



Downingtown Area Historical Society *History Notes*

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

May 24, 2018

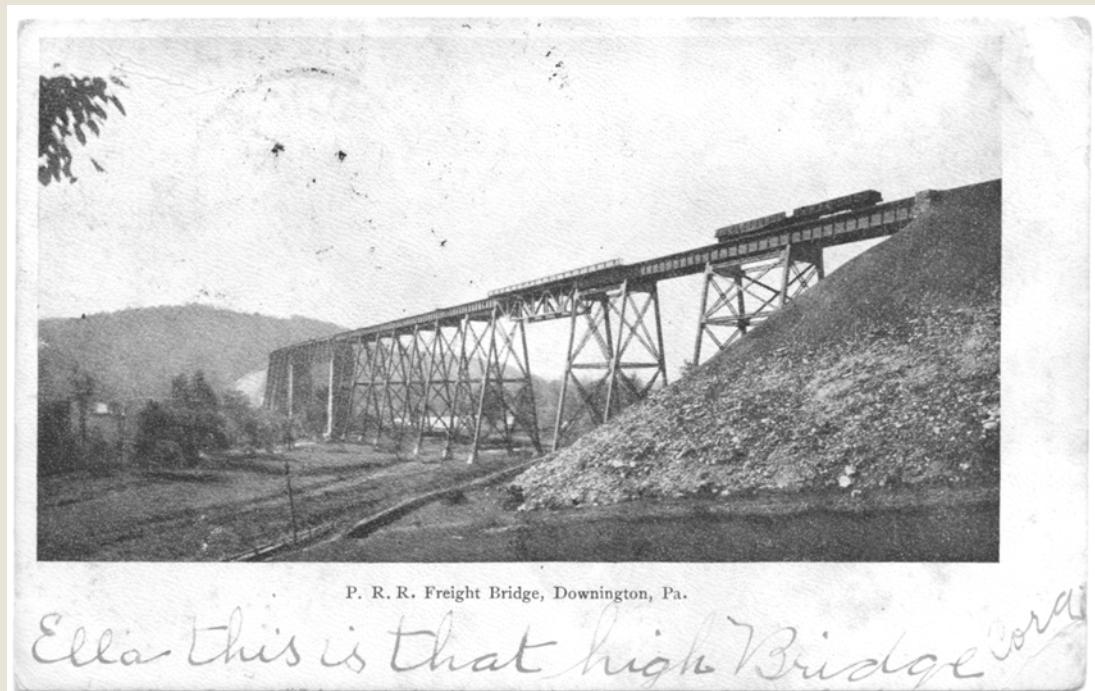
Volume 1, Issue 10

Ten Things You Might Not Know About the Trestle Bridge

You may have driven under the Trestle Bridge south of Downingtown hundreds of times, maybe even thousands. You certainly know it's massive (and it is!), and you know it needs some TLC (and it does!), but here are ten things you might not know about the bridge, especially if you're new to the Downingtown area:

1. We have come to know the structure simply as the "Trestle Bridge", but earlier bridge names included the "Brandywine Valley Viaduct", "Downingtown High Bridge", and the "Pennsylvania Railroad Freight Bridge." It was constructed between 1903 and 1904, but it wasn't until 1906 that the first non-work trains began to operate over the bridge.
2. The bridge is 1,450 feet long and rises 132 feet over the east branch of the Brandywine River. The bridge also has complex geometry. Not only does it descend slightly from east to west, but the bridge was built with a slight curve. When designing it, Pennsylvania Railroad engineers accounted for the centrifugal forces of a train rounding the bridge's curve.

In April 1906 a Downingtown woman named Cora sent a postcard of the bridge to Ella Mae Super in Cynwyd, Pennsylvania stating on the front, "Ella this is that high bridge – Cora." The postcard image was most likely taken in 1905 when work on the bridge was generally complete but not open to regular freight traffic. Laborers at the time were still working on the deep cuts through the hills on either side of the bridge.



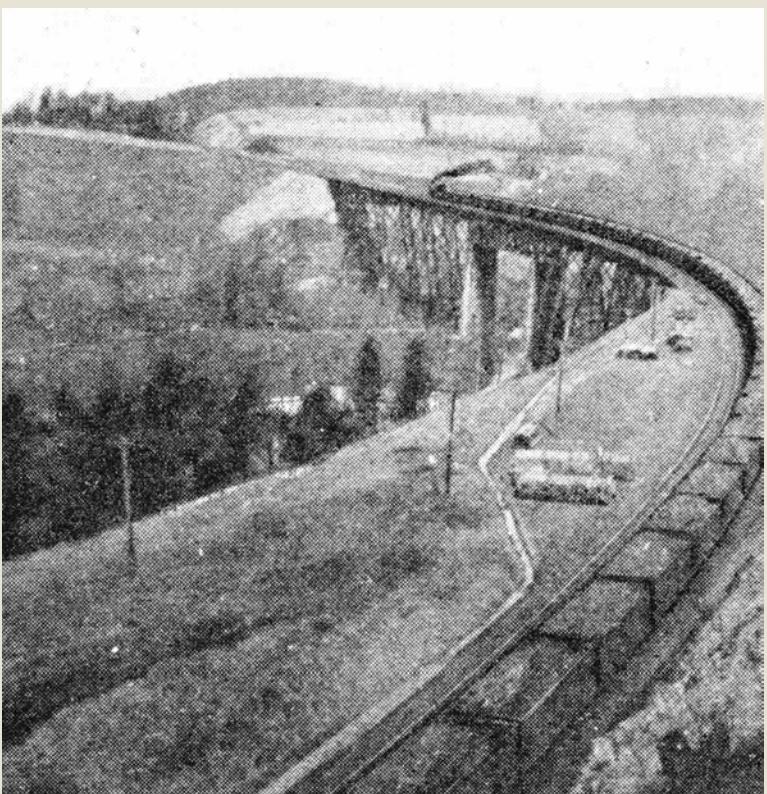
3. When first constructed, the Trestle Bridge was an open deck bridge with railroad ties installed directly on top of steel stringers, as seen in the bottom photograph on page 3. In the late 1940s, the tracks were re-laid on stone ballast over a wooden deck that was specially treated with a fireproof chemical.

- The bridge is made up of 24 individual spans. The longest span is 204 feet and is supported by the two tallest stone piers (a third stone pier is located near the west end of the bridge). This is the span which is over Route 322 and the Brandywine River. The next longest span is the fifth one from eastern end of the bridge. It is 100 feet long because the old trolley line lay at an angle to it.
- Guards were posted at the bridge during World War II. About five years ago, a Hist-O-Gram article noted that Jimmy and Joe Mascherino of Downingtown's West Ward remembered that their father, Dominic "Daddy" Mascherino, along with Attilio "Barrelhouse" Sciaretta were two of the volunteer guards posted in a shack at the west end of the bridge that one of the brothers described as a "hillbilly outhouse."

This ca. 1910 image was taken from the roof of the West Ward School on Lancaster Avenue in Downingtown. It faces south and shows the Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line in the foreground and the trestle bridge of the Railroad's low-grade freight line in the background. An eastbound train can be seen on the trestle bridge from the tell-tale smoke of a steam locomotive.



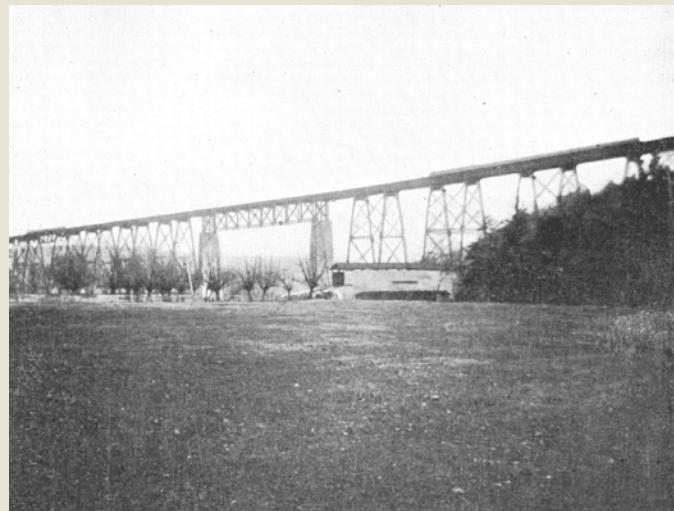
- A playful boy almost caused the death of a man on the bridge. A Downingtown boy manning a switch on the bridge on March 10, 1905 thought it would be fun to lasso the locomotive of a passing work train. He tied one end of a rope to a beam on the bridge and when the train went by he cast the rope. Instead of catching the locomotive, the noose caught the arm of the train's fireman. He was dragged from the cab, and could have fallen to his death, but fortunately the rope broke.
- Italian workers discovered what they thought was a large deposit of titanium when they were excavating the west approach to the bridge during the summer of 1904. A newspaper article mentioned that the men were hoarding the valuable mineral in their cabins and were "dreaming of riches which will far exceed the \$1.50 per day which they are receiving." Experts were sent to the site to make a careful analysis of the find which most likely proved negative.



Seen above is the Trestle Bridge ca. 1910 showing an eastbound coal train.



The bottom of one of the spans is seen here in a current image where two wooden walkways underneath the bridge are visible.



Taken ca. 1907, this image shows the old Kerr covered bridge on the west side of the Trestle Bridge. Before Route 322 was built in the 1930s, travel from the center of Downingtown to the south was made through the Kerr bridge.

8. The bridge was part of the Pennsylvania Railroad's "Low-Grade" line which was an all-freight route built in three distinct sections to relieve congestion on the Main Line. Low-grade doesn't mean the railroad is low to the ground, rather it means the line itself was built very flat which improves railroad operations. Downingtown's trestle bridge is part of the middle section of the low-grade route called the Philadelphia and Thorndale branch which ran between Thorndale and Glen Loch. The other two sections were the Trenton Cutoff (Morrisville, NJ to Glen Loch, PA), and the Atglen and Susquehanna branch (Parkesburg, PA to Cresswell, PA on the Susquehanna River).



If there was a derailment or other operational issues on the Main Line, the Pennsylvania Railroad would often re-route passenger trains across the Trestle Bridge. This image, however, is of a special excursion train in 1936 that operated on the Philadelphia and Thorndale Branch and stopped on the bridge in order to give the passengers a photo op.

9. A plaque was bolted high up on the bridge's western stone pier. It is long-gone but probably noted the years of construction and the names of Pennsylvania Railroad officials. Mason's marks can also be seen on some of the stones of the bridge piers.
10. The bridge was originally double-tracked when constructed in 1903-1904 and electrified in 1938. The Penn Central Railroad removed one track in 1971. We are not sure the exact year when the final train crossed the bridge, but it was some time in the mid-1980s. The single remaining track was removed by Conrail in 1989.

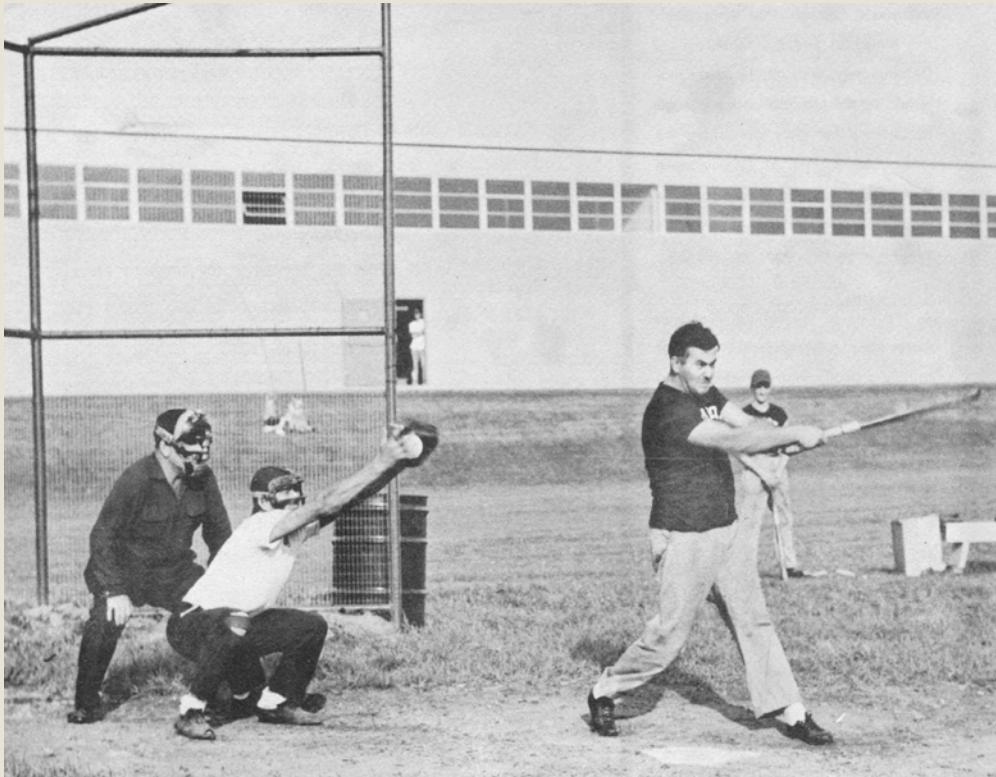
Downingtown Mystery Pic

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. Unfortunately we may get so many responses we aren't able to respond to each one individually. Sorry!



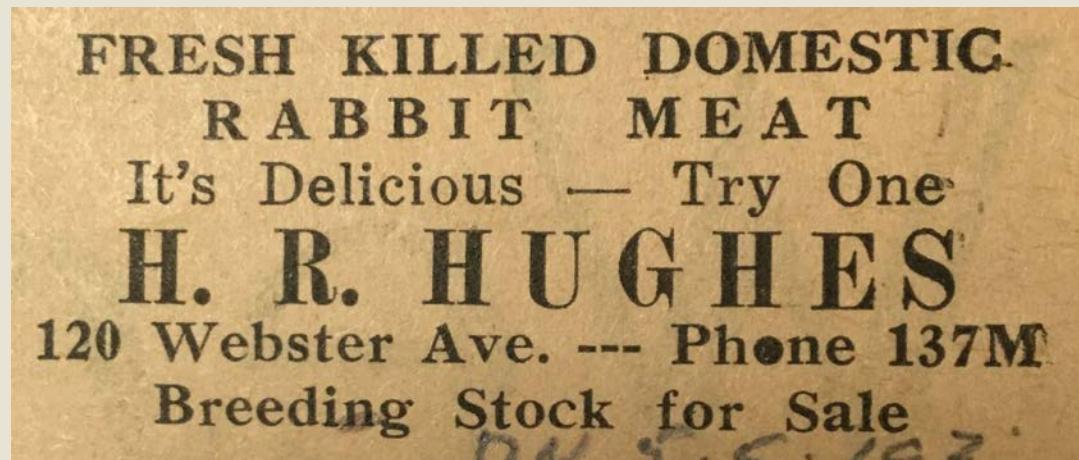
Last Issue's Mystery Pic

Andrew Mascherino is truly a perceptive scholar because he was the first person to identify the location of the photo on the right as the softball field on the west side of the Downingtown Paper Box Company (called Dobox Field) at the corner of Boot Road and Chestnut Street. Johnstone Supply and Coca-Cola are among the businesses now located in the building. **Michael Milano** also guessed the correct location and added that the catcher during this 1958 game was his father Anthony "Sonny" Milano. Games for the Chester Valley Industrial Softball League which included teams from Downingtown Paper Co., Downingtown Paper Box Co., Beloit Eastern, Gindy Manufacturing, and Pepperidge Farm were played here.



Downingtown Vintage Ad

If you had a craving for rabbit you could head over to the home of Herbert Hughes at 120 Webster Avenue. Hughes' full-time job was as a salesman, but supplemented his income by selling rabbit meat as seen in this 1930 advertisement.



Downingtown Date Stone

The Downingtown Opera House on Brandywine Avenue opened in 1903. It later became the Roosevelt Theater. It is now home to several businesses. In a future issue of *History Notes* we will be focusing on this historic Downingtown structure.

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

1880 – On the night of June 24th, “nocturnal marauders” blew open the safe of the Downingtown Post Office and took \$500 worth of stamps and stamped envelopes. Downingtown was one of a number of “up-country” post offices that were hit in a similar manner since April of that year. A man was eventually arrested after trying to sell stamps at a reduced rate in Philadelphia and Columbia, PA.

1892 – During the early morning hours of January 16th, thieves blew open the safes of both Griffith & Woodward, and Baker & Holland stores in Downingtown. Nothing was taken from the safes of either store but \$300 worth of general merchandise was found to have been stolen during the burglaries.

1915 – Yeggs (safecrackers) tried to blow open the safe of the Downingtown Post office on the night of July 25th. The thieves, however, were scared off before they could light the fuse.

1927 – While the attendant was pumping gas, someone stole \$800 from the safe of John McGowan’s service station on East Lancaster Avenue.

1971 – Thieves broke into Mike’s Bar at 121 East Lancaster Avenue and took a 250 pound safe out the rear door where it was loaded into a vehicle. About \$500 was estimated to have been in the safe at the time.

Advertisements for Non-Profits

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 on the 3rd Wednesday of every month at 7PM at the Kennett Friends Meeting House on PA Rt 82 (125 W. Sickle 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.

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.

Farmers Market

Downingtown Farmer's Market will be located in Kerr Park every Saturday from 9 AM to 1 PM.

Brochure on DARC Classes & Activities

You can gain access to the latest Downingtown Area Recreational Consortium brochure, listing all classes and activities, at: www.darc.info/. For more info, call 610-269-9260, or stop by the DARC office (8:30 AM-4:30 PM, Monday thru Friday), 114 Bell Tavern Road, Downingtown.

Library Newsletter

You can sign up to get the Downingtown Library's newsletter via: <http://downingtownlibrary.us12.list-manage.com>

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 June 3rd @ 1:00 PM
- **The first Tuesday of the month, 6:30-8:00 PM (with pizza!)**
Next one June 5th @ 6:30 PM

Please check future issues of History Notes or our Facebook page for exact time and dates.

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:

- A wide, multi-drawer flat file to store maps, and over-size photographs and prints.
- General household items and office supplies including:
 - Light bulbs
 - Paper towels
 - Large and small trash bags
 - Glue sticks (used for our newspaper clippings)
- 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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www.downingtownareahistoricalsociety.org

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***Now* series on YouTube:**



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