, camping, and even baptisms—and, for decades, it would be enjoyed predominantly by members of their own race, perhaps even some of their own descendants.

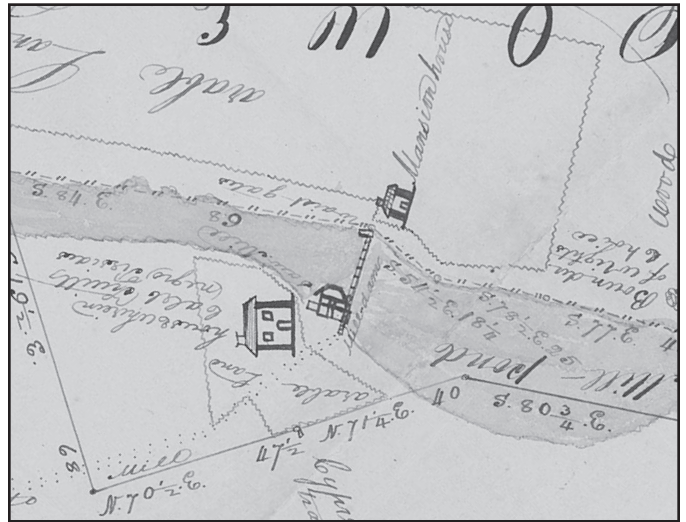




One of Solomon Timmons' closest neighbors was another free black man, Caleb Truitt, who lived on the south side of the Saunders mill-pond (today's Terrapin Pond). We know or can guess a little more about Caleb than Solomon. For one thing, while Solomon headed the only black Timmons household in the area, making it difficult if not impossible to connect him to any family member, there were two black Truitt households in the neighborhood during this period. The other was that of Peter Truitt. It is reasonable to assume that Peter was Caleb's brother, because he named one of his sons Caleb. Interestingly, *that* Caleb was drafted to serve in the 6th U.S. Colored Infantry in 1863. But our Caleb, probably born in the 1790s, had only daughters.

Some connection between the black Truitts and the white Truitts in this neighborhood seems likely, and the most likely connection, of course, is slavery. It was not unusual for freed slaves to take the surnames of their former masters with them. The white Truitts owned land around Trap Pond as early as the late 1700s, and, yes, some of them owned slaves. So it is possible that either Caleb and Peter or their predecessors were slaves on Truitt plantations. Further research into wills and estate records might turn up more information.

In 1830, Caleb was probably a mill-hand at the Saunders Mill, which was located a stone's throw from his house. The only other house associated with the mill is a "mansion house" located directly across the dam, but the surveyor did not identify its residents. Possibly Jesse Saunders had lived there. This mill site is worthy of a brief digression, because it has long been forgotten. It does not appear on the Pomeroy & Beers Atlas of 1868;



*Caleb Truitt's house on the south side of an early mill at Terrapin Pond.*

instead, a sawmill is depicted just downstream of what was known as the Tub Mill Bridge, near where today's Whaleys Road crosses the branch. The Saunders Mill was located upstream along a much older road which, I believe, as early as the 1730s, joined today's Samuel Hill Road and continued northeastward towards the head of the Indian River. The mill in question may have been established during this early, imperfectly documented period, or as late as the 1760s. In any case, it was one of the oldest mills in the area. No trace of it remains.

Caleb Truitt makes a final appearance in the 1840 census, along with his wife and two daughters between the ages of 10 and 23. We may assume that Caleb died before 1850, and the daughters went on to marry local free black men, taking their surnames. They may well be the ancestors of families living in the Laurel area today. 🌸

# Old News

## MOTORCYCLE FOR CLERGYMAN.

Special Correspondence of Every Evening

Laurel, Oct. 10.—Rev. Alfred E. Race, rector of St. Philip's Episcopal Church, has several country churches in charge which he serves and has been provided with a motorcycle to enable him to cover the territory of his work more rapidly than was practicable by driving.

*Every Evening, Wilmington,  
October 10, 1912*

# 4th of July picnic at the Hitchens Homestead



*Photos courtesy of Paula Shannon.*



# Success!

We received a \$335,000 grant for the Hitchens Homestead—now what?

by Don Phillips

In our last couple of LHS Newsletters I have written articles with one purpose: to illustrate and convey how the Laurel Historical Society's actions, projects, and vision for the community's future are the necessary building blocks to leverage our assets—financial, social and political—into obtaining further outside support, financial aid and expertise.

With this recent success in mind, we must recognize the key factors which influence and inform GRANTORS in their decisions to award grants, support and recognition. These same 6 points apply whether we are requesting funding from governmental programs, private foundations, or other non-profits and partner-organizations.

1. Is the Grant Applicant's organization established, run, and managed responsibly, professionally and ethically? **Key concept: Managed professionally.**

2. Does the Grant Applicant have a record of success and a framework of leadership? **Key concept: Able Leadership and a Record of Success.**

3. Does the Grant Applicant provide an 'Organizational History,' a multiyear 'Financial Record (P&L, Balance Sheet, Budget)' and a listing of 'Achievements'? **Key concept: Accountability.**

4. Does the Grant Applicant have a forward looking Vision, Realistic Plan and Goals? **Key concept: Plans & Goals.**

5. Does the Grant Applicant interact with its community, its political leaders, and other partners (including other nonprofits and governmental agencies)? **Key concept: Partners and Active Cooperation**

6. Does the Grant Applicant have a program plan and financial means for its activities that warrant the grant monies, support and/or recognition requested? **Key concept: Future Measurable Tangible Community Benefits.**

In future LHS Newsletters, I plan on expanding on these concepts. These must be the principles we use to build our programs and fund our dreams of community. They must inform our every decision. 🌸

P. O. Box 102  
Laurel, DE 19956



## • SAVE THE DATE! •

September 15th	•	Life in Laurel	•	Rosemont	•	10:30 a.m.
October 2nd	•	Museums Open	•	Rosemont, Hitchens, Cook, Train Station	•	1 – 4 p.m.
October 27th	•	Life in Laurel	•	Rosemont	•	10:30 a.m.
November 6th	•	Museums Open	•	Rosemont, Hitchens, Cook, Train Station	•	1 – 4 p.m.
December 2nd	•	The Grand Illumination	•	Hitchens Homestead	•	to be announced
December 3rd	•	Yuletide at Rosemont	•	Rosemont	•	5 – 9 p.m.
December 4th	•	Open House	•	Rosemont	•	1 – 4 p.m.
December 11th	•	Open House	•	Rosemont	•	1 – 4 p.m.
December 15th	•	Life in Laurel	•	Rosemont	•	10:30 a.m.
December 18th	•	Open House	•	Rosemont	•	1 – 4 p.m.