



Downingtown Area Historical Society *History Notes*

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

April 23, 2020

Volume 3, Issue 8

A Terrible Day on the Railroad

On Friday, December 10, 1920 at about three o'clock in the afternoon, a westbound Pennsylvania Railroad freight train derailed several cars four miles west of Downingtown in West Whiteland Township near Whitford Station. Track gangs and wreck crews were immediately dispatched to the site and by late afternoon most of the wreckage had been cleared. One track gang out of Berwyn, working under the direction of foreman Dallas Slaymaker, remained at the scene until early evening clearing any remaining wreckage and to make repairs to Track 4. On the four-track Main Line, Track 1 is on the south side and is considered the inbound track to Philadelphia, Track 2 and Track 3 are the inside tracks, and Track 4 is on the north side and is considered the outbound track.

Despite the accident, passenger and freight trains continued to pass through the clean-up site all day. At least one eastbound train late that afternoon was being pulled by what was called a "snapper" engine. A snapper engine (or helper) was attached to a train to help pull it on steep grades. In this case, the snapper was attached to the train, probably in Downingtown, to help pull it through the grade out of the Chester Valley. After helping pull the train through the grade, the snapper was detached, and it returned west traveling backward on Track 4.



The Pennsylvania Railroad L1 locomotive was commonly used as a snapper engine on the Main Line. An engine similar to this one could have been involved in the accident near Whitford on December 12, 1920. Photo courtesy of the Pennsylvania Railroad Museum.

(continued on next page)

Slaymaker's track gang was wrapping up their work around 6 o'clock that evening. By this time, it was well past dark, and a fog was settling in. The foreman had been watching for trains most of the afternoon to warn the gangs when one was approaching, but as their work neared completion, Slaymaker assigned this task to one of his men. Shortly after, a westbound train on Track 3 approached the accident site and those who were on Track 3 joined their co-workers on Track 4 to wait for the train to pass. As a result, most of the entire track gang of about 25 men were standing on or just off Track 4.

The noise of the passing train was very great and the smoke from its locomotive enveloped the men as they stood just a few yards away. Along with the darkness and fog that evening, no one heard or saw the snapper engine coming down Track 4 where the men stood.



The exact location of the accident on December 10, 1920 is not known. Early newspaper accounts said the site was between Whitford and Whiteland (now Exton) Stations, but the official coroner's report stated the site was west of Whitford Station. It was also known that Downingtown funeral director Allen Keim could not park his hearse closer than 300 yards from the accident site which might have been Whitford Station. As a result the accident most likely occurred in the area circled above.

They never had a chance. The snapper engine plowed into the track gang killing seven men and injuring half a dozen more, four of them seriously. One of the fatalities was the man assigned by Slaymaker to warn of oncoming trains. He too never saw the second train coming.

Word of the accident was immediately sent to Downingtown, and Deputy Coroner Wilbur C. Johnson responded to the ghastly scene. Bodies and body parts lay strewn along the tracks. A special train was brought in to bring the injured men to Bryn Mawr Hospital. Downingtown funeral director Allen Keim was called to the scene, but he couldn't get his hearse to within 300 yards of the accident site. Keim ended up making two trips to his morgue in Downingtown where the bodies were held to await the decision of a coroner's jury, after which they would be released to their families.

(continued on next page)

The following day Johnson empaneled a coroner's jury of six prominent Downingtown residents to investigate the accident. At the hearing, no less than nine men who were at the scene of the accident the previous day testified, including foreman Dallas Slaymaker and the crew of the snapper engine. Francis Slaymaker, who was the son of Dallas and was working on his father's section gang when the accident occurred but was not injured, also testified.

The hearing took several hours, and the accounts of the men were the same. Owing to the dark and foggy conditions, and with another train passing by them at the same time, no one heard or saw the train that killed and injured the men. At the conclusion of the hearing it was determined that no one should be held responsible – it was simply tragic accident. The official statement of the jury's verdict was the following: "The men were killed accidentally while in the employ of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company on the tracks thereof, west of Whitford Station, Chester County, Pa by being run over by an engine of said company proceeding backward." Wilbur Johnson included this statement on all seven death certificates he signed.

The victims ranged in age from 19 to 50 and all but one were married. Four of the men lived in Malvern, three of whom were neighbors of each other. One each lived Downingtown, Morstein and Paradise.

Victims of the tragic accident on the Pennsylvania Railroad near Whitford Station at 6:00 PM, December 10, 1920

Bartholomew Purcell

from Malvern, age 19, single,
buried at St. Agnes Cemetery in West Chester

Harry Rapp

from Paradise, age 23, married,
buried at St. John's United Methodist Church in Paradise

Oliver Colburn

from Malvern, age 29, married,
buried at Malvern Baptist Church Cemetery in Malvern

Charles Cooper

from Malvern, age 35, married,
buried at Grove Cemetery in West Whiteland

Nicolo DiDonato

from Downingtown, age 35, married,
buried at St. Cecelia Cemetery in Coatesville

Frank Landers

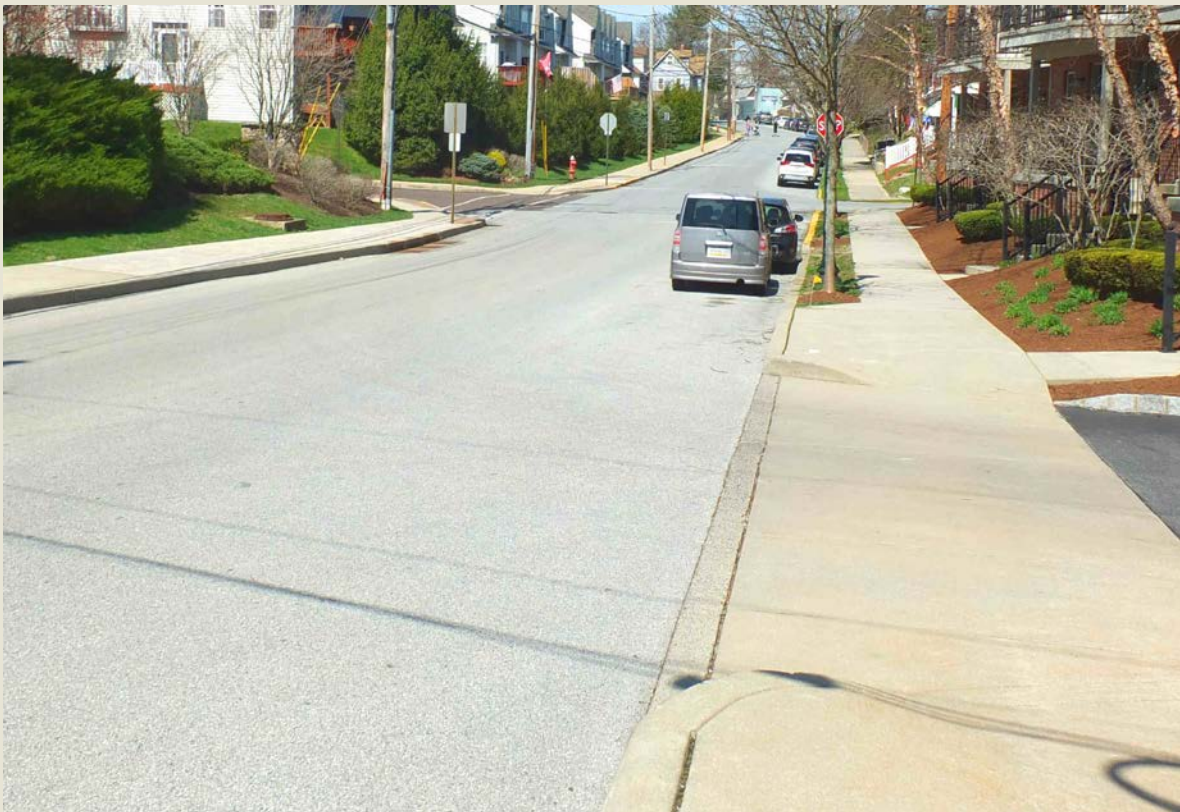
from Morstein in West Whiteland Township, age 38, married,
buried at St. Joseph Cemetery, Downingtown

Henry Taylor

from Malvern, age 50, married,
buried at Pocomoke City, Maryland

Downingtown Then & Now

The images below were taken from the same location on Green Street just south of Jefferson Avenue in Downingtown. The top image was taken on June 12, 1968 after a severe rainstorm came through the area. This section of Green Street often flooded after heavy rains. On the left are offices for Beloit Eastern (formerly Downingtown Manufacturing Company) which made machinery for the paper making industry. The former industrial site is now Main Street Village and the parking lot on the right is now Green Street Mews.



Family Crime Spree Ends in Downingtown

Downingtown Chief of Police Chester Glisson was on routine patrol in the east end of Downingtown the night of August 28, 1931 when he spotted a dilapidated car pull up behind the garage of B. F. Leaman and Sons at 520 East Lancaster Avenue. Glisson stopped his car and watched as three individuals got out and began siphoning gasoline from the vehicles parked on the Leaman property. Glisson nabbed the trio and brought them to the police station inside Borough Hall. Arrested were Chester Sagner, age 38; his stepson Arthur Hall, age 19; and son Edgar Sagner, age 14. At the time they were living in Bradford Hills near Downingtown.

At the station the three confessed to a long series of burglaries including stealing the car they drove to Downingtown. Chester Sagner purchased the car from a dealer in West Chester but claiming to be broke and desperately needing it to get to his job, he was able to win the sympathies of the dealer who allowed him to take the car without a down payment. He never returned to make any payments. Gas for the vehicle was obtained by siphoning gasoline from parked vehicles. When the car needed two tires, the three went to a farm near West Chester, jacked up a car, and stole the tires. Groceries for the family (which included nine in total) were taken from parked cars in and around West Chester. A number of other petty crimes were confessed to Glisson while the three were under interrogation.

As a minor, Sagner's son Edgar was released that night, but Sagner himself and his stepson Arthur Hall were held for trial. Unfortunately, we do not have any information on the results of the trial, but it might be the first time a Chester arrested a Chester for crimes in Chester County.

Remember the MAC Machine?

A new automated teller machine service called MAC (or Money Access Center) began on September 10, 1979 at more than 60 locations in southeastern Pennsylvania, including at two financial institutions in Downingtown – Brandywine Savings and Loan Association and Downingtown Savings and Loan Association. The Brandywine Savings and Loan building is seen below at the corner of Manor and Pennsylvania Avenue with the MAC machine partially obscured by a tree.



"I meet MAC before the morning rush."

Meet MAC for your money.

Now no matter where you are, you'll never be far from your money. Just meet MAC, the 24-hour Money Access Center. MAC is everywhere: in the center of town, out in the country, on campus, wherever there are people on the move who need a convenient way to get to their cash. Fast. Why are there so many MAC machines? Because MAC serves over a dozen financial institutions. It's an "everywhere" idea. And everybody can take advantage of it. Apply for your card now. And start meeting MAC for your money.

If you have an account at any one of the financial institutions listed below, apply there for your MAC card. If not, apply wherever you see MAC.

- Bank of Pennsylvania
- Brandywine Savings & Loan Assoc.
- Downingtown Savings & Loan Assoc.
- East Chester Savings Assoc.
- Fidelity Bank
- First National Bank of Philadelphia
- First National Bank of West Chester
- Germantown Savings Bank
- Home Unity Savings & Loan
- Independence Savings Assoc.
- The Philadelphia National Bank
- PPS - Providence Savings Assoc.

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

1908 – Howard Simmons, who owned the store at the corner of Bradford Avenue and Church Street in Downingtown was visiting Lenape Park with a friend the evening of August 13 when a man stole his horse and buggy. Without any way to get back to Downingtown that evening, the pair were obliged to go to West Chester where they stayed the night with friends. The horse and buggy were seen heading toward Wilmington.

1931 – During the night of August 28, John McNerney's roadside refreshment stand along the Lincoln Highway near Whitford was burgled while an employee named Jackson and McNerney's guard dog "Lady" slept. The thieves, who needed to make several trips in and out of the building, made off with cigars, cigarettes, meats, cheeses, cakes, the stand's dishes, and even a heavy slot machine without awaking either Jackson or Lady .

1956 – In November, the Downingtown Library made an appeal in the newspaper for the return of nearly 150 books that were missing. Some books had been out for two years. The Library's Board of Directors waived the overdue fee of two cents per day provided the books were returned by December 15. Nearly 40 books were returned by that date but about 100 were still missing.

1979 – At its June 20 meeting Downingtown Borough Council members got an earful from Highland Avenue residents complaining about train riders parking on their street. A lack of dedicated lots near the station along with an upsurge in commuters taking the train due to the recent gas crises were causing parking problems not only along Highland but elsewhere in Downingtown's West Ward.

Downingtown Area Group Photo

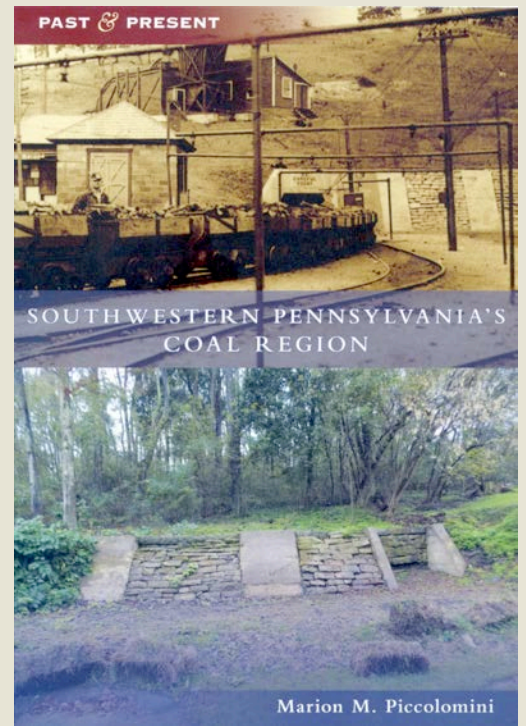
Seen below are players from Downingtown that took part in Chester County's Team Tennis competition during the summer of 1979. From left to right: Coach Millie Dunleavy, Marc Warnick, Jane Gerlach, Lisa Warnick, Andy Lefko, Ken Burkey, Chris Lefko, Cindy Dunleavy, and Sean Anderson. The photo appeared in the August 9, 1979 issue of the *East Branch Citizen*.



New Book by Local Author

Local author and Downingtown Area Historical Society Board Member Marion Piccolomini recently completed a new book called *Southwestern Pennsylvania's Coal Region*. Southwestern Pennsylvania has a strong history in the coal, coke and steel industries that helped shape the region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As the industries grew, existing communities expanded, and new towns were built by mining companies. The available jobs attracted people from around the United States and the world, creating a melting pot of different cultures, ethnicities and beliefs. The book is designed around past and present-day images to bring to life the story of the region through time. It can be purchased on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

This is Marion's second book. Her first book is called [World War II and Chester County, Pennsylvania](#).



Downingtown Area From Above

The photo below was taken by former Borough Manager Don Greenleaf in 1967 of the Boot Road area in Downingtown and East Caln Township.



Last Issue's Mystery Pic

Tom Lee is a truly perceptive scholar because he was the first person to identify the location below as a home on the north side of East Lancaster Avenue across from Woodbine Road. A number of readers thought this was the Ashbridge House which is the home of the Historical Society, but the Ashbridge House is located about 200 yards to the east. This home, along with the Ashbridge House and several others along the road were tenant houses on the former Ashbridge Farm. This photograph was taken in June 2000. The home was torn down soon after to make way for the entrance to the new Ashbridge Square shopping center. The bottom image taken recently shows where the home was located.



Downingtown Vintage Ad

Tad's Pet Shops was one of dozens of small stores in the Downingtown Farmers Market that was located where Home Depot is now. The ad came from the *East Branch Citizen* in 1979.

**Back-to-School
specials**

Gold Fish	only 10¢
10 gallon Black Aquarium	5. ⁹⁹
Power Motor Filter	14. ⁹⁹

FREE Regular hamster with purchase of any hamster cage

Coming in September! Puppies & Kittens

We've remodeled, and have fuller stock, low prices & more variety than ever before

For your convenience:
Tues. 12-6
Wed. 10-8
Thurs. 10-8
Fri. 10-10:30
Sat. 10-10:30
Sun. 10-6
Mon. Closed

Attention all teachers & science departments—
We give professional discounts. Tell us your special needs. (Some items pending seasonal & order availability.)



TAD's pet shops inc.

Store #21 Downingtown Farmers Mkt 269-2710

Downingtown Area Mystery Pic

Can you identify the exact location in this photograph (and the event too)? 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.



Advertisements for Non-Profits

Due to COVID-19 most, if not all, events that the Historical Society has posted for non-profits have been cancelled. When you reopen or when your event has been rescheduled please email the information to the Historical Society at dths1709@gmail.com to have your advertisement re-posted.

Historical Society's Wish List

The Downingtown Area Historical Society is a non-profit organization proudly maintaining the 311-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 tools including:
 - Spade shovel
 - 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!



Downingtown Area Historical Society

P.O. Box 9, Downingtown, PA 19335

610-269-1709

dths1709@gmail.com

<https://www.downingtownhistory.org>

Like us on Facebook:



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



DAHS Board of Directors

President: Jim Sundman

Vice President: Phil Dague

Recording Secretary: Marion Piccolomini

Treasurer: Lauren Fagan

Directors: Mike Dunn, Robin Ashby, Jordan Staub,
Virginia Coates

Presidents Emeritus: Roger Grigson, Parry Desmond