

# BROADSIDE

Fall 2000

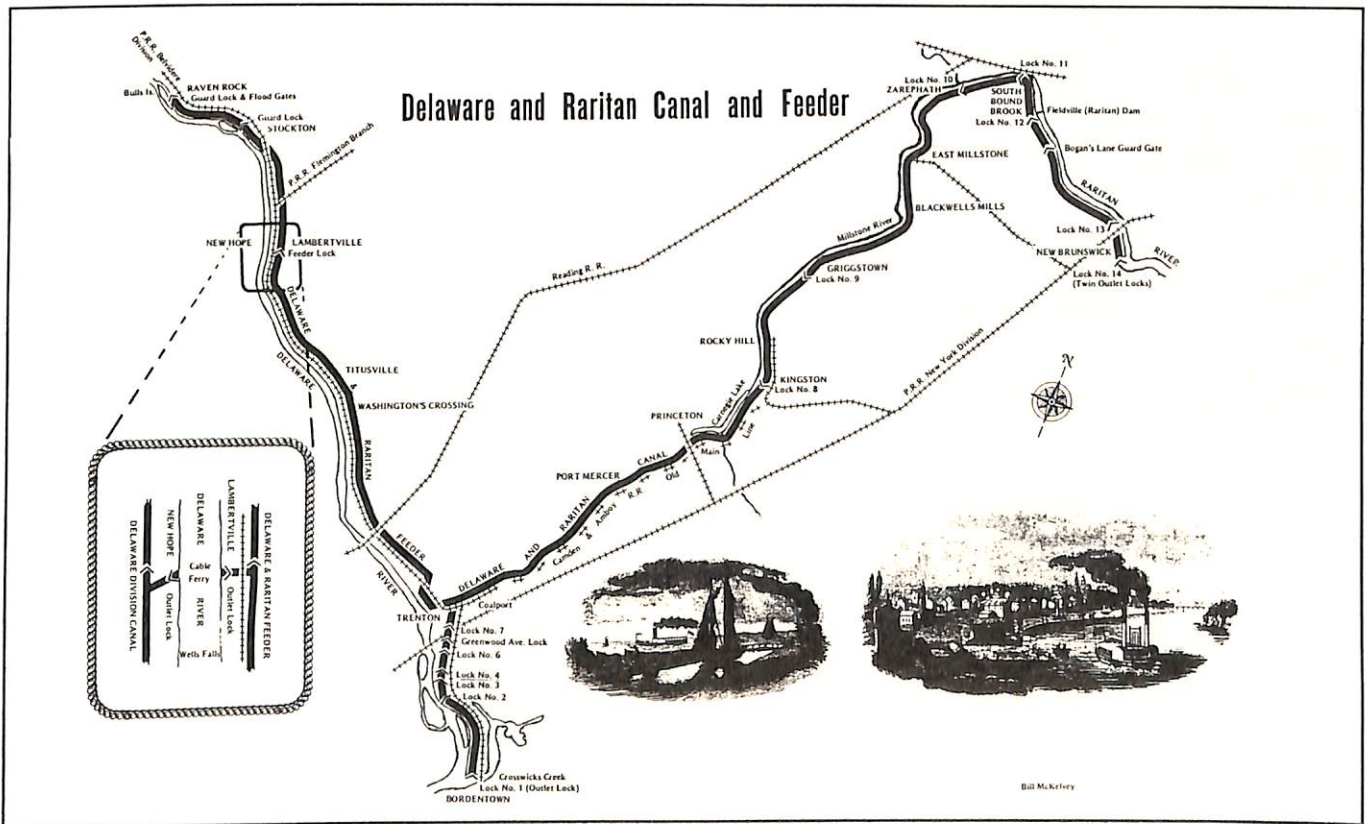
## THE DELAWARE & RARITAN CANAL AND PRINCETON BASIN

### The Delaware & Raritan Canal

From as early as the 1600s, the idea of a canal (or canals) linking New York and Philadelphia had been thought of, planned and abandoned. The need for faster transport for freight and passengers continued to engage the thoughts of various groups. With the opening and success of the Erie Canal, which linked Albany on the Hudson River to Buffalo on Lake Erie in 1825, the possibilities of canal transport along the East Coast came to the fore again.

It wasn't until the late 1820s that a group, led by Robert F. Stockton and his father-in-law, John Potter, applied to the New Jersey State Legislature for permission to build a canal to join the Raritan and Delaware Rivers. At the same time, Robert and John Cox Stevens sought permission to build a railroad (The Camden & Amboy Railroad) in the same area.

In February 1831, having granted each a charter for a year, the Legislature decided to merge them



Map showing Delaware & Raritan Canal courtesy of Capt. Bill. McKelvey, Canal Captain's Press.



into one company, usually called "The Joint Companies," to eliminate competition between the two forms of transportation. Both groups were allowed to sell stock, but profits were to be shared. Naturally, the State of New Jersey was to receive a percentage of the profits as well.

Work on the railroad began in 1830 and they began business in 1833. The canal got a later start and did not open until 1834.

It is difficult for us to imagine the labor, all done by hand, that was required to dig the D&R Canal, a huge ditch 75 feet wide, 7 feet deep and 44 miles long, with a 22-mile feeder canal from the Delaware River at Raven Rock to Trenton, where it joins the main canal. The feeder canal allowed barges easier access to the canal from the river. An additional purpose was to provide water should the level of the canal dip below that required for barge traffic.

Locks raised and lowered the barges and other craft as the level changed during its length. There were two locks on the feeder canal alone. On the main canal, seven locks were needed from the Delaware to Trenton and seven more from Trenton to its end at the Raritan River.

Construction of the canal moved ahead promptly. By the summer of 1833 most of the canal was complete. An outbreak of cholera among the canal workers, mostly Irish immi-

grants, caused a setback. Many of the workers died and were buried in mass, unmarked graves on Bull Island, Ten Mile Run and Griggstown.

Finally, on June 25, 1834, the Governor of New Jersey, Peter D. Vroom and a party of dignitaries sailed the length of the canal amid much celebration. The D&R Canal was now open for business.

The main canal traffic was freight, rather than passengers; coal, from the Mauch Chunk region of Pennsylvania and nearby areas, the major product. (The town of Mauch Chunk is now known as Jim Thorpe, Pa.) There were also other heavy freight products, known as "rough freight." In addition to coal, this included: ashes, pig iron, iron ore, lime, etc. Lighter goods, known as "superior freight," included grain, feed, flour, and manufactured goods. The shipping price was different for each type of product. Rough freight cost 2 cents per ton, per mile; superior, 5 cents per ton per mile.

The canal was open from April to December, Monday through Saturday, 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. A one-way trip the length of the canal took about two days, traveling at the speed limit of 4 miles per hour.

Barges not reaching their destination by 6 p.m. would tie up along the canal, preferably at a basin (wider sections of the canal) until the canal opened the next day. Most of the barge crews would likely head for the nearest canal side village for such amenities as a tavern, a general store and possibly other comforts.

Families called, "canallers," made their homes on their barge during the season. In a room only 6 by 9 ft., with an 8 ft. ceiling, whole families ate and slept. Such living quarters would usually contain a two-lid stove, folding table, side and rear bunks. When the weather was comfortable, the family stayed on deck along with their chickens, who shared the mule's feed. Small children were tethered to keep them from falling into the water.



*Princeton Basin, West Windsor side of the D&R Canal. Photo courtesy of Historical Society of Princeton and D&R Commission.*

Although most canal side villages had a general store, some enterprising barge owners, known as "Sea Peddlers," carried food and other staples on board to supply barge families and crews. Farms near the canal were also glad to sell eggs, milk and fresh produce in season to barge families and crews.

Most barges were drawn by a team of mules. A single team of two mules or a double team of four mules were led by a "mule driver," in many cases the son of the barge family. Later some barges were steam propelled, as were the yachts and other pleasure craft that used the canal to avoid the rougher ocean during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Shave-tail mules, mainly from Montana, were preferred. They arrived in "feral" condition and had to be broken to the tow line. Mule skinnners did the breaking in of the mules for \$5 to \$10 each. A mule lasted about 20 years in towing service, and then was unceremoniously dispatched. Mule teams were usually sure footed, but an occasional team ended in the canal and were rescued, if possible, by the barge crew.

Mules and horses were available from barns at Bordentown, Griggstown and New Brunswick.

Each bridge was controlled by the bridgetender, who lived in a house along the canal. When the barge announced its arrival by horn or whistle, the bridgetender opened or turned the bridge to allow the barge through. Bridgetenders and their families lived rent-free in the canal side house as compensation for their duties, in lieu of wages.

Maintenance of the canal banks was in the hands of "Ratters" and "Path Walkers." Each had 14 miles of canal to maintain. The Path Walkers filled in washouts and plugged holes in the banks, as well as cutting back vegetation and trees to allow the mule teams free passage on the tow path and the heel path on the opposite side of the canal. The "Ratter" had the job of trapping the muskrats that made their nests in the canal banks and undermined them. Each Ratter was allowed to keep the muskrat pelts to sell for 18 cents each. He was also paid wages by the day and received a bounty of 15 cents for each muskrat trapped.



*Lithograph of Steamboat/Railroad Hotel, from the studios of The College Watercolor Group, Ringoes, NJ 1977.*

## Princeton Basin

When the Delaware & Raritan Canal opened for business, small villages and hamlets formed or enlarged along the canal to handle the needs of the barge passengers and their crews. Two such villages were located within West Windsor Township: Port Mercer at Quaker Bridge Road (although it extended across the road into Lawrence Township) and Princeton Basin (on the border with Princeton Township). The history of Port Mercer has been covered by E. Gordon Keith in our Spring 1992 **Broadside**.

The borders of Princeton Basin can be said to be Canal Road and along Alexander Road to the top of the hill on the West Windsor side of the canal and Basin Street/West Street and along Alexander Street to Faculty Road on the Princeton side. (Note: the name changes from Alexander Street to Alexander Road at the Canal.)

There were originally two turning basins in the canal at Alexander Road, where barges could moor overnight and unload their freight. One turning basin still exists on the Canal Road side of the canal; the second, on the south side of the bridge, was filled in.

## The Steamboat/RR Hotel

The anchor building of Princeton Basin once stood at the Alexander Road/Canal Road corner. Known at various times as the Steamboat/Railroad Hotel, it was built between 1839 and 1849. The hotel, shown in the above lithograph, provided overnight accommodations for the barge crews and mule handlers, as well as barge passengers. There were sheds behind the hotel for the mules. Sleeping accommodations were available on some barges, but they were cramped, uncomfortable and lacking in privacy. Prior to the Civil War in the 1860s, the hotel prospered under the management of a Mr. Skillman. John L. Corlies ran the hotel about

1880 and subsequently, Pat Degnan, a Mr. Carrol and John J. O'Kane or Kane.

In 1930s, the hotel building was remodeled as a tavern, but a tavern license was refused. The owner at that time, Alexander Rodweller, then occupied it as a residence. The last owner was Mrs. Della Jenkins, a former school teacher, who was known for walking all the way to the Township offices each quarter year to pay, in cash, her West Windsor Township taxes. By the time Mrs. Jenkins died, the building was in such poor condition, it was unable to be restored. In 1992 the house was demolished and a new house built on the site in 1995.

We have three views of Princeton Basin: One from 1939 when the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) produced "Old Princeton's Neighbors." The second view is excerpted from the report produced in 1982 by the Delaware & Raritan Canal Commission. The third is the 2000 view.

#### **Princeton Basin viewed from the 1930s**

In 1939, Princeton Basin had long passed its heyday. There were 18 modest family residences along Alexander Street, Canal Road and Basin Street at that time. A trucking business and the junk yard of A. Shure were the only remains of commercial activity. (Princeton Waste Company on Basin St. may be the remains of the latter.)

The first commercial enterprise along the canal at Princeton Basin was apparently Scott Berrien's general store although the exact date of its founding is unknown. His store became the gathering place for the townsmen, as well as the bargeman, canal boat tenders, and mule drivers. The building was demolished in the 1930s. Besides the general store, Berrien also dealt in feed, coal, wood, agricultural products and masons' supplies. He owned a hay press located at the top of the hill before the descent to the canal, where a brick house stands today. Berrien also acted as freight collector for the canal company. Freight arriving by barge had to

be weighed to be certain it was the same tonnage as stated on the transport invoice. The fees collected varied by both tonnage and type of freight carried.

In 1860 Berrien's store housed a sash and blind factory run by J. W. Fielder and Sons, as well as the laundry and dyeing establishment of a French emigrant, M. Gerneau, of Princeton.

Berrien apparently kept the hay press business because in 1867 he advertised for good timothy. However, the hay press burned to the ground and the land was sold to the Improvement Association (Messrs. Fielder, Beekman & Co.) who decided in 1888 that they would not rebuild the hay press at the canal. They planned to move their businesses to the railroad by now located at Princeton Junction.

Berrien owned the Reardon Lumber Company at 200 Alexander Road. (Until recently Grover Lumber Company was located at 194 Alexander Road. Perhaps a descendent of the original company.)

Other businesses were located in Princeton Basin: In 1865, J. B. Wycoff had a large warehouse for hay, wood and produce. In 1868 the New Jersey Iron Clad Roofing, Paint and Mastic Company was incorporated by a group of eleven men including John W. Fielder. Fielder also owned the Princeton Lumber and Improvement Company and handled coal, lumber, building materials and fertilizer. Wood and textiles were seasoned and preserved from mold and decay by the Robbin Wood Preserving Company of New Jersey. Between 1837 and 1866, Aaron L. and S. C. Green sold doors, sashes and blinds.

Johnson and McKean offered 56 cents a bushel for potatoes, if produce was taken in exchange, as against 50 cents in cash. A. B. Tomlinson sold lumber and coal. William T. Anderson and Company provided groceries, dry goods and No. 1 Peruvian Guano (manure fertilizer from the islands off the coast of Peru).



*Princeton Basin from "Old Princeton's Neighbors," Federal Writers Project, WPA 1939.*

Billy Lynch's Bottle House was known as a lurid spot even to the hard-living canal workers. Police often had to supervise the activities of the tavern's patrons.

One lone industry held on into the 20th century. This was the extensive bottling plant managed by Martin Vandenberg from 1908 to 1911. Its buildings were later moved to the Princeton Poorhouse, formerly known as the Poor Farm at Mount Lucas, which were subsequently destroyed by fire.

Transportation between the Princeton railroad depot and the Basin was provided by both Joseph Henderson and the Widow Skillman via hackney coaches, four-wheeled carriages pulled by two horses and carrying up to six passengers. Passengers wishing to be "called for" were asked to leave their names on the slates at various locations in Princeton including: M'Ginness' Book Store, the Mansion House, City Hotel, Bergen's Store, P. Henderson's Store, Brown's Shoe Store, Crusier's Hotel and the Post Office.

F.V.D. Voorhees at the Princeton Steam Mills acted as agent for the Franklin Line of Steam Propellers via the D&R Canal for New York and Philadelphia. William and Joseph Holmes ran two freight schooners, the "Parallex" and the "President Jackson" between Princeton Basin and New York in 1885.

However, it was freight, rather than passengers, that built fortunes on the canal via mule-drawn barges. In 1871, its busiest year, the canal handled 1400 barges carrying 3 million tons of cargo. The Trenton Company handled a tremendous freight volume, but shared its success with the Baltimore and Ohio all along the canal.

The Reading Railroad with its own barges and a hundred double teams of mules also handled heavy freight volume. The New Jersey Central, with 400 mule teams, handled the Mauch Chunk-New York coal traffic. They handled so much coal that boats from Mauch Chunk were known as "Chunkers." The Clyde Line ran steamers up from Philadelphia to New York with extra-cargo barges in tow.

At the Basin, Richard S. Conover owned a string of barges needing 300 four-mule teams to keep it moving. Princeton alone supported several large fleets towed by anywhere from 10 to 50 mules. Individual operators with one or two barges dabbled in the continuous stream of traffic that poured through the canal. According to Bill Coan and Daniel Shields, who worked the barges and still alive in the 1930s, traffic was so heavy at times in the 1870s and 1880s that a man might almost have traveled from Kingston to Trenton by jumping from barge to barge. Bill Coan drove mules for Captain Hogarty of the barge "Francis Kelley" and got \$45 a month and "found" (room and board) for his efforts.

The last bridgetender at the Basin was Jean Weitzman, who lived in a house on Alexander Road, across the bridge from the present Basin Park. Other bridge tenders were: someone named Oliver, who went blind as a result of exposure in the blizzard of 1888; "Old John" Coan, father of the Bill Coan mentioned earlier.

There were tragedies along the canal as well. On November 1, 1868, Captain Michael Consedine of a Schuylkill boat was drowned in trying to save his mules that had slipped from the towpath. In 1874, the body of Solomon Krauskopf was found with a pistol ball through his heart. He had been carrying \$170, a watch and chain and revolver, all except \$10 of which were missing. The assassin was never brought to justice.

There was good along with the bad along the canal. A little chapel, the mission of Princeton's Trinity Church, was located near Basin Street in the grassed area along Alexander Street. It was built about 1850 and served as a place of worship and as a school. Princeton resident, Rachel Stevens of the Stevens Institute family, devoted much of her time to the mission's work and the welfare of its people. She was considered the moving spirit of the chapel. James Potter of Princeton established the school. The Stockton family donated the land.

The chapel was a simple frame superstructure on a stone foundation. In 1934 it was taken down in sections and shipped to Camp Nejech (New Jersey Episcopal Choir) on the Metedeconk River in Ocean County. There it was re-assembled and used as a recreation hall and chapel for the choir boys of Episcopal churches. (The building is still in use at the camp in 2000.)

In 1939 there were willows fringing the Basin's waters. It is said they were grown from twigs from the island of St. Helena near Napoleon's grave and brought back to Princeton by William Theodore Van Doren, a graduate of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Cuttings from the trees were also planted on Princeton University campus. It has not been verified if any of these trees have survived.

#### **Princeton Basin viewed from 1982**

In 1982, the Delaware & Raritan Canal Commission had a Historic Structures Survey prepared. The Basin area at this time was in a sorry way.

"When we look at the community of Princeton Basin today (1982), we see two groups of houses separated by the D&R Canal, the Stony Brook, and a couple of hundred yards of mostly flood plain land. A careful examination of the land around and between the clusters of houses will reveal a basin attached to the canal (badly choked with algae and aquatic weeds) and a depressed area where a second basin has been filled, but virtually no sign of the bustling industry that once flourished here.

"Gone are the house and office of the superintendent of the canal, the house and station for the bridgetender, and the Camden and Amboy Railroad tracks, railroad depot and agent's house. Gone too are all signs of the shops, mills and factories that once crowded around the intersection of the canal, the railroad and Alexander Road.

"While this commercial activity was taking place, the Basin became home to several families. The oldest dwellings were probably the Commodore

Stockton building and the M. Vorhees house on the Princeton Township bank of the canal and the Scott Berrien and Ed Ryan house on the West Windsor side of the canal bank . These houses appear on the Anderson Map of 1854 and are standing today (1982).

“In 1932 the Pennsylvania Railroad ceased operation of the canal and one by one the industries left. The factories have all been torn down. Only 11 houses and the hotel remain. (Hotel torn down in 1992.) On the east bank (West Windsor side) five houses remain, only 3 predate the 1950s. The others date from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and reflect the rural vernacular character of the area.”

#### **Princeton Basin in 2000**

Today the Basin has become active in a different way. The establishment of the D&R Canal Park in 1974 turned the area on both sides of the canal

into a place allowing for walking and jogging along its banks and canoeing along its waters.

The landmark hotel was demolished in 1992. Its condition made restoration impossible. Today a modern residence, built in 1995, sits in its place. Including the house on the hotel site, there are only a total of four houses left on Canal Road. The second house along Canal Road has a core portion probably built in the 1850s; the main portion of house dates to around 1900. A small building next to the house was converted in the 1950s into a studio for Rex Gorleigh, the artist. A 20<sup>th</sup> century house comes next, built in the 1950s and owned by the Taylor family. Finally, another house built around 1850. The rest of Canal Street is open land.

Princeton Basin today has peace and quiet and time to remember its more lively days. What better fate could anyone want?

*The Historical Society of West Windsor*  
*P.O. Box 38*  
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FIRST CLASS MAIL



# The Historical Society of West Windsor

P.O. Box 38, Princeton Junction, NJ 08550

## What's Happening at the Historical Society of West Windsor Fall 2000

### The Schenck Farmstead

**Farmhouse** - The new roof has been installed on the house and the smokehouse. Work on the small kitchen is in progress. New cabinets, counters and appliances are being installed in what will be a most useful room during our meetings and events.

The large room (dining room) on the first floor is ready to have its new rug and furniture installed. The room will be set up as both a dining room and a reception/gift shop when the house is open on a regular basis.

**Barn and Outbuildings** - Nothing has been done on the dismantled barn. Work on the new foundation still waits.

**Schoolhouse** - Again, no progress has been reported. We are still seeking school desks of all periods, schoolbooks, old globes, etc. to be used in furnishing the schoolhouse.

**New Members** - We are pleased to welcome: Jeannette Boyer, Pepper deTuro, Mr. and Mrs. Robert McClellan, Gay, Dennis, Rann, Dawn and Tara Huber, Gretchen Fahrenbruch and Kim White.

Word of mouth is the best way to enroll new members. We need your help to tell new neighbors and friends about the Society and to encourage them to join us. Also, it would be helpful if you would tell others about our fund-raisers, such as our Holiday House Tour.

**Milestones** - We must once again report the death of members: **Ruth Kehoe**, who was a Charter Member and who has provided us with many photographs of her family and farm on Rabbit Hill Road. **John Ellsworth**, the original owner of the Princeton Junction liquor store, now known as Ellsworth's. Our sympathy is extended to their families.

**Gifts to the Society** - We were the recipient of \$501.90 which was collected by the Third Grade students at the Village Elementary School as part of a project called "Handful of Help." We are most grateful to all who participated.

**Memberships** - Please check your mailing label to see when you paid your dues last. Your 2001 dues would be appreciated as soon as possible, as well as any overdue membership fees. Also, Seniors over 80 do not have to pay dues. Please let Joan Parry know when you reach that birthday so she can remove you from the dues-paying list. E-Mail - There are times that we need to reach members quickly. If you have e-mail, please send Joan Parry (jsparry@erols.com) your address. We will use the address only in emergencies.

**Broadside** - The Princeton Basin and D&R Canal article could not have been completed without the help of James C. Amon of the D&R Canal Commission. Mr. Amon took the time to read over the copy and made several helpful changes. We also appreciate receiving permission for the D&R Canal map on page 1 from William J. McKelvey, Jr., the author of several books on canals.

**Fund-Raisers** -Our Fall Yard Sale took place Oct. 21<sup>st</sup> and raised some restoration money, as well as giving visitors a chance to see the Schenck House restoration progress. Thanks to all who worked as Tour Guides, Sellers and Cashiers.

**Holiday House Tour**-Our tour will take place Sunday, December 10<sup>th</sup> from 1 to 5 p.m. If you are free to be a Room Guide or to help with the refreshments, please phone Joan Parry, 452-8598. We will also need baked goods to serve during the tour.

**Election** - At our annual election of officers and Board of Trustee members, the following were elected: President-Joan Parry; Vice President & Recording Secretary-Kathy Kapp; Treasurer-Kay Reed; Board of Trustees - Mary Schenck, Clifford Reed, Anneliese Midland, Roberta Smith and Shirlee Bleacher.

**Oral History**-Volunteers are needed to help with this project. We need interviewers and long-time residents to give us the benefit of their memories of Old West Windsor. Interviews are taped and then transcribed for our future use. Kathy Kapp at 890-2068 is in charge of the project.

**Gift Ideas**-Many of the photographs used in Broadside are available for framing. An 8x10 photo costs \$25; 5x7, \$10. Complete sets of our Broadside issues are available in a looseleaf notebook with Table of Contents for \$30, as well as sets of the Village issues only, for \$20 (Dutch Neck, Penns Neck (2), Grover's Mill (2), Edinburg, Princeton Junction (2), Port Mercer and Princeton Basin.)

Keep in mind also our HSofWW tee shirts, notecards and prints of the old Town Hall and covered bridge at Aqueduct. Our gift shop during the Holiday House Tour will offer stocking stuffers, holiday ornaments, dolls, and dollhouse furniture.

**2001 Meeting Dates:** 7:30 p.m. at the Schenck House. January 8, March 5, May 7, September 10 and November 5.