



Spring 2019

NEWSLETTER

P.O. Box 102
Laurel, DE 19956

laureldehistoricalsociety.org



A Note from the President

by George Denney

The Laurel Historical Society's membership campaign has resulted in a significant increase in our collections from previous years; however, there are still many past members who we have not heard from. Your membership dues are part of what enables the society to produce and mail our newsletter and maintain our museums. Individual and family memberships are the basis on which our society builds its budget each year. If you have submitted your membership dues, thank you! If not, please take this opportunity to renew your membership.

Our annual Donor Reception will be held on May 11th at the beautiful home of Richard and Cathy Parker, set on the highest point overlooking Chipman's Pond. Individuals who contribute to the society's annual appeal will be invited to this elegant affair. It's not too late to give!

Join us on June 8th for our "Hoedown at Hitchens Homestead" fundraiser, featuring live music, food trucks, beer and wine, artisan exhibits, and more. See page 3 for more details — I look forward to seeing you there. ■



Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester with George Denney at Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church. Courtesy of Paula M. Shannon.

IN THIS ISSUE: Celebrating Black History, **Hoedown at Hitchens Homestead 6/8**, Historic Movie Theaters, Swimming in Records' Pond, Upcoming Events, and more!

The Hitchens Homestead is getting a facial: to be more specific, a facial peel exfoliating the extraneous stuff. Layer by layer, we're beginning the process of peeling back changes, additions, and other modifications made to the original structure over the last 141 years. When complete, we should have a pretty decent picture of what the place looked like when first built. Some things may be added and others may be taken away, but, all told, we can guarantee that it will turn heads when done. Appearances are everything, after all. Isn't that what facials are for?

Over the past few months, we've made great strides in getting the property ready, first, for study and, second, for restoration. All seven buildings have been emptied and swept out. Personal property remaining from the Hitchens family has been sorted and gone through — keeping objects important to our interpretation of the property and disposing of others deemed unsuitable. This hasn't happened overnight and not without an army of volunteers, each and everyone one of whom for which we are so grateful.



Mark and Blair Whaley totally demolished the 20th century bathroom right down to the bare walls, exposing original building fabric and paving the way for determining original paint schemes and the configuration of the piazza. Ben Lowe carted off a massive oil drum and stand. Donnie Wickham

pulled out a heavy hot water heater and took off modern storm doors. Gareth Dietzel installed much-needed drain covers along the driveway.



Courtesy of Crystal Stanley.

Woody Disharoon secured all buildings with padlocks, repaired doors to once again be usable, cleared brush behind the barn, and scoured the grounds in determining the location of our underground electric lines. Woody has also photo-documented our progress in the various stages, as well as all personal property for later reference. LHS senior Jacob Larson and the ever-faithful Doug Marvil have spent hours pulling up assorted bricks, pavers, concrete blocks, and flagstone from all over the property and then hauling them to the back of the barn for future use. Mary Jones, the undisputed queen of the staple removers, has toiled in 27 degree temperatures and, given somewhat fairer weather, was joined by Carla and G. A. Hankins, Ron and Kim Corapi, and others in pulling out staples left from removing wall-to-wall carpets. Al Erskine came armed with his chain saw and front-end loader to cut up and haul off a downed tree. Chris Slavens removed window blinds and hardware, and (big drumroll, please) Michael Dunn volunteered to cut our grass.

There have been some exciting discoveries along the way. The tenant house yielded the main house's original south parlor mantel, as well as nearly enough original window sashes from the main house to replace modern triple-tracks. On a closet

shelf in the main house's "meal room" was an 1881 newspaper bearing the mailing label of E. W. Twilley, the original owner of the house and for whom it was built in 1878.

Twilley's only living descendant, Dan Twilley, of Sykesville, Maryland, was tracked down by sleuth Norma Jean Fowler. He has since visited with us and, much excited, toured his great-grandparents' home for the very first time. No stranger to Laurel, though, Twilley spent his childhood paddling all over Records' Pond with his dad's best school-days friend, the late Paul Robinson. Dan presented us with a copy of our first really old photo of the house, taken around the turn of the 20th century, with his grandfather brandishing a shotgun, perhaps on his way to go rabbit or squirrel hunting around the place.

We have also been blessed with the continued generosity of our members and friends. Louis and Shirley O'Neal have donated an important collection of local farm machinery and equipment, Gwen North has promised us a Hitchens family buggy, Brian Shannon bought back the Hitchens family farm tractor at a local auction for our use in

promoting the property, and the Fowler family has given us a number of pieces of furniture appropriate to furnishing both of our houses. Among these items is a secretary desk documented to have been made in Laurel. Laurelite Madeline Dunn has even offered us her two-seat privy.

Only so much, however, can be accomplished at the local level. We are now beginning to call upon professionals for much-needed advice, as we want to do things only once and do them right the first time. The Delaware State Historic Preservation Office is providing assistance and we have recently sought input from Catherine Masek, a much-acclaimed historic paint researcher from Severna Park, Maryland. Last, Preservation Delaware has awarded us a \$4,000 grant with which to undercoat badly exposed areas until original exterior paint colors can be determined.

While all of the above is going on, the Hitchens steering committee consisting of Debbie Mitchell, Dawn Collins, Brad Spicer, Don Phillips, and chairman Ned Fowler is diligently mapping out an overall vision for the restoration and eventual use of what will one day be Laurel's pride and joy. ■

**Join us for a
HOEDOWN!**

BEER - WINE
FOOD
ARTISANS
MUSIC

**JUNE 08, 2019
4 PM - 7 PM
@HITCHENS
HOMESTEAD
205 WILLOW ST
LAUREL DE**

**RESTORATION
FUNDRAISER
\$10 ADULT
\$5 UNDER 16**

Join us on Saturday, June 8th, for an evening of music, food, fun, and artisan exhibits at the Hitchens Homestead. Bring your lawn chair or blanket. Food vendors include Abbott's on Broad Creek and Vanderwende's Creamery. Beer, wine, and soft drinks will also be available. Enjoy the classic rock sounds of Charlie and the Cool Tones, explore the exhibits, and enjoy the beautiful views of historic Records' Pond and Broad Creek.

The event is a fundraiser for the restoration of the Hitchens Homestead. Laurel's iconic Rural Gothic Revival cottage will soon take on a new life. Slated to become a museum celebrating Laurel's agricultural heritage and heyday, the 4.3-acre property, owned and/or occupied by six generations of the Edmund Hitchens family, will be the crown jewel of Laurel's public park lands stretching one-half mile through the center of town on both sides of Broad Creek.

Advance tickets are available at Laurel Pizzeria, Maxine's, and online at laureldehistoricalsociety.org

LHS Receives \$4,000 Grant for Hitchens Homestead

by Doug Marvil

The renovation of the dwelling house at the Hitchens Homestead is steadily gathering momentum. It quickly became apparent that one of the most pressing needs was the stabilization of the exterior of the house in order to minimize any further deterioration due to weather.

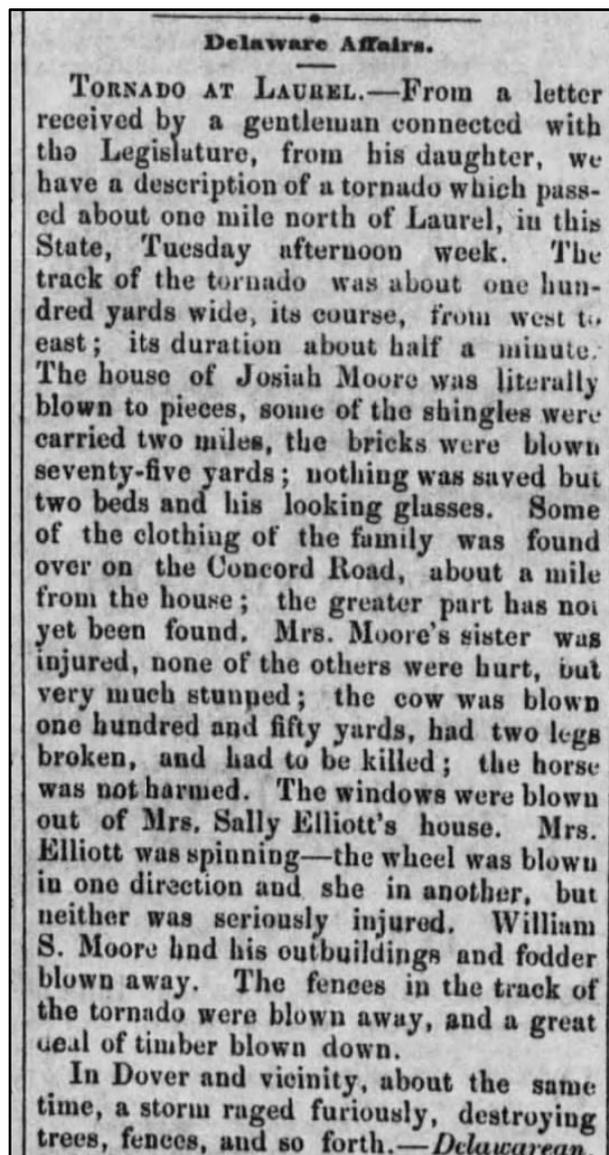
Preservation Delaware, Inc., a highly regarded nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of Delaware's architectural heritage and historic settings, sponsors a Small Grants program for qualified applicants. It is with great pride that the Laurel Historical Society has recently become the recipient of a \$4,000 grant from Preservation Delaware!



The society is very fortunate, because this funding will permit us to begin the timely stabilization of the siding, windows, doors, and trim of our unique and beautiful nineteenth century Gothic cottage residence which was built by Emanuel Twilley, one of the founders and operators of the Laurel grist mill on Records' Pond during a time when Laurel was entering its heyday. ■

Old News

From the *Middletown Transcript*, March 6, 1869:



Retrieved from *Newspapers.com*.

Morris Harris Donates Collection of Scrapbooks

Recently the Laurel Historical Society became the fortunate recipient of an impressive collection of scrapbooks created by Morris Harris. The painstakingly crafted albums document life in Laurel in the mid-20th century, with an emphasis on local sports. They contain many rare photos and newspaper clippings, and are a wonderful addition to the society's growing collection.

On Sunday, April 7th, about three dozen people gathered at the Laurel Heritage Museum on Mechanic Street to view the albums and honor Morris Harris and his family in a brief ceremony of appreciation. Doug Marvil spoke briefly and thanked Harris on behalf of the society, and Harris introduced several family members who were present. The society is deeply appreciative of his work, and grateful for his donation. ■



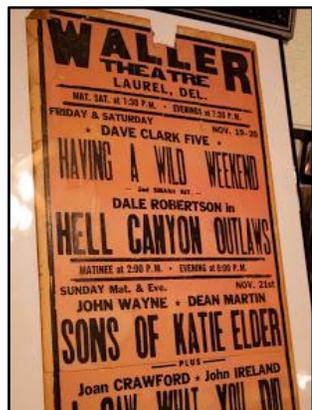
A Night at the Movies

by Don Phillips

Folks attending the recent LHS “night at the movies” on March 16th were whisked back in time, or so it seemed. The society set the mood for the evening with aisle lighting, movie posters, a popcorn stand, historic exhibits, lots of candy, and a continuously looping vintage copy of *Casablanca* projected onto the “silver screen” during dinner.

In addition to a 5-star reviewed meal, guests were entertained by a fascinating presentation by author Michael Nazarewycz about the publication of his book *Historic Movie Theaters of Delaware*. Our local Waller Theater's history was woven through his presentation, as Michael deftly blended social trends, politics, and local history into his greater story of movies in Delaware.

It was a nostalgic night of memories for many of the older attendees, and even the author was delighted when a couple of folks in attendance gave eyewitness descriptions of "the night the ceiling fell in," ending the Waller's storied run. These “nostalgia nights” are so much fun that maybe we should rebrand ourselves the Laurel *Hysterical Society*! Don't miss the next one! ■



All photos courtesy of Paula M. Shannon.

Review: *Historic Movie Theaters*

Grab some popcorn, silence your cell phone, and enjoy the show—or, rather, enjoy the book.

In *Historic Movie Theaters of Delaware*, published by the History Press, film buff and writer Michael J. Nazarewycz invites readers to take a deep dive into the history of 150 movie theaters in the First State, from the Middletown Opera House—where attendees enjoyed viewing still photographs projected via Sciopticon in the early 1870s—to the multiplex cinemas of today. This is a cleverly cinema-themed book, with punny section titles including Opening Credits, Closing Credits, Fade In, Fade Out, and Moving Pictures, all referring to the life and times of various theaters.



Rather than trace the history of individual theaters from beginning to end, Nazarewycz tackles the statewide scene in chronological order, one era at a time. Thus we learn in “Take” or chapter four that T. J. Waller built the first Waller Theatre in Laurel in 1913, but its disastrous burning in 1940 and subsequent replacement are mentioned three chapters later. The Waller (or New Waller) closed permanently after its ceiling collapsed in 1967.

Of the 150 theaters covered, only 22 are open today, a mere “14 of which are full-time movie theaters,” making *Historic Movie Theaters of Delaware* a valuable and important chronicle of a vanishing part of Delaware’s past. ■

List of Laurel’s “Lilies” Grows

In his excellent article published in the Winter 2019 issue, LHS board member Brad Spicer reflected on the significance (and gradual disappearance) of “the Lilies of Laurel,” decorative porch brackets carved in a distinctive *fleur de lis* pattern, and identified nineteen houses in town which feature the design.



During the last few months, society members have reported several additions to the list:

Laurel-Bethel Camp
(cottages in early photos)

12290 Chipmans Pond Road, Laurel

12968 Laurel Road, Laurel

14521 Laurel Road, Laurel
(side porch only)

28274 E. Trap Pond Road, Laurel

510 Vine Street, Bethel

315 Delaware Avenue, Bridgeville

525 King’s Highway, Lewes

The Laurel Historical Society is interested in documenting the locations of any other houses featuring the brackets, especially those outside the Laurel area. ■

Remembering Dunbar Elementary School

by Emily Abbott

The doors to Paul Laurence Dunbar school may be closed to students, but for a few hours on a Sunday this past February the halls rang with laughter and memories of the past. Seventy people gathered in the gym to reminisce about the glory days of the school when West Laurel students attended there until 8th grade.

Artez West greeted the attendees who walked the halls, looked into classrooms, and chatted over photographs of an era long gone. Then they gathered in the gym where Mrs. Lorraine Hitchens, Mrs. Delores Hyland, and Mrs. Hattie Jones led a discussion about the history that had been made in that school, especially during the days before it became an integrated elementary school and the name changed to West Laurel Elementary School.



Courtesy of Paula M. Shannon.

Stories were told about attending there and then having to leave Laurel to go to Wilmington in order to finish their high school education. Former teachers were named and stories told about classroom antics and school events, but one teacher named got the biggest reaction—Mrs. Webb, who also became principal. The reverence these former students had for her could be heard in their voices. They mentioned her no-nonsense manner of teaching, how some students experienced her grabbing their ears and “setting them straight,” but there were smiles and laughter and deep respect shown for this remarkable lady.

The building will soon be under construction for changes to make it the police station and youth center. Those brick and mortar walls have been part of Laurel’s history, and we are destined to see them create more. ■



Courtesy of Paula M. Shannon.

Black History Celebrated at Mount Pisgah

by Emily Abbott

In February members of the Laurel Historical Society and the Roger C. Fisher Historical Society met at Mount Pisgah church for a spaghetti dinner and an inspirational presentation by Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester.

The congresswoman highlighted her life’s journey through schooling, marriage, the birth of her children, divorce, marriage, living in China, the death of her husband, and her government work, all of which were supported by her parents and her strong faith in God. Her positive attitude and encouragement for everyone to believe in themselves illuminated the church and those in attendance. ■

Photos courtesy of Paula M. Shannon.



Summertime Means Swimming!

Young and old alike have always loved cooling off on a hot summer day anywhere water is available, be it creek, river, ocean, pool, or just an old swimming “hole.” While Laurel has never had a public concrete swimming “pool,” we did have a bona fide swimming area roped off in Records’ Pond in the 30s and 40s.

Kendal Jones first told us about the swimming area located at the end of today’s Governors Ave. He said the dirt path down to the shore line was dusty, tree-lined, and full of ruts. The pool was constructed during the summer of 1929 at a time when the mill dam was being replaced. Charles Marvil, grandfather of society member Doug Marvil, was charged with clearing the stumps.



Pavilion at Records Pond.

Newspaper accounts of the day report that the pool was 112 feet long and extended into the pond about 100 feet. Built on the south edge of the pond, the pool depth was about 7 feet which gradually decreased in depth to the shoreline. Three diving

boards were erected, and the pool, as well as the entire grounds, were lighted. Night swims were very popular.



Swimming lessons at Records’ Pond, circa 1931.

One newspaper account claims that between 500 and 2,000 bathers visited on the hottest summer days. Can that really be true? Bath houses for changing and spectators’ stands surrounded the roped-in swimming area. Swimming lessons were offered many years.

The property was owned by the Town of Laurel, and included about two acres. The entire pool and its equipment were financed by popular subscription, and were entirely paid for by its first summer season in 1930.

By 1949, the *News Journal* reported that the Town Council was considering the sale of the pool, and what seems to have been a golden era for fun in the sun in Laurel was coming to an end. ■

Laurel Historical Society Board of Directors, 2019

Officers

President: George Denney
 Vice President: Artez West
 Secretary: Dee Cross
 Treasurer: Roy Jones
 Ex Officio President: Ned Fowler
 Ex Officio Treasurer: Doug Marvil

At Large

Woody Disharoon	Norma Jean Fowler
Trina Giles	Greg McCullough
Deborah Mitchell	Don Phillips
Scott Phillips	Maggie Proctor
Brian Shannon	Chris Slavens
Brad Spicer	Patrick Vanderslice

On the morning of January 29, 1860, a Sunday, the folks who lived around Lowe's Crossroads filled their pews at Jones Methodist Episcopal Church. Rev. John Milton Purner, who had stayed with Isaac Short the night before, preached on Hebrews 6:1. He appreciated the large crowd and good atmosphere. After the service, the 26-year-old minister rode his horse northwestward towards Terrapin Hill, probably dining with a parishioner along the way. Another service was held at Bethesda M. E. Church, where he preached on II Corinthians 8:9 to the largest congregation that had gathered there all year. After a less successful evening service at Bethesda featuring a sermon on Romans 2:4-5, Purner spent the night at the nearby home of Hezekiah Matthews.

The details of this typical Sunday, and many others, are preserved in the *Journal of the Rev. John Milton Purner: January – May 1860*, a new addition to the Laurel Historical Society's collection.

The journal was transcribed and edited by Barbara Duffin and Philip Lawton for The Commission on Archives and History of the Peninsula-Delaware Conference of The United Methodist Church, and published in 2004. Copies can be purchased at Barratt's Chapel & Museum of Methodism in Frederica, which holds the original.

Born in Cecil County, Maryland, Purner entered the ministry in his twenties and spent a year in training on the Lewes Circuit before coming to

Laurel in 1859. As a Junior Preacher, he did not have a house of his own, but depended on church members for meals and lodging. He preached at St. Thomas, Jones, Bethesda, Hepburn (King's), Old Zion (colored), Mount Zion, Bethel, and St. George's, among other local churches. His brief entries—which are rife with misspellings, but usually readable—include sermon texts, comments about services, and the names of his hosts. Typically, he only stayed with a family for a night or two before moving on. On more than one occasion, the young man wrote that he was homesick.



A typical circuit rider in early America.

By April 1860, Purner had been assigned to the Church Creek Circuit, and subsequently served in other communities on the peninsula, including Sharptown and Accomac. Sadly, he died on a Sunday morning in 1867 at age 34. The journal he kept during his time in Laurel, despite its brevity, is a valuable addition to the history of the community. ■

MAY IS DELAWARE ARCHAEOLOGY MONTH

Time Traveling in Delaware State Parks



Time Travelers are volunteer members of the public who give their time to assist the archaeologists and historians working in state parks with research projects to protect and study our cultural heritage.

Time Travelers have recovered c. 2500-year-old Wolf Neck prehistoric pottery from a site near Laurel and historic artifacts used by 18th-century millworker families in Yorklyn. Sound exciting? It is!

No experience is necessary. However, classroom training sessions are held that provide the basic background necessary to work with state parks staff and to take part in research programs in our parks and other DNREC properties. The classroom training sessions involve illustrated lecture and hands-on training in basic archaeological field skills. Classes last about three hours. Each newly-qualified Time Traveler will receive an embroidered Time Traveler patch. The program is open to anyone over the age of 14, but minors under 16 need to be accompanied by an adult. Younger students may be admitted on a case-by-case basis.

For more information, visit destateparks.com/programs/timetravelers or contact John McCarthy at John.McCarthy@state.de.us or (302) 739-9188.

HELP WANTED

“The show must go on!” That’s the goal for Broadway, and, to achieve that goal, understudies are carefully prepared to take the reins when things get tough. They prepare themselves just in case they are needed. And so must the show continue with the Laurel Historical Society. During its 42-year history, roles and responsibilities have passed down from the charter members, year after year, until the present. Our current band of merry men and women are working tirelessly to maintain our town’s history. But we need an understudy for our collection work. The reputation of our research center has expanded to the point that Norma Jean Fowler, our collections manager, has requested we find an “understudy” for her role as chief historian.

“What?” you say. “I couldn’t help with that job! I don’t know enough.” Well, of course you can. What better way to learn about Laurel’s history? If you have a love of local history, very basic computer skills (do you use email?), and some free time you can dedicate on a regular basis for step-by-step training, you would be perfect for the job! She is looking for someone to relieve her of the basic tasks involved with collection work, and is more than willing to offer incremental training to anyone who is willing to make a commitment to work with her for a few hours each week. This is not a quick fix, rather a search for someone willing to make collection work for the society a part of their future.

If you want to learn more about what this might entail, please contact Norma Jean Fowler at laurelhistoricalsociety@hotmail.com or 302-875-2820. She’s ready, willing, and eager to talk to you!

Do you remember the *Bulldog* newsletter?

We know there was a school newsletter named the *Bulldog* sometime around the early 1970s, but we don’t know much about it other than the title, including how long it ran.

We would love to learn more about this piece of Bulldogs history. We have many copies of the *Bellman* (circa 1921 – 1926) and the *Mirror* (circa 1938 – 1946), and we learn so much from them.

Do you have any memories about the duration of this newsletter? Or do you have any existing copies that you would be willing to donate to the Laurel Historical Society for posterity?

Please email laurelhistoricalsociety@hotmail.com

Please Join us for our



Heritage Day at the Nanticoke Indian Museum

Saturday

May 11, 2019

11 am to 4 pm

The Nanticoke Indian Museum is located at
26673 John J Williams Highway,
Millsboro, DE 19966

FOR QUESTIONS PLEASE CALL 302-945-7022

Featuring Guest Speaker

Charlotte Hockings, LAC Du FLAMBEAU OJIBWAY



Attractions include:

- Native American story telling, dancing, music, and vendors
- Traditional Native American food such as succotash, fry bread and Indian tacos

This Event is **FREE** to the public.

Life in Laurel

“When the Dual Highway Came to Town”

May 30th • 10:30 am

Laurel Public Library

All are welcome to attend, ask questions, and share memories!



Worship like it's 1772 at Old Christ Church



First Sunday of the month

June – September

10:00 am

WaterColors IV PAINT A BUS!



July 13th, 9:00 am – 2:00 pm

Roger C. Fisher Park

Laurel

4th Annual Community Watermelon Bus Painting

FREE

UPCOMING EVENTS

Save the date!

Annual Donor Reception · May 11, 2019 · 5:00 pm · Richard & Cathy Parker's

"Life in Laurel" Discussion · May 30, 2019 · 10:30 am · Laurel Public Library

Hoedown at Hitchens · June 8, 2019 · 4:00 pm · Hitchens Homestead

Annual 4th of July Picnic · July 4, 2019 · 5:00 pm · Janosik Park

WaterColors Bus Painting · July 13, 2019 · 9:00 am · Roger C. Fisher Park

Society Fundraiser · October 12, 2019 · 5:30 pm · *more details TBA*

The Laurel Heritage Museum (215 Mechanic St.) and the Cook House (502 E. 4th St.) are open on the first Sunday of each month from 1:00 to 4:00 pm. We love visitors!

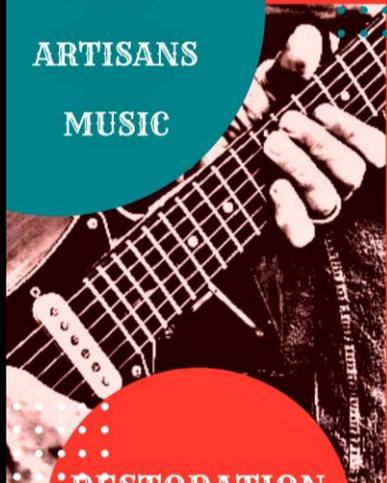
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