



Downingtown Area Historical Society *History Notes*

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

October 11, 2018

Volume 1, Issue 19

The Strange Disappearance of Clayton Zinn

On the evening of June 8, 1910, a highly-skilled tinsmith in Downingtown named Clayton Zinn received a summons to repair a stove in a small Italian settlement near the village of Gallagherville, a short distance west on the Lancaster Pike. Zinn had been to the settlement before to do work and was well-known among the men, most of whom were laborers on the railroad or who worked in the local rolling mills. But the 43-year-old Zinn never returned home that night.

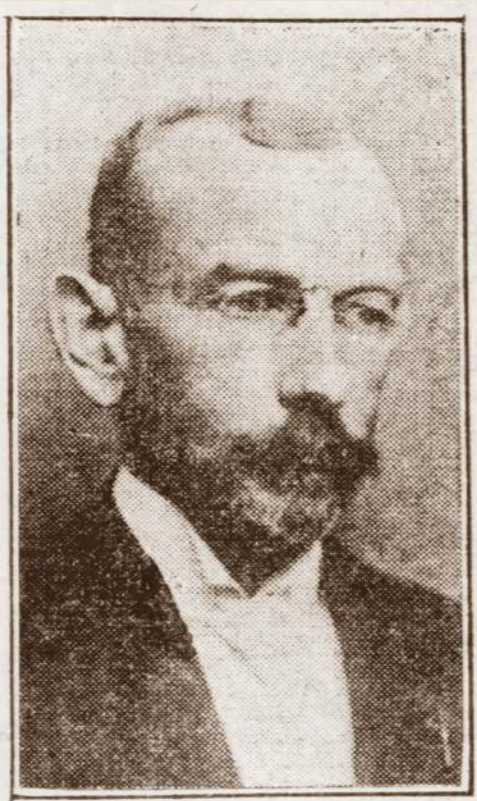
As it grew dark, Zinn's wife Annie became worried. She contacted Zinn's friends, some of whom were with the Alert Fire Company where Zinn was a prominent member, and a search party was organized. Unable to find any trace of the missing man that night, the search was called off until the following morning. When it resumed the next day hundreds of Downingtowners were out looking for Zinn, who by all accounts was a well-liked and well-respected member of the community.

Authorities questioned the man who had his stove repaired and he confirmed Zinn left his home and was heading toward Downingtown at 8:30 PM the previous evening. The man stated he paid Zinn for this and other repair jobs. He also said that Zinn was carrying a dozen eggs that he sold him.

The first clue that foul play was suspected was when Zinn's tools and hat were found in a culvert under the railroad tracks in Gallagherville. Fearing he was murdered and his body dumped, the most logical place to look was in the Pennsylvania Railroad's reservoir just to the south of the tracks. The reservoir was drained but nothing was found. Later that day in woods south of Gallagherville, searchers discovered Zinn's handkerchief and several papers he was carrying when he disappeared.

Some locals thought Zinn was murdered for retribution. At some point before this, Zinn and his son John, who was also his business partner, ran over a young Italian boy. The incident was an accident, and the boy recovered from his injuries, but this nevertheless fueled speculation that there was a revenge plot against Zinn. Some even theorized that the notorious Italian "Black Hand" extortion racket was involved. But this turned out not to be the case. Eventually all leads dissolved.

A week later, on Tuesday, June 14, when the searches had ended and all hope seemed lost, Clayton Zinn walked into his Downingtown home at 101 West Lancaster Avenue. And he had a story to tell!



Several days after his disappearance, this picture of Clayton Zinn appeared in the Philadelphia Inquirer.

According to Zinn, on the night he repaired the stove in the Italian settlement near Gallagherville, he was walking back to Downingtown along Lancaster Pike, having missed the last trolley of the day. He was carrying \$34. As he walked he was approached by two men in a car coming from the direction of Coatesville. The car stopped and one of the men got out and approached Zinn, asking for a match. The driver, who was wearing a straw hat, remained in the car. Zinn dropped his tools and the eggs he was carrying, and as he went through his pockets looking for a match he was hit from behind and lost consciousness. Except for a brief period, over the next six days, he had no recollection of where he was or what he was doing. During the brief period when he regained consciousness, he realized he was in small town but did not recognize the location.

On the Tuesday following the assault, Zinn regained his faculties enough to realize he was in now West Chester. He did not know how he got there, and all the money he had, except for \$1, was gone. He recognized the store of his friend John Furlong, but in his condition decided not to go in. At this point he started walking to Downingtown, still suffering with significant pain from the blow to his head. He headed west along Strasburg Road to Copes Bridge, turned north to Sugars Bridge, then followed the trolley line to Downingtown. In Downingtown by the Miller Paper Company, he climbed up to the railroad tracks, walked west along the tracks to Viaduct Avenue, then down to his home and business at the northwest corner of West Lancaster and Downing Avenues (the same building as Crossroads Bar). During the entire time he was walking, whenever he heard an automobile, Zinn would hide himself until the auto passed, fearful the men who abducted him would return.

He was in terrible condition when he reached home and Dr. Laban Bremerman, whose home and office were only a few doors away, was quickly summoned. Zinn was weak, in much pain, and remained in bed for several days. His return was the talk of Downingtown and his strange disappearance and reappearance was complicated by the fact that even though he was injured and starving when he arrived back home, he was strangely clean-shaven and his clothes were in good condition.

Some didn't believe his story, but were denounced when a local newspaper stated, "it is strange to understand how so many people, heretofore professing friendship for Zinn, should now be so anxious to discredit his story, and harbor evil thoughts in the matter." On the other hand, there was no evidence, especially given his condition, not to believe Zinn's statement. In fact, Zinn's account gained further support when on the night he disappeared, Emmett and Mary Ramsey and their son Henry, as they were returning to their home in Romansville in West Bradford, encountered two strange men in an automobile along the road in West Bradford. One was wearing a straw hat.

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Clayton Zinn was a well-known and well-liked resident of Downingtown. He came to Downingtown from Newville, Pennsylvania about 1901 and established a business as a tin smith. This advertisement was from 1908.

The two men were never found and the excitement of the week eventually died down. The crime was never solved. Life went on for Clayton Zinn. He continued as a tinsmith in Downingtown but stopped for a period when he became a superintendent of the Harbison-Walker brick factory north of town. In 1925, he and his family moved out of the Borough and back to his hometown of Newville in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania where he again took up the tinning business.

The incident in Downingtown wasn't the only time Zinn made local headlines for some misfortune. In 1877 when he was ten years old, he was driving a wagon when a shaft broke. The wagon overturned and the young Zinn nearly had his head crushed by a wheel. In 1928, a torch exploded while he was soldering tin, causing serious burns to his arms. In 1931, he fell unconscious in his garage by carbon monoxide poisoning while working on his car and was rescued by one of his customers who happened to come by at the same time. In 1932, while working on the roof of his shop, he was overcome by heat stroke. But a positive headline emerged in local papers in July 1957 when his 92nd birthday was recognized. Clayton Zinn died the following October.



Clayton Zinn's disappearance made headlines throughout Pennsylvania in June 1910. Unfortunately, many of the headlines and accompanying articles right after his disappearance contained errors about the incident.

Downingtown Area Group Photo



This is the 5th grade class at the old East Ward School during the 1954-55 school year.

In The (Old) News – Items that Made Headlines Back in the Day

1904 – Christmas dinner appeared to be set for dozens Thorndale families following a train accident on December 12th. On that date an eastbound Pennsylvania Railroad freight train stopped at Thorndale to take on water when a train following failed to stop and crashed into it. The caboose of the stopped train was destroyed as well as the second-to-last car which was filled with nearly 2,200 geese, most of which took the opportunity to escape. What followed was a “lively goose chase” by over fifty local residents and a handful of railroad workers. About 200 geese were killed in the crash and another 300 were maimed. The latter were given to the residents by the railroad workers for helping to round up the other 1,700, and some no doubt were cooked up for a tasty Christmas dinner two weeks later.

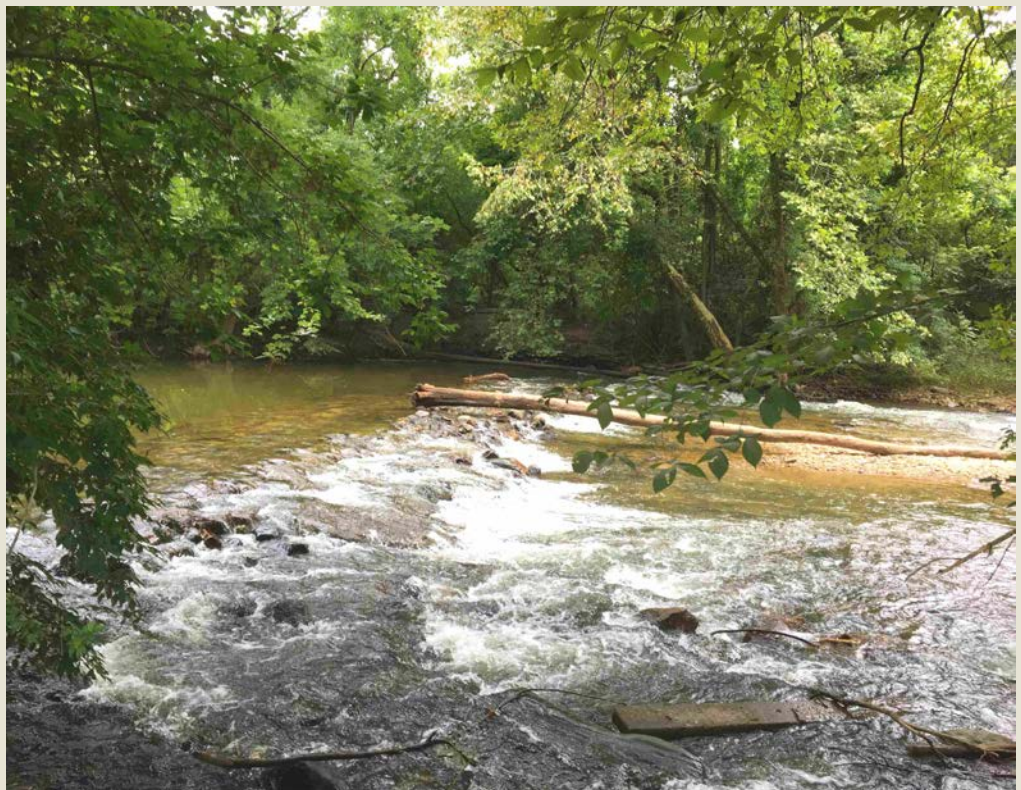


STEEL KING'S MOTHER
TRIES TO HIDE SHAME

1907 – Adaline Corey, the mother of William Corey, president of U.S. Steel, moved to the former farm of President James Buchanan near Thorndale in April “to hide her mortification and shame at the act of her son.” In 1905, her son William divorced his wife in order to marry actress Mabelle Gilman. She sought the obscurity of the farm and preferred to “remain away from her lifelong friends in Pittsburgh.” Adaline became a prominent member of the Thorndale M. E. Church and often entertained the Aid Society in her home. She died in 1916 and is buried in Northwood Cemetery. Mabelle and William divorced in 1923.

Downingtown Did-You-Know?

Did you know that due to significantly rising electric costs in 1980, the Borough of Downingtown seriously considered using hydropower to generate electricity for its sewage treatment plant? The idea was to use an old dam in the Brandywine River at Johnstontown Park (right), and repair it in order to divert water down an unused mill race which once provided water to the Kerr Paper Company. The sewage treatment plant was located adjacent to the mill race at which point a modern water wheel or turbine would have been installed. The project was never done, of course, perhaps due to regulatory hurdles, or perhaps some were concerned about the repaired dam once again impeding the natural flow of the Brandywine.



Downingtown Area Mystery Pic

Can you identify the location in the photograph below? The first person to correctly identify the location of this photo will be recognized as a truly perceptive scholar. Please send your response to: dahs19335@gmail.com.



Downingtown Vintage Ad



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It's hard to imagine that a 13 inch color TV in 1977 cost \$329. That's about \$1,400 today! Romig's was an electronics store located on West Lancaster Avenue in Downingtown.

Last Issue's Mystery Pic

Laura Orsini is truly a perceptive scholar because she was the first to identify the location of the Mystery Pic in the last issue (taken by Jay Byerly in August 2001) as the current location of Main Street at Exton in West Whiteland Township. Main Street at Exton was constructed in 2001-2002 on the former Indian Run Farm and several of the old farm structures, including the stone house below, were saved and incorporated into the development. The building is now home to Maggie Moos Ice Cream seen from a similar angle in a recent image at the bottom.



Advertisements for Non-Profits

Marshallton United Methodist Church

The Marshallton United Methodist Church is hosting a Roast Beef Dinner on Saturday, October 20, 2018. The menu includes Roast Beef, Mushroom & Brown Gravy, Mashed Potatoes, Green Beans, Cole Slaw, Applesauce, Rolls & Butter, Dessert, and Beverage. Hours for the "Eat-in" or "Take-out" option are from 4:30 to 6:30 pm. Ticket prices: If ordered before 10/17/18: \$13/adult and \$5/child (ages 5~12) At the door: \$15/adult and \$5/child (ages 5~12). Please contact the church by phone or email to order your tickets on or before 10/17/2018. The church is located at 1282 West Strasburg Road, West Chester, PA. Contact the church office at (610) 696-5247 or office@marshalltonchurch.org with any questions.

Fall 2018 East Brandywine Historical Commission Speakers Series. All programs are held at 3:30 p.m. at the East Brandywine Township Building

Sunday, October 21st - "John Hershey's Vision" presentation by Dale Hendricks, a self described "itinerant preacher on ecology and trees who tries to communicate new ideas, bring the young folks along, and have a little fun." He is the owner of Green Light Plants in Landenberg.

Sunday, November 18th - "Historic 1700's Pennsylvania Cooking" presentation by Nancy Bialy Daversa who has worked as a historic consultant for movies and television show, and has been called the "Hollywood Herbalist."

Community Luncheon

Central Presbyterian Church, 100 W Uwchlan Ave, Downingtown, holds a monthly Community Luncheon from 11 AM until 1 PM on the first Thursday of each month, October through May. Their popular chili, chicken corn noodle, vegetable beef, and cream of potato soups are sold, along with sandwiches, salad platters, homemade desserts and beverages. For take-out service, call 610-269-1576 and ask for the kitchen. Bring a friend, meet a neighbor, or come alone and enjoy good food and fellowship.

Uwchlan Township Historical Commission

The Uwchlan Township Historical Commission will open the Edith P. Moore schoolhouse on the first Sunday of the month from May to November. The hours are 2pm-4pm. The schoolhouse is located on North Village Avenue in Lionville.

Lyme Disease Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania

The Lyme Disease Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania, an education and support group for patients and caregivers who have been affected by Lyme Disease, meets quarterly on the 3rd Wednesday of January, April, June, and October at 7PM at the Kennett Friends Meeting House on PA Rt 82 (125 W. Sickel St. Kennett Square, PA 19348). Meetings are free and all are welcome. Check www.lymepa.org for directions and programs.

Greater Downingtown Business and Professional Women (BPW)

Meets monthly on the 2nd Wednesday evening, at 6 pm, in the Thorndale Inn for a dinner, networking, program and meeting. All area women are welcome. Most nights there is a program such as a speaker. Call Cindy Markley for your reservation for dinner at 610-363-1404. We meet each month from September to June.

Joseph's People, Downingtown chapter

An ecumenical support mission to help unemployed or underemployed people. The group is entirely conducted by volunteers, and has been at St. Joseph's since 1995. Meets at 7:30 PM on the 2nd & 4th Tuesdays of the month. All are welcome. Visit web page, <http://josephspeople.org/our-chapters/downingtown/>, or just come to a meeting at St. Joseph's Parish Meeting Room behind the school, 460 Manor Ave., Downingtown. Call 610-873-7117. Leave Message. Leader: Cheryl Spaulding, Email: cheryl.spaulding@josephspeople.org.

Clipping Events

Did you know that as part of our archival collection we have about 14,000 cards in our files that contain newspaper clippings? During most months there are two opportunities at the Historical Society to help clip and paste newspaper articles for this collection. The sessions are held at the Ashbridge House, our 309-year-old headquarters, next to the Chick-Fil-A restaurant in the Ashbridge Square Shopping Center on Route 30 in East Caln. The two sessions are usually:

- **The first Sunday of the month, 1:00-4:00 PM**
Next one November 4th @ 1:00 PM
- **The first Tuesday of the month, 6:30-8:00 PM (with pizza!)**
Next one November 6th @ 6:30 PM

Historical Society's Wish List

The Downingtown Area Historical Society is a non-profit organization proudly maintaining the 309-year-old Ashbridge House and a large archives. The society can always use gifts in kind with an immediate need for:

- General household items and office supplies including:
 - Light bulbs
 - Paper towels
 - Large and small trash bags
 - Glue sticks (used for our newspaper clippings)
- Amazon gift cards or gift cards to Home Depot or Lowes. Sometimes we need to make quick purchases so gift cards would come in very handy.

To make a tax-deductible cash donation, use this link
or send a check to the address below. Thank you!



Downingtown Area Historical Society

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610-269-1709

dths1709@gmail.com

www.downingtownareahistoricalsociety.org

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