



# Downingtown Area Historical Society *History Notes*

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

February 27, 2020

Volume 3, Issue 4


## Circus Gets Stranded in Downingtown

Philadelphia-based John O'Brien's Circus was traveling all throughout eastern Pennsylvania during the summer of 1886, stopping in large cities and small towns with over 50 performers and dozens of trained animals. The animals, including a dozen elephants, were said to be "the most interesting feature of the show." After early July performances in Philadelphia, the circus headed west to Harrisburg where its tent was set up on the grounds of the State Capitol.

After Harrisburg, O'Brien's Circus traveled to New Holland where its tent was set up in a low-lying field on the outskirts of town. But around July 10, a severe storm flooded the field. Water was a foot deep inside the tent which resulted not only in canceled shows but in damaged equipment. The next stop was Honey Brook where the circus, in order to make up for lost revenues from its bad luck in New Holland, increased its admittance fee to 50 cents. But there were very few takers. "The people of that section did not appear to feel willing to hand in many of their half dollars when the show had been given at other places for ten cents," one newspaper wrote. The price was eventually lowered to 25 cents, "but few availed themselves of the opportunity of seeing the show."

The next scheduled stop was Downingtown where the circus performed on Thursday, July 15. But because of the losses in New Holland and the debacle in pricing at Honey Brook, John O'Brien couldn't pay the transport bill due to the Pennsylvania Railroad. The Railroad refused to carry the circus to Christiana, its next scheduled stop after Downingtown.

**FOURTH OF JULY AT THE CIRCUS.**



**John O'Brien's Big Circus**

REMOVED UP TOWN TO  
SUSQUEHANNA AVENUE, NEAR BROAD.  
FOR ONE WEEK ONLY.  
POSITIVELY THE LAST WEEK  
IN THIS CITY.  
THREE PERFORMANCES TO-MORROW,  
Viz: 10 A. M., 2 and 8 P. M.  
Two entertainments each day balance of the week.  
Ladies and children are particularly requested to attend  
the morning show, in order to avoid the immense crowds  
afternoon and night.  
ONLY TEN CENTS ADMISSION TO ALL.  
CHOICE RESERVED SEATS 25 CENTS EXTRA.  
Remember, this is positively the last opportunity of  
seeing this mammoth show at ten cents. After leaving  
this city for the regular summer's campaign the price  
will be RAISED TO 50 CENTS ADMISSION. Children  
half-price.

MILLE MILLIE TOURNAIRE,  
The Beautiful Female Athlete and Aerial Trapeze Gym-  
nast, will make her first appearance to-morrow and con-  
tinue the balance of the week. Also  
MR. GEORGE AUSTIN,  
The World's Greatest High-Wire Performer, will make  
his initiatory bow to a Philadelphia audience. Many new  
faces and acts just added. The  
TWELVE PERFORMING ELEPHANTS,  
Including the War Elephants "Empress," "Chief" and  
"Queen;" the White Baby Buffalo, the Castilian Dog  
Circus and a complete.  
FIRST-CLASS CIRCUS COMPANY  
Will still continue to attract admiring thousands at the  
new up-town location,  
SUSQUEHANNA AVENUE, NEAR BROAD.

*This advertisement for "John O'Brien's Big Circus"  
appeared in the Philadelphia Inquirer in 1886.*

(continued on next page)

To make matters worse for O'Brien, the cornet band that traveled with the circus took legal action against him when they were not paid. According to their contract, the band was supposed to be paid daily but felt O'Brien was "trying to trick them out of their wages." The leader of the band went to Squire Johnson in Downingtown and entered a complaint against O'Brien and an affidavit was made and filed and an attachment was issued. An attachment is a legal process where the creditor, in this case the cornet band, designates a piece of property owned by the debtor (John O'Brien's Circus) that must be given to the creditor, or sold and the proceeds given to the creditor.

The affidavit issued by Johnson was given to Downingtown's Constable Jones who placed an attachment on the circus's pole wagon. The pole wagon was a large, heavy vehicle (in this case six tons) that carried the long poles and other parts for the circus tents. Without the pole wagon the circus couldn't operate, but its "selection was made for the purpose of bringing Mr. O'Brien to terms, as it was about the only thing management could not have spared from the fat woman down to the baby elephant." With the pole wagon's seizure O'Brien was quick to negotiate with the cornet band. After a lot of back and forth, a compromise was reached, and the pole wagon released by Jones.



*An attachment was issued on the O'Brien Circus' pole wagon by Downingtown's Squire Johnson for withholding wages from its cornet band. O'Brien's wagon probably looked similar to the one seen here.*

O'Brien, however, was still unable to pay the Pennsylvania Railroad for transport costs so his circus remained stuck in Downingtown. Eventually a compromise was reached, and the railroad moved the equipment to Philadelphia where it could be stored in a better location. Due to his finances, O'Brien canceled the circus' itinerary for the remainder of the summer of 1886. At several towns word of the cancellation was never received. The circus was scheduled to appear in Millersburg, Pennsylvania in late August but one newspaper wrote "no circus here...the town is full of people but no elephants to see."

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

**1875** – According to the March 20 issue of the Daily Local News, "A lady resident of Downingtown, has taken the widow and widower census of that borough, and reports the number as being 41 widows and 9 widowers."

**1906** – In late April, it was reported that a snow drift was seen close to the trolley line by Sugars Bridge when snow in all other areas had melted long ago. The drift was said to be shaded by several large cedar trees. It was called the "coldest nook in the state."

**1979** – In June, East Caln Township supervisors reviewed preliminary plans submitted by Tabas Enterprises for a 12-story addition to the Tabas Hotel, which was then under construction on Business Route 30. The sketch plan showed a 100-foot addition which far exceeded the Township's 65-foot building height limit. The 168 proposed rooms would be in addition to the 191 rooms in the original part of the hotel. If you're new to the Downingtown area, the Ashbridge Manor Senior Living building is the former Tabas Hotel.



## Baseball Game Divides Marshallton

Up to 1886, the village of Marshallton in West Bradford Township was described as a village that “slept peacefully beneath the downy folds of the white-winged angels of peace.” Its inhabitants “were contented, happy and glad, dwelling in brotherly affection, and the right hand of fellowship was extended and shaken whenever its law-abiding citizens met.”

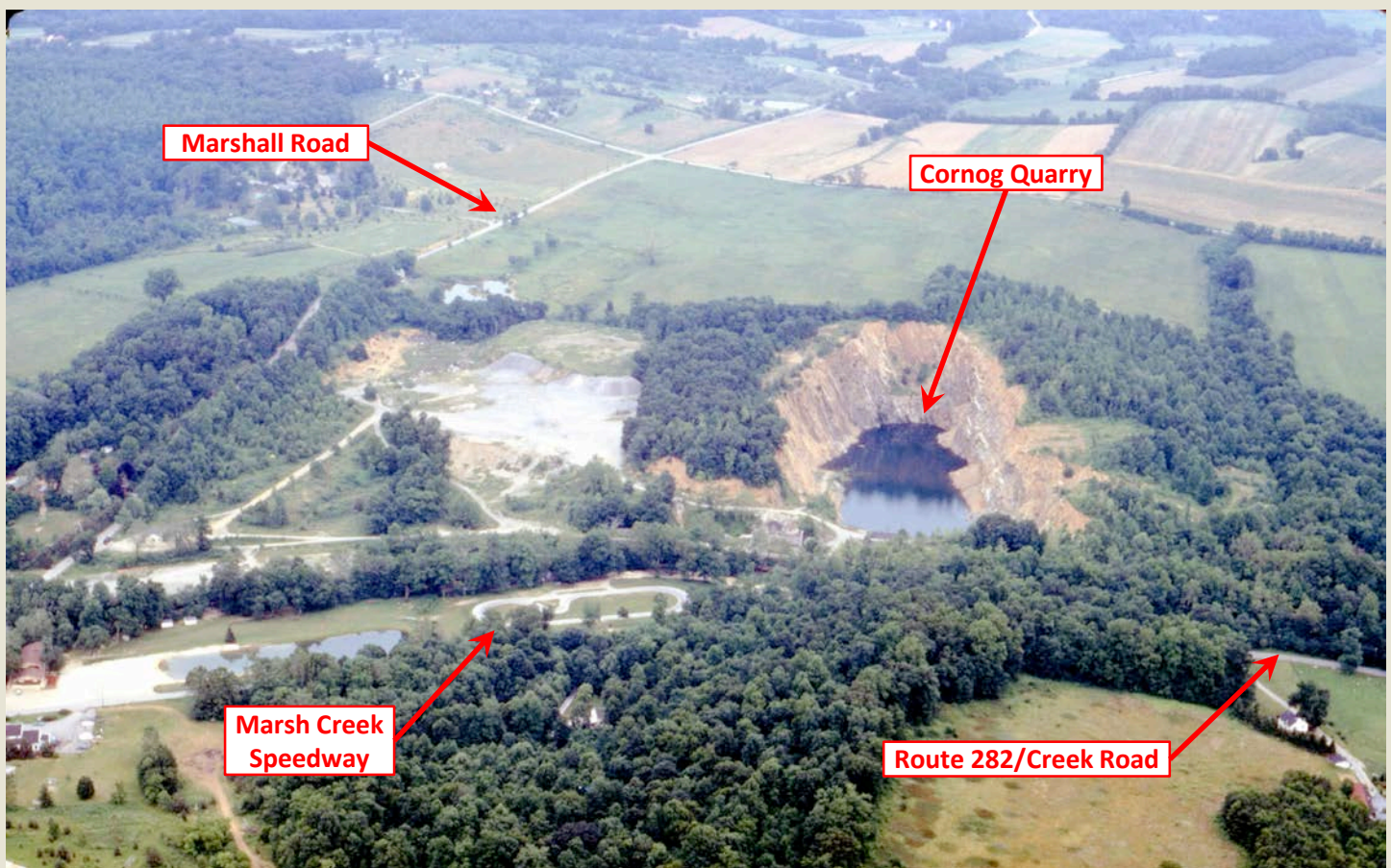
But that changed following a baseball game played in the village in May of that year. Two baseball clubs, one from the east end and one from the west end of Marshallton, met on a field in the village and the resulting game ended in a bad loss for the east end team. The citizens took sides in the matter and the village “was in an uproar all day.” The dissension was so bad it was said that girls with boyfriends in the other end “refuse now to see the former objects of their love, and vice versa.” Even the dogs of the village were said to have taken sides and “find cause for action when they meet.”

A rematch between the two teams was going to be scheduled for later that spring or early in the summer. It was expected that extra police would be on hand during that game “to prevent what might otherwise follow – a civil war.”



## Downingtown Area From Above

The photo below was taken in 1970 and shows a portion of southeast Wallace Township.





## Downingtown Area Group Photo

The photograph below shows a group of Pepperidge Farm employees who were presented with perfect attendance awards at a party at the plant in June 1965. The employees pictured (L to R) are:

Front row: Frank Saello, Kay Wentz, Mary Ippolito, Rita Collela, Harry Nestorik

Second row: Melvin Leisey, Serge Oliel (plant manager), Howard Fitzgerald

Third row: Melvin Leisey, Helen Dague, Fred Reutter

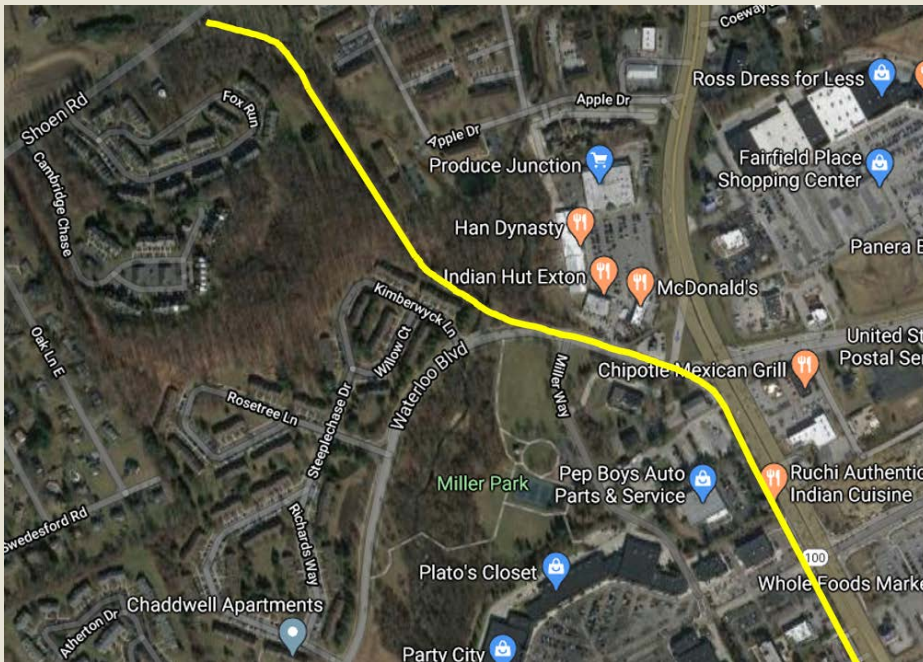
Top Row: Leon Wolfe, Jules Carpenter, William Mendenhall





## Downingtown Did-You-Know?

Did you know there was a railroad spur line in Exton that ran north along what is now Route 100, turned west, and ended at what is now Shoen Road? The spur line came off the Reading Railroad's Chester Valley Branch as seen on the 1912 map on the right and ran north to the silica mine of the West Whiteland Silica Company. Silica was used in the making of fire bricks. The company was in business from 1879 to 1919. The spur line was probably built around 1900 and was abandoned when the mine closed. Traces of the line can still be seen between Shoen Road and Waterloo Boulevard. We drew a yellow line where the spur line ran on a current Google Map image (below).



## Do-You-Have?

We are looking for a desk about 44 inches to 50 inches wide that would fit between sets of filing cabinets in our new file room at the Ashbridge House. We do not want any drawers as part of the desk. Ideally it would be a desktop with four legs...pretty simple. If you have anything like that and wouldn't mind parting with it, please let us know. You can email us at [dths1709@gmail.com](mailto:dths1709@gmail.com). Thank you!





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## Last Issue's Mystery Pic

No one identified the location of last issue's Mystery Pic. It was taken in 2001 by Jay Byerly on the former Foote Mineral property in Exton. The site was later developed into Main Street at Exton. The old barn now houses Elevations Cabinetry and Millwork.





## Downingtown Vintage Ad

The advertisement below for **Frank's Folly Campground** appeared in the June 28, 1979 issue of the *East Branch Citizen*. Frank was Frank Sinex who owned the Lyndell Country Store in the village of Lyndell along Creek Road (Route 282) in East Brandywine Township. In 1962, he purchased 11 acres of swampland north of the store along the Brandywine Creek. According to his daughter Carol Sinex Schmidt, when Frank went to Downingtown National Bank for a loan, bank president Jay Lammey told him he was crazy to buy swampland. But Frank drained the swamp, built the campground, and turned it into a very successful businesses. It is now the Brandywine Creek Campground.

The ad on the right appeared in the same issue of the *East Branch Citizen*. We wonder if Frank's signs were ever returned.

# MISSING

Two  
Frank's Folly  
Campground  
Directional  
Signs

Valued At  
**\$100.<sup>00</sup> Each**  
Please Return To  
Campground.

**Thanks, Frank**

# NO GAS?

Then Camp At

**FRANK'S  
FOLLY  
CAMPGROUND**

Our Rate Is Only \$4.00/Tent Site

**FLEA MARKET**

July 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th

Rt. 282

Lyndell

942-9287



## Downingtown Then & Now

The Lloyd family is seen in the before image relaxing on the terrace of their home on Valley Brook Farm in Caln Township sometime in the 1940s. The current image was taken from the same location during the summer of 2018. The family are L to R: Margaret Lloyd (1885-1959), William Lloyd (1882-1970), Lucy Ruth Lloyd (1920-1969), and Peggy Lloyd (1913-1971). It would be great to see the home restored and people once again sitting on this terrace. As of this writing it is still unclear what will happen to the property.





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## Downingtown Area Mystery Pic

Can you identify the location in this photograph? 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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## East Brandywine Historic Commission Program

**Sunday, March 15, 3:30 p.m. -  
"Aren't You Hot in Those Clothes?"**

Have you ever seen women and men at reenactments and historic sites dressed up in clothing of another time period and wondered just how they were tolerating the heat of a summer day in that getup? This lighthearted presentation will explain the whys and wherefores of clothing worn during the 1700s.



Elizabeth Bertheaud is the Historic Site Administrator for Ephrata Cloister, 632 West Main Street in Ephrata. Started in 1732 the community's unique lifestyle allowed the creation of incredible architecture, original music, significant publications, and remarkable art.

Programs are held at the East Brandywine Township Building on Route 322 in Guthriesville.



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# Advertisements for Non-Profits

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

The West Caln Historical Society will hold a meeting on Tuesday, March 17, 2020 at 7 P.M. in the West Caln Municipal Building, 721 West Kings Highway, Wagontown, PA on the subject of: **History of Mt. Airy Lavender Farm in Wagontown.** The speaker will be JoAnne Voelcker, farmer and co-owner. Meetings are free and open to the public. If you would choose to join, the yearly dues are only \$10.00 for individual or family.

## ***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 on the following dates in 2020: January 15, April 15, June 17, and October 21. Meetings are at the Kennett Friends Meeting House on PA Rt 82 (125 W. Sickie St., Kennett Square, PA 19348). 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 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!



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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:



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



### DAHS Board of Directors

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