

BROADSIDE

Spring 1992

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PORT MERCER

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Early American Canal History

Port Mercer, a small hamlet on the northwestern corner of West Windsor is a product of the transportation revolution which transformed the United States into an industrial power. As one of the last intact nineteenth century canal towns, Port Mercer stills looks much as it did when barges laden with coal, household and industrial goods traveled the Delaware and Raritan Canal.

How did this port develop in central New Jersey? The answer can be found in both American history and the D&R Canal.

As far back as the 1600s, some 50 years before the Schencks and Kovenhovens first settled in West Windsor, William Penn proposed a canal across the narrow waist of central New Jersey. Penn recognized the need to improve transportation linking the major population centers of the Dutch and English colonies, New York and Philadelphia.

As the New World developed, Indian trails evolved into roads. Communities like Penns Neck, Edinburg and Dutch Neck grew along the thoroughfares. During the Revolutionary War difficulties in moving supplies and troops forced recognition of the poor transportation system.



PORT MERCER IN c1900 (LEFT TO RIGHT): BARN/WAREHOUSE, C. H. MATHER GENERAL STORE, TWO-CHIMNEY HOUSE, INN AND PART OF BRIDGETENDER'S PORCH.

A Brief History of Port Mercer (cont.)

By 1804 President Thomas Jefferson called for a program of internal improvements to open up transportation into the territories of the Louisiana Purchase. The existing road system was just too undependable. A new way to transport people and goods had to be developed.

When the British blockaded the Atlantic coast during the War of 1812, support grew stronger for an inland waterway. Canals could reduce the young country's vulnerability to external forces such as bad weather and blockades which threatened its survival.

Even without war, a trip by ship from Philadelphia to New York (200 miles) required several weeks. Travelers considered this passage so hazardous, they referred to the Jersey coast as "The Graveyard of the Atlantic."

The Convention for Improvements of Internal New Jersey convened in 1827 to resolve the problems delaying construction of a canal system. After four attempts and 26 years, Robert F. Stockton and his father-in-law, John Potter, successfully overcame political objections to financing a canal connecting the Delaware and Raritan rivers. The objections ranged from Pennsylvania's balking at diverting water from the Delaware to provide water for a canal in New Jersey, to northern New Jersey business interests protecting their investment in the Morris Canal and railroad interests fearful of competition.

In 1830, with a budget of \$1.5 million, the Canal Company engaged Canvas White, the preeminent canal engineer, to construct 66 miles of waterway providing the final link which connected Lake Champlain in Canada with the James River in Virginia. This mammoth project was the interstate of its time and propelled the young nation into the industrial age.

Construction of the canal required four years, additional millions of dollars and thousands of lives.

But in spite of all the difficulties, the canal opened in 1834. Business leaders, townspeople and politi-

cians celebrated this momentous event along the canal from Bordentown to New Brunswick. Now, the trip from Philadelphia to New York took two days instead of two weeks. Passengers opted to travel in luxury on the smooth gliding barges instead of the bumpy stagecoaches.

However, consumer preference for the passenger barges was brief. A new force had arrived, the railroad. Built parallel to the canal were the tracks of the Camden & Amboy railroad. Along the canal, one bank contained the tow path for the barge-pulling mules, on the opposite bank, railroad tracks for the trains. Passengers opted for the speedier trains.



FORMER INN/HOME OF CHARLES H. MATHER, PORT MERCER GENERAL STORE OWNER. IT STILL STANDS, BUT PORCHLESS, ON QUAKER BRIDGE RD., ACROSS FROM THE BRIDGE-TENDER'S HOUSE.

The Hamlet of Port Mercer

It is in this environment that Port Mercer sprang to life. The community evolved where Quaker Bridge Road crosses the canal. The first structure in the new community was the bridge. The bridge required an operator or tender, who pushed the bridge open to allow the barges to pass. The bridge was a swing type which opened like a door and when open, paralleled the canal bank. The second structure, also constructed with the canal and owned by the canal company, was the bridge tender's house. Bridge tenders lived rent free as compensation for their duties in lieu of wages.

The bridge tender also served a communications function for passing traffic. Messages were passed by a long pole from passing barge captains to be

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relayed by the tender to other vessels. The bridge tender was a person of great responsibility, controlling both traffic and communications. As canal traffic increased so did the need for supplies, food and entertainment for those who traveled and worked on the canal.

By 1840 Alfred Applegate opened a general store in Port Mercer, which he closed eight years later. In 1850 John A. Crater reopened the store and constructed a home which was later expanded and converted to an inn or tavern by Samuel Smith. Mr. Smith in turn leased the property to William West. Mr. West apparently recognized a good thing when he saw it. He had previously conducted business up the road in Clarksville on Route One. When he saw the traffic pick up down the hill on the canal, he moved.

The inn catered to the bustling canal and rail traffic. Another canal feature, the turning basin used to turn the barges around, prompted construction of storage facilities, since it is really a parking lot for barges to load and unload their goods. Evan Cook and Jordan Allen ran a coal yard behind the general store. A barn-like warehouse sheltered material and provided loading platforms for the railroad and local community to store and retrieve goods. Charles Gillingham manufactured lime.

It was probably Mr. Crater's steam-powered saw mill which provided the lumber for these structures. The mill operated for about twelve years before it burned in approximately 1860.

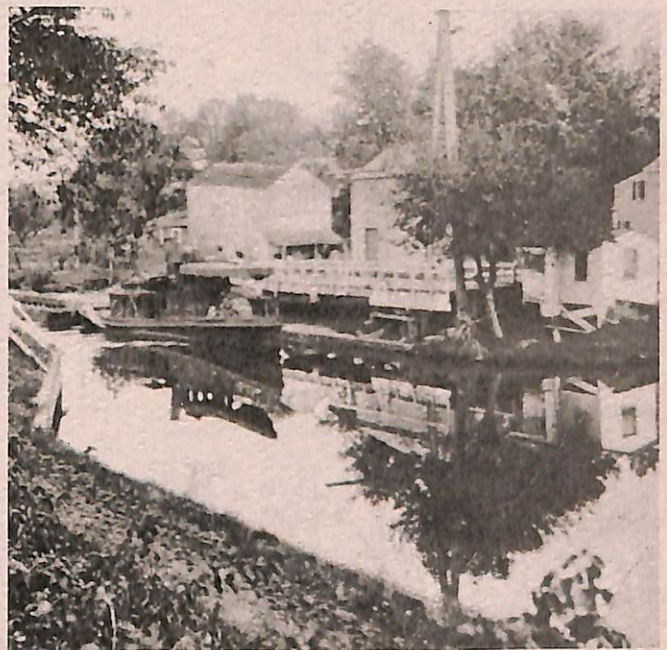
It was during this period that Port Mercer developed. The hamlet consisted of: an inn, store with post office, bridge, bridge tender's house, saw mill, turning basin, derricks, warehouse, loading station, lime kiln, mule sheds, ballfield, race track, as well as one two-family and three single family houses.

With 1400 barges traveling the canal and 3 million tons of cargo, prosperity had come to Port Mercer. Perhaps as a result of his dominant presence in the community, Mr. Crater served on the West Windsor Township Committee starting in 1848 and became Justice of the Peace in 1850.

By the mid 1860s trains traveled faster than the curving rails along the canal could safely allow. The rail line was moved after considerable debate to its present location and resulted in the development of the village of Princeton Junction/Berrien City.

The canal had business hours and was open 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday. The operating hours dictated when barges could pass through locks and bridge crossings. With over 200 barges passing through every day, Port Mercer became a favorite stopover for food, drink, rest and recreation.

Attempts to capitalize on the heavy traffic included a well-timed delay in opening the swing bridge. This slow opening of the bridge might entangle the mules' tow lines and inadvertently pull the mules into the canal. Fortunately, local boys would be nearby and rescue the mules from drowning and receive a reward for saving the mule.



PORT MERCER SHOWING: BARN/WAREHOUSE, GENERAL STORE, SIDE OF INN. NOTE SWING BRIDGE IS OPEN TO LET TUGBOAT WITH BARGE PASS THROUGH.

During the happy hour of its day, the inn would offer turtle soup or clam chowder more than adequately salted. Those partaking would then require an additional beer or two to satisfy their thirst. At the same time locals would board the unattended

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barge and frantically unload as much coal as possible before the revellers returned. Others would acquire coal by placing cans or bottles on fences or posts. Passing bargemen might be enticed to practice their throwing skills in knocking down the targets with lumps of coal.

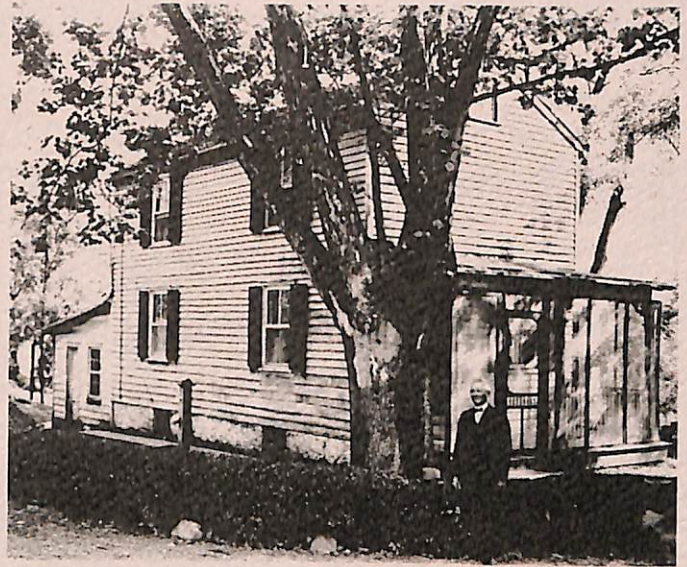
It is known that the inn had a dance hall on the second floor. Persistent rumors still circulate that some of the participants may have included "ladies of the night" imported on weekends from Trenton. Supposedly, this questionable commercial activity was so popular that more than one building in the community was necessary to accommodate the demand.

By the turn of the century, the canal ceased to be profitable for cargo barges. Just as the railroads had captured the passenger traffic sixty years earlier they now carried freight faster and cheaper.

In the early third of this century pleasure boats replaced the commercial barges. The inland waterway and the D&R Canal was still the safest and most pleasant passage for the Vanderbilts, Morgans, Rockefellers and others to transport their yachts to warmer waters for winter. Port Mercer with its bucolic, pastoral setting and congenial general store remained a favorite port. The store continued to serve local farms with kerosene, canned goods, mail, telephone service and a warm cup of cocoa for skaters on the canal during winter.

In 1932 the canal was deeded to the State of New Jersey and has been a major regional source of water since 1944. In 1973, the canal was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Headquarters for The Lawrence Historical Society, the bridge tender's house, a center chimney style canal house, is also listed on the Register as an individual historic structure. The remainder of Port Mercer is part of the canal district listing.

While the homes in the canal district do not have individual designations, the New Jersey Office of Historic Preservation - Historic Sites Inventory states: One home is an example of the other style canal house, the two chimney. Another home is a



TURN OF THE CENTURY PHOTO OF THE BRIDGE-TENDER'S HOUSE, NOW HEADQUARTERS OF THE LAWRENCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

rare example of Greek revival architecture on the canal and recognized as architecturally outstanding. The Greek revival and the former inn are listed as historically significant. The other homes are architecturally notable because their original integrity has not been compromised.

About the only thing that has changed in the hamlet is the 275 year old green ash. The tree was over 60 years old when General Washington passed through and 160 years old when the canal opened. The tree has grown to over fourteen feet in circumference and is registered as the largest of its type in New Jersey.

Port Mercer remains much as it was 140 years ago and represents a significant era of American history, The Era of Canals.

-E. G. Keith, Jr.

Photographs courtesy of: George Arrowsmith, The Princeton Recollector, The Historical Society of Princeton, Champlain to Chesapeake by William J. McKelvey, Jr.

1992 MEETINGS & EVENTS

Regular HSofWW Meetings

January 13
March 9
April 26 - HaCenJer (Jamesburg)
May 11
September 14
November 9

Special Events

May 9 - "Hidden Treasures" Auction at
Zaitz-Schenck House

September 26 - Flea Market/House Tour
at Zaitz-Schenck House

December 13 - Holiday House Tour

We are unbelievably organized this year! Not only do we have our regular meetings scheduled, but our fund-raising events.

Our "Hidden Treasures" Auction will be similar to those formerly held by the Lions Club. Luci and Ed DiPolvere (586-1149) and The Bleachers (799-0344) will coordinate the event.

Anyone having items to donate for the Auction should get in touch with either the DiPolveres or the Bleachers to arrange where and when to drop off your donations.

While you're doing your Spring cleaning, think of the Auction and rid your closets, attic and cellar of all those items you have been meaning to dispose of, and receive a tax-deduction as well.

Last year's Flea Market was so successful that we sponsor plan to hold another this September 26th. Space rental forms will be sent to members with the next newsletter. Crafters will be welcome, as well as non-profit organizations. The Zaitz-Schenck House will be open to tour so you can see what progress has been made on our restoration project.

Sunday, December 13th, has been set for our annual Holiday House Tour at the Castle. It's a busy time of year so jot the date down on your calendar now. We will need Room Guides and lots of cookies.

As soon as the weather warms up, work will resume on the Zaitz-Schenck House. Mary and Warren Schenck are looking for volunteers to help. Please phone them at 799-1278 to offer your services.

PORT MERCER TODAY



TOP LEFT: VIEW OF HAMLET LOOKING TOWARD QUAKER BRIDGE RD. FROM CANAL; TOP RIGHT: EVAN COOK HOUSE. NOTE CHIMNEY WHICH MARKS END WALL OF ORIGINAL HALF-SIZE HOUSE; BOTTOM LEFT: FORMER TWO-FAMILY HOUSE; BOTTOM RIGHT: FORMER INN.

PHOTOS ABOVE COURTESY OF E. G. KEITH, JR.

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