

# Downingtown Area Historical Society *History Notes*

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

October 24, 2019

Volume 2, Issue 20

## Blind Woman ID's Deceased Husband

When Easter 1937 arrived, Susan Reilly and her daughter Mary knew something was wrong. They hadn't heard from Bernard Reilly, or Barney as he was called, who was the estranged husband of Susan and father of Mary. Despite a separation of 17 years, Barney always contacted them each Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. The women lived on a small farm on Gallagherville Road west of Downingtown where they raised pigs. Barney lived in Philadelphia where he rented a room on North Garnet Street. He was retired from the Railway Express Agency.

On March 23, 1937, which was the Tuesday before Easter, the 63-year-old Reilly was walking across Lehigh Avenue near 21st Street in Philadelphia when he was struck by a car. He died that evening at Temple Hospital. Police arrested the driver, 30-year-old Fred Robinson, also of Philadelphia.

Because there was no identification on Reilly's body, no one knew who he was. Several times over the next few days, police and the coroner's office put out a description of the body with the hopes of finding a relative or friend, or at least someone who could identify him. Otherwise he would have been buried anonymously in the city's potter's field. Their repeated attempts finally paid off when Charles Simpson, a former co-worker of Reilly's, identified him. Police were then able to locate Reilly's estranged wife and daughter living near Downingtown. They too needed to make a positive identification. But 58-year-old Susan Reilly was blind.



*The Philadelphia City Morgue as seen in 1929. Photo courtesy of PhillyHistory.org.*

(continued on next page)

The Monday after Easter, Susan and Mary left their farm near Downingtown and took the train to Philadelphia, and then to the city morgue where the body was kept. Mary stayed in another room while attendants led her mother to where the body was lying. The police, coroner, and attendants stood silently as they watched Susan. She stood by the head of the deceased and passed her hands over and over her husband's face, feeling every feature. After a while she stopped and spoke to the small crowd who had watched her delicately touch his mouth, nose, forehead, eyes, and chin. "Yes, it's my husband. Seventeen years ago it was that we parted. But I can't forget the face. It's Barney."

Susan was then led back to the room where her daughter waited. The coroner now asked Mary to come identify the body as well. Though she was young when the family split, Mary was certain it was her father when she saw him. "Yes, I remember him well now. It's Daddy." The body was released to their custody.

Finding Susan and Mary was critical not only for the proper burial of their husband and father, but also because the mother and daughter may have been willed a substantial sum of money. When he died, Reilly left an estate worth \$8,000, a considerable sum at the time, and especially so during these Depression years. This included \$4,200 cash in a savings account with the remainder being a death benefit from a fraternal organization he belonged to. Bernard Reilly was buried at St. Denis Cemetery in Havertown, Delaware County two days after he was identified.

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## Last Issue's Mystery Pic

**Sandra McCabe** is a truly perceptive scholar because she was the first of only two people to identify the home in the image below as 301 Jackson Avenue in Downingtown, which is on the northeast corner of Jackson and Green Street. We believe the house was built in the 1920s. Sandra mentioned that her father, Peter Ippolito, and his nine sisters grew up on Jackson Avenue.



# We Need Display Cabinets!

We have a lot of items in our archives at the Ashbridge House that we would like to display. In order to do so, we are looking to acquire several display cabinets. If you are aware of a source where we can obtain them (hopefully inexpensively!) please email us at [dths1709@gmail.com](mailto:dths1709@gmail.com).



# Ashbridge Artifact

Water bills today are based on usage, but when Downingtown Borough first supplied public water to residents and businesses it was based on the number and type of water outlets. Edge Lewis' water bill from April 1, 1910 to April 1, 1911 for a property he owned on Highland Avenue was \$26, which he paid at Downingtown National Bank on April 28, 1910. The Bank (now DNB First) still handles the Borough's water bill payments.

Since there was no water meter and actual usage was unknown, one rule was that "owners or tenants are not allowed to supply their neighbors with water. For each house so supplied, an additional charge will be made, or the water shut off at the option of the Borough."

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## BOROUGH WATER WORKS

Downingtown, Pa., 4/1 1910

Edge C. Lewis

To The Downingtown Borough, Downingtown, Pa., Dr.

FOR WATER RENT FROM APRIL 1, 1910, to APRIL 1, 1911

PAYABLE AT DOWNINGTOWN NATIONAL BANK

<u>Highland</u> Street Avenue					
<u>1/2</u> Hydrant	@	\$5.00			10
<u>2</u> Bath	@	5.00			10
<u>2</u> Water Closet	@	2.00			4
Pave Wash	@	3.00			
Stationary Wash Stand	@	1.00			
<u>2</u> Heater	@	1.00			2
<i>Bill rendered 4/1-1909</i> <i>" " 2/1-1910</i>					<div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; display: inline-block;">26 00</div> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; display: inline-block;">5 42</div> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; display: inline-block;">1 80</div> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; display: inline-block;">33 22</div>

**APR 28 1910**

Received Payment \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ 1910

**DOWNINGTOWN NAT'L BANK, Treas.**  
**OF THE BOROUGH OF DOWNINGTOWN, PA.** Borough Treasurer

All bills must be paid in advance. The fiscal year commences April 1st. Thirty days thereafter a penalty of ten per cent. will be added on unpaid bills. On the first day of June the supply will be cut off from all premises in arrears. No water will again be introduced to the premises until all arrearages are paid. The supply will also be cut off, and payments forfeited, where the water is being used fraudulently or wasted, or for other purposes than embraced in the annual charges.

## Downingtown Then & Now

Our latest Downingtown Then & Now, which we posted on Facebook and YouTube, compares an image taken in 1978 and one taken recently from the same spot near Brandywine Avenue. The curved tracks on the right are the former Pennsylvania Railroad New Holland Branch, which came off the Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line at this spot. The building in the foreground is the former Reading Railroad's combined passenger and freight station, which was at the end of the Reading's Chester Valley Branch. The Downingtown Paper Company is across the tracks in the old image (it was torn down last year). The "Then & Now" series can be seen on YouTube by clicking here: [Then & Now](#)

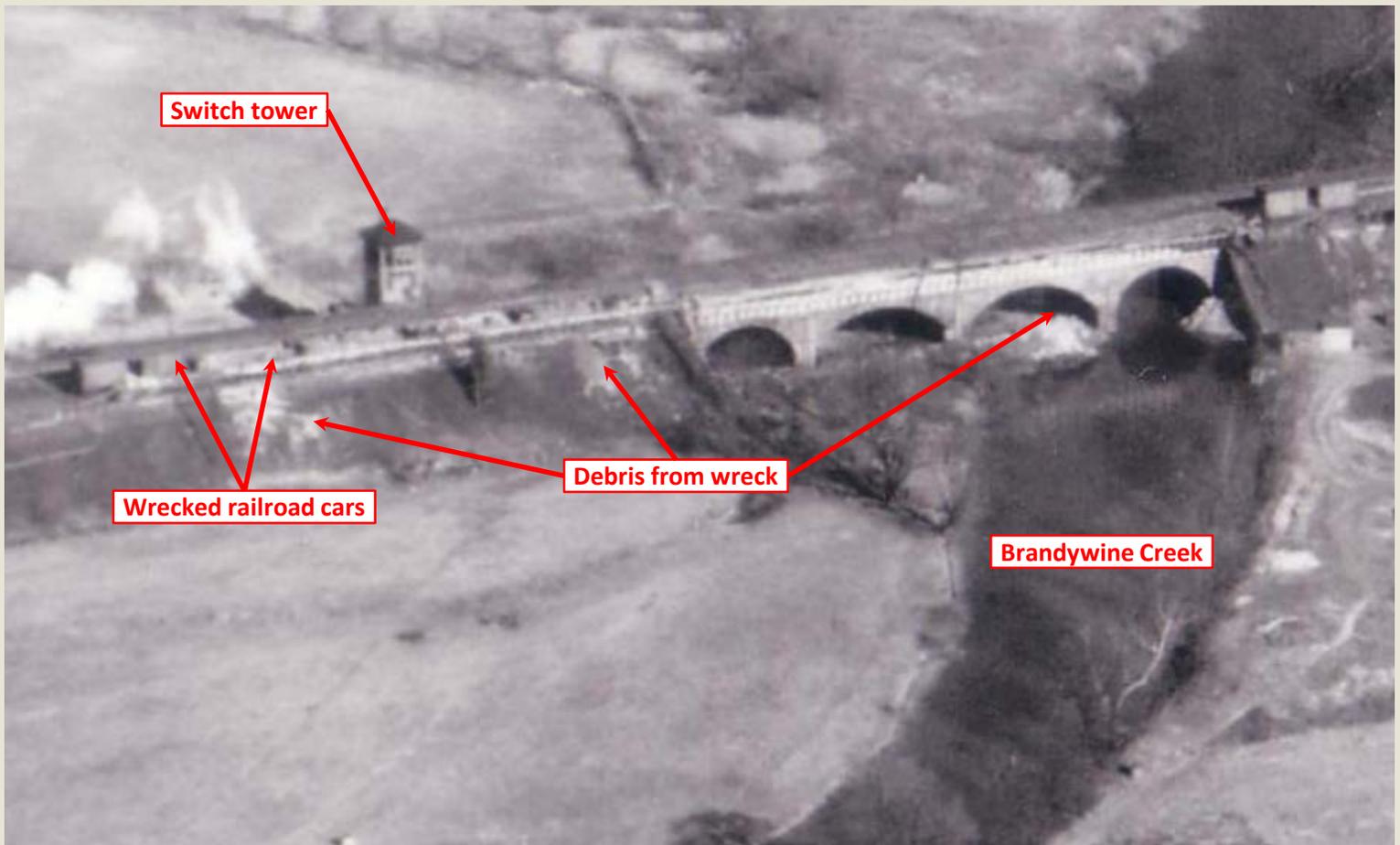


## Caught On Camera

While looking close up at an aerial photograph taken by **Dallin Aerial Surveys** on December 12, 1934 (available for viewing online at the Hagley Museum's website) we noticed what looked like wrecked cars on the railroad tracks by the stone-arch bridge over the Brandywine Creek in Downingtown. Wondering what had happened, it was discovered from newspaper articles that on November 18 of that year, a Pennsylvania Railroad freight train heading east towards Philadelphia derailed at that spot. Thirty-one of the train's 66 cars left the tracks including nine which plunged into the Creek. None of the crew was injured. The wreck blocked all four tracks causing significant delays along this busy line for several days. More than three weeks later, Dallin Aerial Surveys plane flew over Downingtown and snapped the picture as seen on the right.



Zooming in on the photograph (below) shows that more than three weeks after the wreck, some of the railroad cars were still on the tracks. Debris from the cars' contents can be seen along railroad embankment. Sometimes details in a photograph can tell an interesting story!



## Downingtown Area Group Photo

This family photograph was taken in 1958 and shows five generations. The boy in the photograph is Patrick Hurley who is being held by his great-great-grandmother Ella Rhoads of Coatesville. Seated at the left is Patrick's great-grandmother Viola Preston. Standing at the left is Blanche Miller, Patrick's grandmother, and standing on the right is his mother Verna Hurley. When this photograph was taken Ella Rhoads was 72 and had seven living children, 17 grandchildren, 19 great-grandchildren, and two great-great-grandchildren. Viola Preston, Blanche Miller, and Verna Hurley used to live on East Lancaster Avenue in Downingtown. Ella died in 1981 at age 95.



## Downingtown Vintage Ad

Italian Village II opened in early 1965 as seen in this advertisement from the Downingtown Archive. Was there an original an Italian Village I or an *original* Italian Village? Let us know.

*Announcing The Opening Of*

# ITALIAN VILLAGE II

821 West Lancaster Ave.  
**Downingtown**

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Most delicious pizza in town.  
Complete selection of delicates  
sen foods. Imported cheese.

**LUNCHEON MEATS—GOURMET ITEMS**

**HOURS**      Daily: 10 A. M. - 11 p. m.  
                         Sunday: 4 P. M. - 10 P. M.

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**Dial 269-4525**  
**For Carry-Out Orders**

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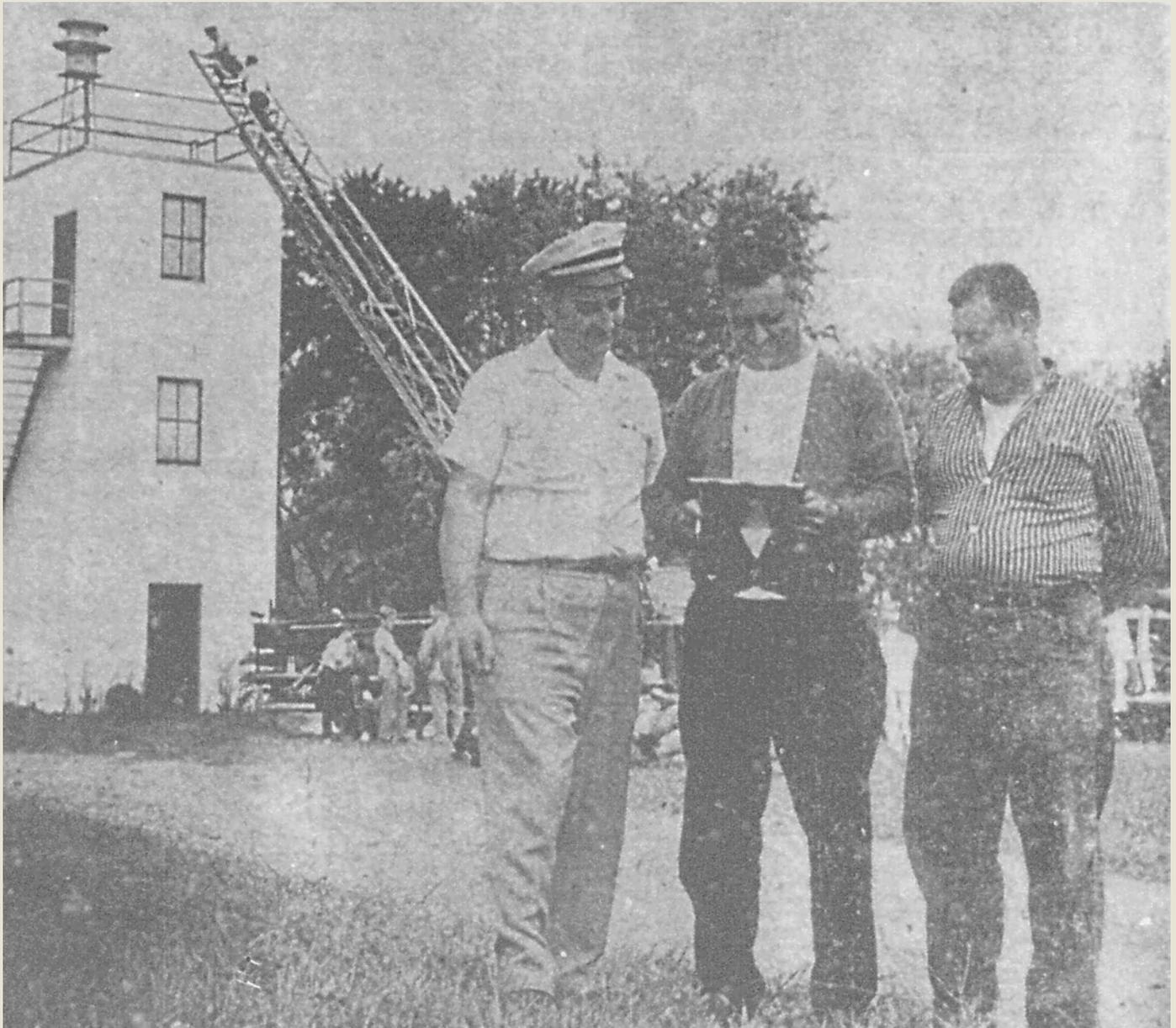
*"You'll Be Glad You Did!"*

# High-Speed Chase Goes Through Downingtown

During the early evening of May 30, 1944, Downingtown Chief of Police Chester Glisson received a call from the Pennsylvania State Police to be on the lookout for a black Packard sedan heading his way. The car had been stolen in Lancaster earlier that day and when Lancaster police spotted it in the late afternoon, the thieves speed off. They headed east on the Lincoln Highway "with a contingent of Lancaster police in full cry." Reaching Coatesville, the Lancaster police dropped out and were replaced with several police cars from Coatesville and the State Police. Chief Glisson joined the chase at Hunt Avenue in Downingtown on his "trusty motorcycle." But it was no match for the Packard, which State Police estimated had blown through the Borough at 90 miles per hour. Down the Main Line the chase went. With burnt bearings and blown tires, the State Police eventually bowed out leaving it up to the "Devon and Main Line sleuths to carry on." But the thieves eventually lost them all. The car was recovered in Phoenixville and was still in great shape, except for a dead battery.

## 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](mailto:dahs19335@gmail.com).



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# Advertisements for Non-Profits

## ***West Caln Historical Society***

The West Caln Historical Society will hold a meeting on Tuesday, November 19, 2019 at 7 P.M. in the West Caln Municipal Building, 721 West Kings Highway, Wagontown, PA on the subject of: **History of Chester County Coroner.** The speaker will be Dr. Christina J. VandePol, MD, County Coroner.

***Fall 2019 East Brandywine Historical Commission Speakers Series.*** All programs are held at 3:30 p.m. at the East Brandywine Township Building

**Sunday, November 17<sup>th</sup>** - "History of the American Flag." The speaker is Michael Rapp. Michael and his wife Jeanne owned Brandywine Flags from 1995"

## ***Uwchlan Township Historical Commission***

The Uwchlan Township Historical Commission will open the Edith P. Moore Schoolhouse (9 North Village Avenue, Lionville) and the John Cadwalader House (21 North Village Avenue, Lionville) on the first Sunday of each month, 2-4pm, April through November.

## ***Central Presbyterian Church Community Luncheon***

Central Presbyterian Church, 100 W Uwchlan Ave, Downingtown, PA 19335, holds a monthly Community Luncheon on the first Thursday of each month, October through May from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Their ever-popular chili, chicken corn noodle, vegetable beef, and cream of potato soups are sold along with sandwiches, salad platters, homemade desserts and beverages. Gluten free options are available. 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.

## ***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, will meet Wednesday, October 16, 2019 at 7PM at the Kennett Friends Meeting House on PA Rt 82 (125 W. Sickle St., Kennett Square, PA 19348). This will be a special support meeting to answer your questions, share your experiences, and meet others who are battling Lyme Disease. Meetings are free and all are welcome. Check [www.lymepa.org](http://www.lymepa.org) for directions.

## ***Chester County Marine Corps League Detachment***

BINGO on the first and third Saturday of every month, 420 Chestnut Street. Public welcome. Kitchen opens at 5:30, Bingo Cards on sale at 6:00, Early Bird Special 6:30. Food is available for purchase. Funds used by the Marine Corps League and Marine Corps League Ladies Auxiliary to help veterans from all branches of the service as well as others in the community.

## ***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](mailto:cheryl.spaulding@josephspeople.org).

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## Historical Society's Wish List

The Downingtown Area Historical Society is a non-profit organization proudly maintaining the 310-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:
  - Pens and pencils
  - Scotch tape and masking tape
  - Copier paper (both color and white)
  - Light bulbs
  - Paper towels
  - Large and small trash bags
- 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!



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### Downingtown Area Historical Society

P.O. Box 9, Downingtown, PA 19335

610-269-1709

[dths1709@gmail.com](mailto:dths1709@gmail.com)

<https://www.downingtownhistory.org>

Like us on Facebook:



Follow us on Twitter:



Check out our *Then & Now* series on YouTube:



### DAHS Board of Directors

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