



Winter 2020

NEWSLETTER

P.O. Box 102
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laureldehistoricalsociety.org



Hitchens Homestead Illuminates the Holiday Season

* * * * * by Brad Spicer * * * * *

Excitement was in the air as nightfall fell upon the Hitchens Homestead on Friday, December 6th. The temperature was mild and the wind was light: a perfect night for a community gathering in celebration of the holiday season. The much-awaited “Inaugural Grand Illumination” of the Hitchens Homestead was upon us. The results of monthly planning and detailed preparations by the Laurel Historical Society’s Hitchens Homestead steering committee and board of directors was approaching fruition. So many countless hours of dedicated volunteer service, by numerous society members, had readied the property for the event. The illumination would be the culminating event of a festive night for the town of Laurel, preceded by the Christmas Markets on Broad Creek and the annual Christmas parade.

As part of the preparations, a large bonfire had been built and was ignited during the parade so that it was visible to parade and market attendees. The bonfire was maintained throughout the event, removing the slight chill of the evening.

Like moths to the flame, the crowd began to make its way to the venue due to the bonfire and Christmas music being played by a local DJ. Holiday-themed refreshments were offered for sale by the Laurel Lioness Club and were greatly enjoyed by the crowd. The Laurel High School band attended the event and played a couple of songs once the parade had ended.



Courtesy of Paula M. Shannon.

IN THIS ISSUE: Annual Meeting 1/26, The Grand Illumination, Sledding the Big Hill, Hitchens Homestead Colors Revealed, Old Forge A.M.E., Upcoming Events, & more!

This was followed by a brief history of Laurel by steering committee chairman Ned Fowler, outlining the important role that this property had played. The house had been adorned with wreaths, sporting red bows, that were hung on the lower level of the main house, barn, an outbuilding and the millhand house down the hill.



Photos courtesy of Paula M. Shannon.

Twinkling candle lights, positioned in the windows of both houses, were sequentially lit on cue during “Silent Night.” Five flood lights, surrounding the perimeter of the building, were switched on during the final line of the carol, bathing the homestead in a glorious bright light. The Hitchens Homestead was transformed into a sparkling gem atop the hill. It was quite a celebratory moment for the society and the community. The Grand Illumination was a major success! ■



ANNUAL MEETING & ELECTION

All are welcome!

The nominating committee is pleased to announce the following slate of candidates for election at the Laurel Historical Society's annual meeting at 2:00 p.m. on January 26, 2020, at Abbott's on Broad Creek:

President.....George Denney
 Vice President.....Artez West
 Secretary.....Dee Cross
 Treasurer.....Doug Marvil

At large:

Woody Disharoon, Norma Jean Fowler, Trina Giles, Matt Parker,
 Don Phillips, Maggie Proctor, Brian Shannon, Chris Slavens,
 Brad Spicer, Patrick Vanderslice, and Emily Whaley.

With the holiday season behind us, it is time to renew our commitment to the mission of the Laurel Historical Society. Whether you're a life member, or, like myself, a regular member of the society, each of us can make a lasting contribution to our community in so many different ways. As I reflect on last year's events, I am amazed and gratified by the quality and number of events, and the level of participation from you, our members. This issue will highlight some of those events.

Of course, the first event of importance this year is our **annual meeting on January 26, 2020, at Abbott's on Broad Creek at 2:00 p.m.** Items on the agenda include reports from officers and board members about finances, the Hitchens Homestead, the Fowler Research Center, and much more. The annual meeting also offers a forum for the general membership to ask questions and discuss issues relative to the society.

We are excited about upcoming activities this year, including a society bus trip to the Harriet Tubman

museum in February, Life in Laurel discussions at the Laurel Public Library, a spring program featuring local children's artwork in March, and an even bigger and better Hoedown at the Hitchens Homestead in October.

Finally, I would like to thank all our members and friends who have so generously given to our Annual Appeal to date. Your contribution is what enables us to pay our electric, telephone, and fuel bills this year. Any time is a good time to make a contribution, so please consider sending a tax-deductible donation. It's a great time to be a part of the Laurel Historical Society! ■



Courtesy of Paula M. Shannon.

Old News

From the *Delaware Republican*,
January 26, 1881:

He Saved Seven Lives.
Five young women and two young men broke through the ice together at Laurel, Delaware, the other day. William Sipple, the only person near, heard a crash, and saw a dozen hands sticking out of the water. He ran to the edge of the hole and pulled three of the girls out at once, the second clutching the feet of the first, and the third those of the second. He then rescued the others and now is the hero of the town, with the credit of saving seven lives.

From the *Lancaster Weekly Examiner*,
February 5, 1890:

Hissed Out of Church.
A church sensation took place near Laurel, Delaware, a few days ago which has done more to sever the good-will of the two races than anything occurring since the war. A student of Westminster College was called on to preach at a country chapel during the absence of the pastor in charge. A negro preacher and other colored friends attended the service, and at the close the colored divine was asked to dismiss the congregation. He arose to comply, but a storm of hisses and a general stampede from the church was the result.

Retrieved from newspapers.com.

Society Receives an Unexpected Gift at Annual Christmas Reception

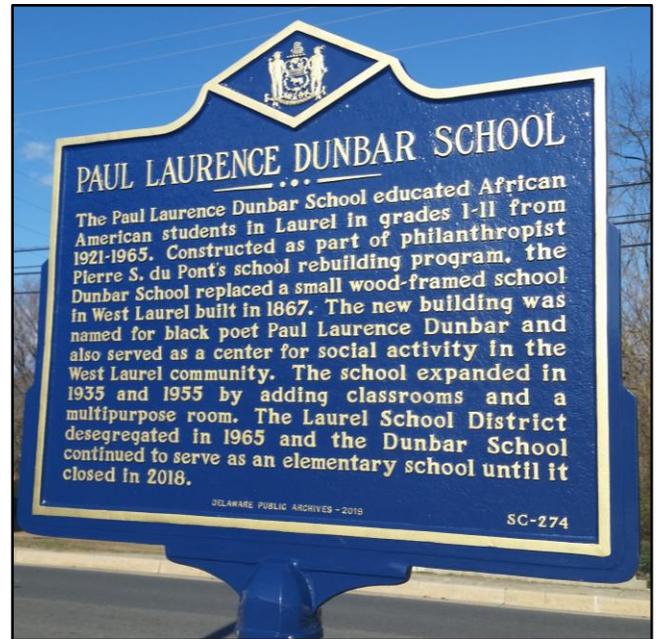
The Laurel Historical Society welcomed members to its annual Christmas social at the Laurel Heritage Museum on Sunday, December 1st. Attendees enjoyed a festive afternoon of refreshments, exhibits, and good company. In a splendid display of holiday spirit, representatives of the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation (LRC), a local nonprofit dedicated to fostering economic development in Laurel, presented a gift of \$5,001.00 for the society's ongoing Annual Appeal. See page 9 for more on the Annual Appeal. ■



L to R: LRC Chairman Barry Morrison, LRC Executive Director Brian Shannon, and LHS President George Denney.

New Historical Marker at West Laurel's Dunbar School

Laurel's newest historical marker, located on West 6th Street in front of Paul Laurence Dunbar School, was dedicated in September. Its creation and installation were the result of a cooperative effort between local citizens and the Delaware Public Archives, which places markers at eligible, historically significant sites throughout the state. ■



Fall Dinner Highlights Historic Photo Analysis and Restoration

The society's fall fundraising dinner, held on October 19th at St. Philip's, featured historic photo sleuth and restoration specialist John Fillmore. After a dinner provided by Southern Grill, Fillmore demonstrated how he searches for subtle clues in old photographs to identify locations, time periods, and individuals. He also presented and commented upon a selection of local Waller photographs. ■



Photos courtesy of Paula M. Shannon.

True Colors Revealed at the Hitchens Homestead

A group of society members and interested members of the community gathered on the lawn at the Hitchens Homestead on Sunday, September 29th, for a presentation about historic paint trends and analysis by Catherine Masek, a professional historic preservation consultant whose list of clients includes the State of Delaware and various historical societies.

“Old buildings are like puzzles,” said Masek, giving a brief overview of how she analyzes paint samples to determine a structure’s color schemes over the years. Gesturing at the green-trimmed, mostly white house behind her, she explained that popular color palettes of the 1870s incorporated truly natural colors, reflecting trees, grass, and earth—but not white, which is not a color, technically.

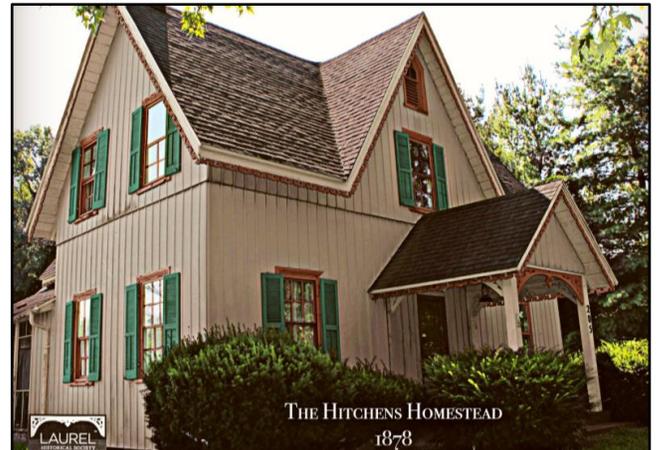


Courtesy of Paula M. Shannon.

After the presentation, society members Norma Jean Fowler, Doug Marvil, Brad Spicer, and Woody Disharoon assisted in revealing the original colors of the Hitchens Homestead, one at a time. Society intern Emily Whaley joined Ned Fowler in unveiling a digitally-altered photograph of the house “painted” with the colors.

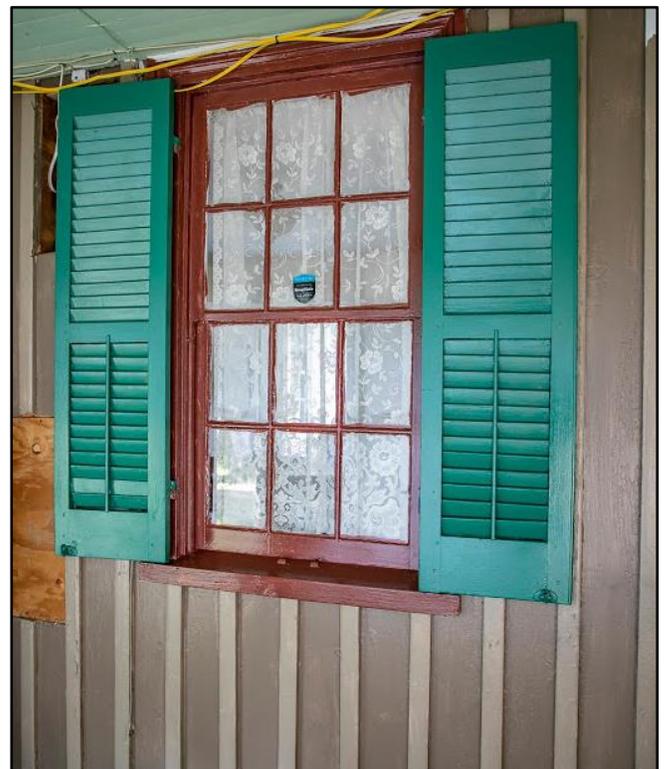


Courtesy of Paula M. Shannon.



L to R: Rustic Taupe (exterior), Smoky Ash (battens), Antique Mahogany (trim), and Deep Jungle (shutters).

The final surprise was revealed inside the side porch, where the window, shutters, and exterior wall had been beautifully repainted with the “new” colors, including the lighter hue of the vertical battens which produces a subtle pinstriped effect. The society plans to repaint the entire house in its original color scheme. ■



A taste of things to come. Courtesy of Paula M. Shannon.

I was born in Harrington, Delaware, on December 14, 1920. My parents were Theodore Risdon Twilley and Mary Jane Culver Twilley. My father, born in 1881, was the third son of Emanuel Walker Twilley and Jeanette Adams Twilley. The elder son was Edwin; next was Paul. Bell was the youngest of the four children. And by all accounts, she was the most spoiled. My father, Theodore Risdon, was known to his contemporaries as “Jake.” His family, including my mother, called him “Risdon.”

My father's father ran a grist mill which was water powered. It was located between the Laurel Lake and Broad Creek. In addition to the mill, there was a dirt dam with a spillway with flood gates between the pond and the creek. At that time the Lake was called Twilley's Pond. The family lived in a beautiful English style house overlooking the lake and mill. The house still exists. The mill burned down a few years ago.

At the end of my fourth year in school, we moved to Laurel. I really don't know what prompted the decision to move. I think that it is most likely that my father lost his job. After all, it was the middle of the “great” depression; a lot of people were losing their jobs.

We moved to the Laurel House Hotel, which my parents leased and managed, neither of them with any prior experience in that business. During the depression, many people had to change professions. We rented a small house on Seventh Street to store some of our furniture and belongings; and some things were moved into the hotel.

The first person on the staff at the hotel with whom I became acquainted was the chef, Harry Jenkins, a gentleman of color. He was the true gentleman and became a good friend to all of us. There was a waitress, named Margie, who was like a big sister; and a young colored boy, William Jones, who helped out in the kitchen and sometimes was pressed into service in the dining room when there was a banquet or when someone less dependable didn't show up. William stayed with us until we left the hotel. His younger brother Cecil helped out sometimes, too. In those days there still was a lot of racial prejudice. It would have been unthinkable to serve a Negro in the dining room. I did, however,

visit Harry and William in their homes in “Suburb”, the part of town where all of the Negroes lived. I met their families and broke bread with them. I must confess, though, that I was a little uncomfortable; and I'm sure that they were also. By the way, “Black” was a derogatory term then. We used “Colored” or “Negro”, but never “Black.”

I am ashamed to admit this: I was a brat. Harry was a very good cook. Everyone raved about his cooking, especially his soups; but what did I do when I wanted soup? Sometimes, I went to the store, got a can of Campbell's Vegetable Soup, and fixed it for myself. Then rather than eat something that he had prepared, I had a peanut butter sandwich.

My father's Uncle Edgar had a nice little rowboat that he kept in a boathouse on the pond. He gave us a key to the boathouse and Daddy took me fishing frequently. We caught sunfish with worms for bait. Also, we fished off of the spillway into the creek using fresh water shrimp for bait and caught white perch. Another big thing that summer: I learned to swim. The Red Cross gave swimming lessons at the pond. The town had fenced in an area of the pond, hauled in sand for a nice beach, and built bath houses, a diving board, a pavilion, and a concession stand and erected lights. They also provided a lifeguard.

Moving between school years is a good thing to do insofar as schooling is concerned, but not so good for making friends. I went to Sunday school, but didn't get close to anyone there. There were two boys my age who lived fairly near to the hotel. I palled around with both of them some—never really became close friends with either. I entered Laurel School in the fifth grade. I was put in a class that met in an old building adjoining the new building. The only one in the class who was smarter than me was the teacher, and I'm not too sure about her. I don't remember the name of a single person in that class. I doubt if any of them finished school.

** Collection of the Laurel Historical Society. Gift of Daniel Risdon Twilley, son of author John Emanuel Twilley, and great-grandson and only living descendant of Emanuel Twilley, the original owner of today's Hitchens Homestead.*



The Laurel House on an early postcard. Undated.

I did well enough, however, to gain a transfer to the other class. There I began to make some good friends. Among them were Fuzz Ralph and Paul Robinson.

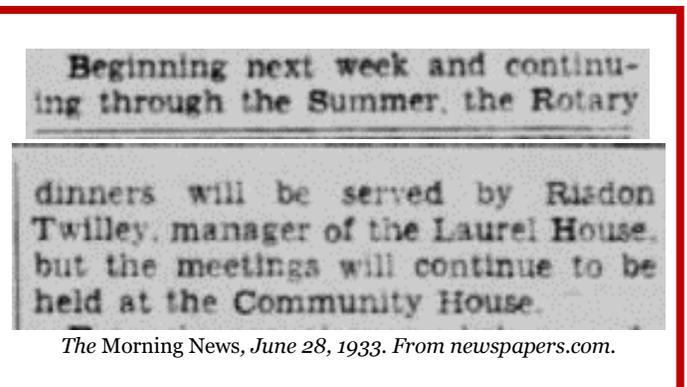
Paul first. He lived in one of the nicest houses in Laurel and it was only about a block from the hotel. Paul's grandfather had founded the Robinson Hardware Company and was the principle stockholder of the Marvil Package Company, the two largest industries in Laurel. Both were manufacturers of baskets and crates for farm produce. Robinson Hardware furnished the hinges and hasps and Marvil Package imported timber from the Carolinas to make the baskets and crates. The logs came by boat. Paul's father was the president of Marvil Package.

Paul had a playroom that was the ultimate—a great train layout; all kinds of blocks and bricks from which to build forts, an army of toy soldiers, cowboys and Indians; toys of all kinds. I guess you could say that he was spoiled. Also, on the property was a three car garage with a loft which we used for a clubhouse. In spite of all that, Paul spent as much time at the hotel as I did at his house. I had some things that he didn't—a small basketball court in the kitchen, and a fire escape, also, a cupola from which we could see all over town. We were careful not to bother Harry too much, because we depended on him for snacks. Also, he helped us make and bottle root beer. Paul wasn't the only one who was spoiled. In later years, Paul often reminisced about the times that my father took us boating or on hikes. I remember one time when he took us on a hike to Bethel. We walked along the creek on the path that the sailors took from the ships that put in to Bethel, which was about three miles from Laurel. A number of sailing vessels were built there. Some of them sailed between ports on

the Chesapeake and some went around Cape Charles out to sea. A great many of the captains made their homes in Bethel and one who I knew lived in Laurel. The town of Bethel had nothing but a general store and a church, and no train or bus service. Laurel had some pretty nice stores, bus and train service, and a movie theater and two hotels, the Laurel House and the Rigbie Hotel. The Rigbie was where the sailors went. It was rumored that they served whiskey before it was legal to do so. So, when the ships arrived at Bethel, the sailors took the Sailors' Path to Laurel.

Paul's father became ill. I think he was diabetic. Maybe there was some other problem, too. During the sixth grade, Paul's parents took him out of school and went to Miami for six months, for his father's health. It was during that time that I became more friendly with Harry Wiley (Fuzz) Ralph. Fuzz lived across from the school. His father was a food broker, and his mother was a great cook. Her biscuits were almost as good as Miss Lizzie's. My relationship with Fuzz was a little different than with Paul. He was more into athletics. We played sandlot football and baseball in the appropriate seasons. And we played basketball in the gym in the winter on days when the school was closed. We never did any damage; and we never got caught. There were a few close calls, though.

Fuzz's mother was a Methodist and his father an Episcopalian. Fuzz was going to the Methodist Sunday School when we first met. One Sunday he went to the Episcopal Sunday school with me. There was a girl in our class who Fuzz already was sweet on. He soon returned to the faith in which he had been baptized. He probably would not admit that his conversion had anything to do with his affection for that girl. No matter. As you may know, Fuzz went on to become an Episcopal Priest. I've always felt that I deserve part of the credit for that. ■



Sledding the Big Hill

by Frank Calio

Anyone who grew up in Laurel between the early 40s and the 60s knows what the “Big Hill” opposite the Bank of Delmarva (formerly People’s Bank) in Laurel meant to them, especially during a snow.



Looking north from the top of Delaware Avenue.

Anyone who had a sled, lived in town, or could get to town sledded the Big Hill. From the top of the hill to the bottom of Delaware Avenue, which meant crossing the bridge, was approximately 3/10th of a mile. It was the place to be. Since there were no businesses on that strip of road (only one of three sewing factories which operated during the day) and only a few homes, and the state did not plow that street often, it was wide open to sledding with no fear of vehicular traffic.

Whenever we *did* see a car going in either direction, it was booed!

I think the parents and the public knew that when it snowed, this was a place for kids, and they stayed off the road. Mom and Dad always knew where I was, and knew I’d be safe.

I was a very young kid, around 5 or 6, when I was allowed outside to watch the sledding. We had relocated Dad’s businesses and home to one of the storefronts then known as the Fooks building, and in later years the Janosik Building, so I was just feet away from the action.

Opposite the Fooks building was an empty lot, vacated by C.C. Oliphant after the fire of ’41 which also leveled my parents’ home, a convenient spot for kids to assemble, rest, and chat.

For a few years, I just watched because I had no sled. Then I found one at the back of the first store

which stood unclaimed for a week, so I confiscated the one and only sled I ever owned. And it was one of the fastest sleds around. I still have it, though it is now in the possession of my son, Chris.

Most sleds could make it only as far as the bottom intersection of the hill, but some, including mine, could make it to the bridge past Valliant Fertilizer, now the site of Abbott’s Grill. We also had a hill in back of the store where we could start sledding and join the others on the main drag.

I can’t recall if they closed the schools for snow, but I know that by afternoon the Big Hill was filled with school kids who stayed until way after dark. As long as your parents knew you were sledding, the curfew of being home when the lights came on was off the table. I’m talking a good number of kids; you had to stand in line four across to wait for your turn. I can’t tell you the number of times I sledded down that hill and walked to the top to sled again. Today, I wouldn’t make it past Laureltown.



Winter fun on frozen Records’ Pond.

Some of the younger adults would gather on Records’ Pond, on ice which was much thicker than, to ice skate and have a bonfire. It was legal to have a fire in town then.

When Bill Jones opened his liquor store in the late 50s, I believe, Delaware Avenue was cleared, which meant less sledding. Many moved over to the Little Hill* on Willow Street, next to the home of Jay Windsor, and Clark and John Abbott. For some reason, it didn’t have the appeal of the Big Hill. ■

**Also known as Abbott’s hill.*

A Big Thank You to Our Annual Appeal Supporters

by Doug Marvil

The society has done, since its formation in 1977, a phenomenal job of carrying out our mission of preserving and interpreting the cultural heritage of the Laurel community. Maintaining three properties while conducting valuable research and organizing and preserving our vast collection is quite expensive, and consequently we depend largely on the financial support of the community. Examples of our annual expenses are electricity, \$2,550; fuel oil, \$2,000; insurance, \$2,600; phone/internet, \$2,000; lawn care, \$1,750; security, \$2,500; water/sewer, \$1,825; marketing, \$1,500 and newsletter, \$2,000. There are other lesser expenses too numerous to mention.

This year, once again, our members and supporters have demonstrated their unfailing generosity in supporting the Laurel Historical Society. The amount we have received in response to the annual appeal for 2020 as of this writing is **\$26,718.11**, far exceeding our goal of \$20,000! These financial resources are so critical in allowing us to fully utilize the amazing talents and energy of our current board members in accomplishing the lofty goals and objectives of the society.

We are so thankful to have such giving and caring individuals who truly love the Laurel community and its fascinating and unique history! It should be pointed out, however, that to-date annual appeal donations have been received from only 51 of our 210 members. Just imagine what our society would be able to accomplish if all of our members were to contribute whatever nominal level of support they felt comfortable in donating.

Two of our 2020 annual appeal donors deserve special recognition for their very significant and selfless contributions. Laurel natives Pat and Paul Downes, for the third consecutive year, donated \$10,000 to support our society! Their love of the Laurel community and their commitment to its historic preservation is undeniable! We are also very appreciative to the Laurel Redevelopment Corporation (LRC), who graciously contributed \$5,001 to our annual appeal this year. The LRC has been steadfast for many years in their commitment to enhance the entire downtown area and the adjacent residential neighborhoods. Our special heartfelt and sincere thanks is extended to these benevolent donors. ■

Collections Corner

by Norma Jean Fowler

As we start a new year, a look back at 2019 will highlight how our collections have grown and expanded. We would like to thank the 36 people who donated items last year, including Steven Dye, Ned Fowler, Bruce Smith, Louis O'Neal, Doug Marvil, Morris Harris, the heirs of Sue Hart, Elwood Baker, Linda King, Mona Wright, Bobby Carey, Odd Fellows Lodge, Arnold Hearn, Woody Disharoon, Kendal Jones, Earl Little, Chris Slavens, Ben Sirman, Marlene Warrington Hamilton, Ann Lee, Wendy Dolby, Bev Warrington Smith, Ruth O'Neal, Nancy Lowe, heirs of Doris Boyce, Brad Spicer, Jane Ellen Hiller, Caryl Osborne, Michael Nazarewycz, Fred Fuller, the Jack and Lois Cordrey family, Dan Twilley, Don Long, Linda Justice, Robert Riggan, and Matt and Dona Blaine. A rough count of the records added last year approximates 471 items! It's been a good year.

2019 could be called the year of the intern, as I have previously reported, for all of their activities. Now

we are looking forward to sharing some of that with you! Join us in the Carpenter Community Room at the Laurel Library on **Tuesday, March 17th, 4:00 – 5:30 p.m.** for *Talking Crayons: History Revealed in a Child's Drawing*. We will be presenting the children's most engaging artwork with a panel discussion of the social, economic, and historical information that they convey. If we are lucky, we may even have some of the original artists with us.

It was also a very good year because, as the fall turned into winter, we were delighted to add recent college grad and former LHS intern Emily Whaley to our board as corresponding secretary. She will be living in the area now, and plans to continue working with our collections.

The number of information contacts we have received has also increased. Phone calls, emails, and on-site visits, from Nevada to Annapolis, show that we are improving in our mission to preserve and educate. I wonder what 2020 will bring? ■

Old Forge A.M.E. Church and Camp

by Chris Slavens

Old Forge A. M. E. Church was located beside James' Branch a short distance s. w. of the old Broad Creek Bridge. Near this point, a forge, a saw-mill and a grist-mill were erected in the late 1700's. The forge was the first to be abandoned, the saw-mill was closed about 1880 and the grist-mill was closed some time later.

On Sept. 16, 1848, James Horsey donated a half-acre church site to a group of free Africans headed by Samson Mathews. Old Forge Church was built and a graveyard was laid out. An active camp-meeting was conducted each year in the woods beside the church. The church was closed about 1909 and the land reverted to Wm. De Shields who had purchased the Horsey farm. There were no tombstones in the graveyard and there is nothing to mark the old site.

- Frank R. Zebley, *The Churches of Delaware*, 1947

It is unclear when, exactly, Frank R. Zebley wrote the above entry in his wonderful book, since he spent years researching, visiting, and photographing hundreds of Delaware churches before its publication, but some of his photos of Laurel-area churches date to the mid-1930s, a mere twenty years after the annual camp meeting at Old Forge was said to be one of the most popular black camp meetings on the entire peninsula. It seems unthinkable that all visible evidence of a church, campground, and cemetery—the center of a community for countless people over several generations—could vanish so quickly, and that so little of its history would be remembered.

Yet even today, with easy access to newspapers and other records via searchable online databases, we have only been able to learn a little more of that history. Most of the story of Old Forge A.M.E. remains unknown.

It begins, as Zebley stated, in 1848. For the sum of ten dollars (the site wasn't truly donated), James and Bridget Horsey sold one-half acre of land to trustees "Samson Matthews, Isaac Rodney, Isaac Morris, George Polk, William Sipple, John Saunders, Peter Truitt and Robert Sipple free Africans" under the condition that they would build "a house or place of worship for the use of the African people. . ."

The rectangular lot was described as beginning at "a post on east side of a road leading from Polk Mills (originally) down the western side of said Mill Branch out into the state road leading from

Georgetown to Salisbury Maryland and intersecting said road near Broad Creek Bridge so called and then running from said post along or nearly along the East side of said road. . ." Like the church, these roads no longer exist, and the entire site is shrouded in forest.



Approximate location of the half-acre Old Forge A.M.E. lot in yellow, south of today's Sandy Fork. 1937 (L) and 2012 (R) aerial imagery.

Little is known of most of the trustees. There were two "free colored" men named Samson Matthews living in Sussex County at the time. John Saunders was involved in the Union Temperance Benevolent Society. The most prominent trustee, by far, seems to be William Sipple, a successful Laurel blacksmith and landowner who provided land to Mt. Pisgah A.M.E., served as a trustee of the local African-American school, and is even believed to have been involved in the Underground Railroad.

Although it is assumed that the new church was named Old Forge A.M.E. upon its construction, the name does not appear on the deed. Evidently the church began holding annual camp meetings in 1855, but we only know this because the camp celebrated its 60th anniversary in 1915; the known records are silent about both church and camp meeting during the early decades. Hopefully, more information will be discovered.

As if to make up for years of inattention, somebody began submitting brief notes about the camp to the newspapers in the early 20th century. On July 23, 1902, Wilmington's *Every Evening* reported that Old Forge camp meeting was in progress and drawing a large attendance. The same article implies that some of the attendees were robbing

nearby watermelon fields under the cover of darkness, while farmers guarded their fields with shotguns. Three weeks later, on August 15, *Every Evening* reported that Old Forge was still drawing a crowd from Laurel. That's some camp meeting!

Alleged watermelon heists paled in comparison to the news that came from the camp two years later. After a violent brawl erupted in or near the campground, during which knives, blackjacks, razors, and pistols were brandished if not actually used, participant Lee Ackwood—a rough character who makes several appearances in Maryland and Delaware newspapers for various crimes—returned to the camp later that evening and shot John White, a popular and respected black merchant, badly injuring him. Both the *Morning News* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that a posse searched for Ackwood on the night of the crime, but the latter clarified that the posse consisted of black men: "...if caught he will be lynched by his own race, as White was extremely popular, and his friends are determined to wreak vengeance upon his assailant." The shooter was arrested and jailed the next morning.

MAY BE MURDER AT NEGRO CAMP

During Row at Old Forge Meeting, Near Laurel. John White, Colored Merchant, Was Shot by Lee Acwood, for Whom Posse is Searching.

The Morning News, August 1, 1904. Retrieved from newspapers.com.

The camp continued to have a tainted reputation; the ten-day meeting in 1909 was said to be the first without shootings or fights. It seems that the church was closed at about this time—probably due, in part, to the condition of the aging structure—for in 1910 the annual camp meeting was continued by Mt. Pisgah A.M.E. Church. In 1914, the *Morning News* contradicted the various reports of violent incidents, stating that the camp had "always been free from shooting scrapes." The 60th annual camp meeting, in 1915, was described as one of the most successful in the camp's history—yet it also seems to have marked the end of the camp's history. Old Forge is conspicuously absent from state newspapers after 1915. The seemingly abrupt demise of the camp corresponds with a peninsula-wide crackdown on black camp meetings due to a perception that they frequently turned disorderly or violent. Prejudice was certainly a factor, but, surprisingly, some black

FROM THE BOOKSHELF



The Churches of Delaware, by Frank R. Zebley, was published in 1947 after twelve years of research. Featuring brief histories of nearly 900 churches, and many photographs, the 363-page book is a valuable reference work. It is also extremely rare; copies which sold for \$5.00 in 1947 now sell for hundreds of dollars. Reportedly, many of the unsold books were destroyed. Fortunately, free PDF copies are available online.

The book includes entries for about forty Laurel-area churches, including those in nearby communities such as Bethel, Portsville, and Bacon's. The following African-American churches are mentioned:

- New Zion M.E. in Suburb or West Laurel.
- Mt. Pisgah A.M.E. in Suburb or West Laurel.
- Mt. Calvary M.E. in Portsville.
- Mt. Nebo A.M.E., south of Columbia.
- Old Forge A.M.E., near Broad Creek Bridge.
- Mt. Zion Holy Church, founded in 1943 in a home near Hearn's Crossroads.
- St. Matthew's First Baptist "at Bacontown."
- St. John's A.M.E. Zion at Ross Point.
- Gray's Church, "south of Record's School near Gray's Branch," no other information provided.

ministers were in agreement, citing alcohol use, gambling, and arrests at so-called "bush meetings."

CAMP MEETINGS AN EVIL

That is Why Negro Preachers Favor a Prohibitive Tax on Them.

SEAFORD, Del., Feb. 25.—A delegation of colored preachers of the Delaware Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church, appeared Tuesday before the Eastern Shore senators and delegates and gave evidence of the demoralizing influences of modern colored camp meetings, which, they said, are conducted more with a view to pecuniary than religious profit.

The Morning News, February 26, 1916. From newspapers.com.

Whether the camp was affected by new legal restrictions or it simply couldn't survive without an active church at the site, its closing marked the end of an era in the community. With its lost cemetery and incomplete history, the wooded site of Old Forge A.M.E. Church in today's state-owned James Branch Nature Preserve continues to be one of the most intriguing locations in Laurel. ■

UPCOMING EVENTS

Save the date!

Annual Meeting · January 26, 2020 · 2:00 p.m. · Abbott's on Broad Creek

All members of the Laurel Historical Society are invited to learn about ongoing projects and upcoming events.

Society Bus Trip · February 28, 2020 · Harriet Tubman Museum

Please see the enclosed mail-in registration form for more information.

Talking Crayons · March 17, 2020 · 4:00 p.m. · Laurel Public Library

Carpenter Community Room. Featuring local children's artwork from the 1930s-1940s, with a panel discussion.

Fundraising Dinner · June 6, 2020 · 5:30 p.m. · St. Philip's

Featuring a presentation of historic photographs by Kendal Jones.

2nd Annual Hoedown · October 2020 · The Hitchens Homestead

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 p.m. We love visitors!

It's time to renew
your membership in the
Laurel Historical Society

2020 membership dues:*

Individual	\$30.00
Family	\$50.00
Business	\$100.00

Please complete the enclosed membership application and mail it with payment to P.O. Box 102, Laurel, DE, 19956. Or, renew or join online:

laureldehistoricalsociety.org

**Lifetime members are renewed automatically, and do not pay dues. Thank you for your faithful support!*

CONNECT WITH US ONLINE



If you have provided us with your email address, keep an eye out for occasional updates from the Laurel Historical Society!

laureldehistoricalsociety.org

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IN MEMORY OF GEORGE COLLINS

March 5, 1930 – December 14, 2019