

## Middletown (DE) Historical Society

### **Museum Coordinator's Driving Tour----Northeast quadrant-----by Alison K. Matsen-----2020**

*(This is not meant to be an all-encompassing tour, telling you all the history of this area, but rather a tour of some of the points of interest I find most intriguing, and generally less known. Alison K. Matsen)*

Meet at the 1820's Academy Building, 216 N. Broad St. Head north on N. Broad St. This was the old Upper King's Highway. On a c. 1711 sketch it's called "the road to New Castle".

On your right starting a little after Lockwood Street was the William Brady farm, called "Greenlawn", earlier owned by W.C. Thomas. About where the 4 story office building on your right is now were the historic, grand house and barns for that farm. They were razed in 1985, despite protests by locals who decided then to form the Middletown Historical Society to raise awareness of our rich local history. The Greenlawn farm manager's house, which used to be where the entrance to the shopping center is now, was noted in two books on Delaware architecture. It was moved in 1992 to a property west of Townsend to save it from being razed, and is now on the New Castle County historical listing.

A little before Cedar Lane Road, on the right you'll see a small rectangular monument which says "Jones' Walk" on the bottom. In 1908 the New Century Club was given free gravel to install a walk from their clubhouse on the north side of town to Forest Cemetery. They dedicated it to E. S. Jones, who used the walk often. The stone was legible when I came to Middletown in 1972, but now is eroded by acid rain.

Just before the RR tracks, turn right into Forest Cemetery, then left. The area just north of here has a pretty stream hidden in the trees. It's a branch of Drawyers Creek, which we'll see later north of Odessa. The old log Forest Church, built about 1750 five miles inland from its mother church, in a heavily wooded area, was in the area along the creek and away from N. Broad St., where there is now a grassy corner area bordered by trees. It was called the Middletown or Forest (Presbyterian) Church to distinguish it from Drawyers Presbyterian Church, in the marshes north of Odessa, which it broke off from. The church thrived for decades and some of its most active members were the Noxons, Bouchelles, and Rothwells, but as Methodism became popular at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the membership waned. The old building was sold for scrap wood, and a new brick church was started in Middletown in 1850 on West Main. Lots of old local family names are in this cemetery, including Naudain, Cochran, Armstrong, and Rothwell.

Head north on route 71, going over the RR tracks, first laid in 1855.

On your right (just after Paddy's and two white ranch houses) was a small log house, c. 1790, but covered with more modern siding, razed c. 2010 due to lots of termite damage. This was the Hayes house in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. David Matsen saved several of the solid pieces of dressed logs, and they are now housed in the basement of the Historical Society. Now there's just a lawn.

Head north on route 71. Just before Armstrong's Corners, you'll see the brick Armstrong House, c.1870, on your left. It's being restored by our members Joann Armstrong and Dick Janney. Go under new route 301.

On your left, just before School House Road, is a small grouping of houses. On the 1868 Beers Atlas, there is a grouping of 3 houses here owned by the same S. Brady who owned the Robbs' house to the east. The houses were presumably used for workers on the farm. The white larger one toward the back was originally a schoolhouse for African-American children.

Head north on route 71, to Mt. Pleasant crossroads, and then turn right onto Boyd's Corner Road. Back when this area was almost entirely farms, there were huge grain elevators on this corner, near the RR tracks. They were taken down 15- 20 years ago.

On your left (just after Ratledge Road, and as the road starts to bend to the right) is an old stucco house, c. 1810, owned by the Samuel Rothwell family, with a newer addition.

Jamison corners had a country school on the southeast corner, listed as S.H. #59 as of 1849. This area had lots of peach farms in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

Where Bayberry South is now was the Thomas family farm, later bought by the Maillys, who also had a townhouse in Odessa and who named the farm "White Hall". They sold it to Sereck Shallcross in 1871, adding to a number of Shallcross farms in this area. (All these families went to Old Drawyers Church.)

As you come to the route 13 intersection, the near corner on the left used to have the general country store run by the Boyd family, shown on 1849 and 1868 maps, hence the name Boyd's Corner Road.

Turn right to go south on route 13. As the road narrows from 3 lanes to 2 lanes, get onto the shoulder on the right, and look to your right at the back of a lawn.

This little village of MacDonough (aka The Trap) still has the MacDonough 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century family graveyard, preserved by Brigitta and Cindi Moulson. Go a little farther on Route 13 south, and you can see from the historic marker in front of the 18<sup>th</sup> century brick house that Thomas MacDonough was a famous commodore in a battle on Lake Champlain in the War of 1812. The interior woodwork in this house is beautiful and original. At the historical society, we have several dishes from the 1820's commemorating that victory over the English. It's ironic that the dishes themselves were produced in England, the country we were fighting in the War of 1812!

On the west side of the road, there's a small, square, white wooden building, (note the small central chimney) which used to be a one-room schoolhouse, #62 in 1849.

Continuing south, on your right in the middle of the Shannon Cove development is the 18<sup>th</sup> century brick house known as "Mount Jones", whose lovely interior paneling was yanked out when it was empty for years. Stay right, and at #2667 go into a small side road, parallel to route 13, which makes a dead end at the tidal waters of Drawyers Creek. At this dead end was the 1920's bridge across Drawyers Creek, as part of the Dupont Highway paid for by T. Coleman DuPont. The route 13 bridges were added later, and now it's also crossed by route 1, of course. So you can see 3 ways people have gotten across this stream in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Dutch, Swedes, English and French settled this area in the late 1600's and early 1700's. There were bridges noted crossing this creek here on early documents also, including a drawbridge here by 1681!

Go across the bridge on route 13 south, and turn right immediately into the graveyard. Head straight toward the back of the churchyard. Old Drawyers Presbyterian church was started by a mixture of European protestants. As of 1711 they had a log church here, built high above the marshes (nice view toward the right). Lots of members would have used boats to get to church. The present church is from 1773, with bricks made on the Meldrum farm just south of here. Reverend Thomas Read of this church helped George Washington in the fall of 1777 by sketching a map of the local area before the Battle of the Brandywine. The Presbyterian Church had started in Scotland, arch enemy back then of the English; some of the most fiercely patriotic Americans were Presbyterians. Exit from the south gate.

Keep going south on 13 for just a few feet, then make a right on Marl Pit Road, called that for the marl discovered here c. 1834. (you'll see lots of trees downed by the recent tornado) Marl is a green sand, created in prehistoric times when Delaware had lush vegetation. It has great fertilizing properties. The land in southern new Castle County was getting very poor by the 1820's. It had been used to grow primarily tobacco in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and mostly grains in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Farmers fertilized only with animal dung. Because of low crop yields, there was a depression in the 1820's when many families in Delaware went bankrupt. The discovery of the marl meant a turnaround in the crop yields, so by the 1840's there was a building boom in this area. (the old marl pit is after the bridge across a branch of Drawyers Creek, down a road to the right) Go over bridge over Drawyers Creek.

We'll now pass three houses (all on your right) built after the discovery of marl in this area, and all important peach growing farms in the 19<sup>th</sup> century :

After a row of pines, the J. K. Williams house ( just after Jack's Way) at #993 in the middle of the Woodlawn Estates development. Built in 1859 in a Georgian style.

After the stop sign, sitting back from the road, the Sereck Shallcross house, "Oakland", built in 1842 , is just before Shallcross Lake Road. It's a mixture of Greek Revival and Italianate architecture.

Okalona, 1860's, whose driveway is off Shallcross Lake Road, is visible when the corn is not high. It was built by R.T. Cochran. On your left, now Parkside development, was another Cochran farm. A descendant gave the Historical Society an interesting early 20<sup>th</sup> century diary written at this farm.

Keep going straight at the stop sign (intersection with Cedar Lane Road). Just north (to the right) of here is where Samuel F. Jones lived, the African-American farmer we feature in our new peach exhibit at the museum.

On your right is Achmester, a historic house with odd architecture and now in very precarious condition, owned by New Castle County. It was built by General Richard Mansfield, one of the founders of the Academy in Middletown, and on the school's board 1824-1847. Note the nice old smoke house (square, white) on your left as you go down the lane. If you look carefully, in a couple places you can see the logs under the vertical wood siding. It could possibly still be saved by being dismantled, moved and reconstructed. Apparently it was raised to install the poured concrete foundation. Turn around. Member Dick Janvier made a stained glass picture of this house, and gave it to our museum.

Left onto Marl Pit Road, retrace your steps, then turn right at Brick Mill Road. There used to be a one-room schoolhouse at this corner. Corbit Collins had it moved to the Del. Ag Museum. There is not much left now of the old Thomas family grist mill, I believe. (note more tornado damage along this road.)

Right onto 299. This road is built on top of the ancient native American footpath, later a cart road used by the early European settlers, as the shortest “short cut” between the Delaware River and the Chesapeake Bay. Just after the Friendly’s, note the fields of soybeans and trees laid out slanting to the right, and not perpendicular to the road, as you might expect. They were laid out in the 1670’s, and I believe are the only remaining sign of 17<sup>th</sup> century settlement around here. Each settler was given a long, narrow piece of land to clear and till using oxen. The Middletown Historical Society is planning (hoping!) to place a sign here to raise awareness of these very early property lines. Head west.

After St. Joseph’s, where the car wash, storage buildings, and medical building are now on your right, used to be the old tannery area, where animal hides bought from farmers, trappers and hunters were made into leather. The Petersons started the tannery in early days and then sold it to the Readings in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to old records, they had 37 vats in operation for curing the hides in 1790. Tanning hides was a stinky business; tanneries in the Middle-Atlantic area were usually on the east side of a town, because the prevailing winds are from the west. Already as of 1849, the Green family lived here. They used the biggest brick building as a barn for many years. It burned c.1988

Right on Catherine Street. Half a block down on the right, where there’s just green lawn now, was the first public school in Middletown, started in 1762 by several Presbyterians.

Left onto E. Lake Street, named for Jesse Lake, a devout member of Bethesda Methodist Church who donated land (on W. Lake) in the 1880’s for his friends to build a canning factory to help with the high unemployment in the black community. The early Methodists were known for their anti-racist views.

On the left, just past Cox Street, at # 20 is the old Bertha Allen house, which was moved in 1975 from its original site at 309 North Broad St., where Shing Kwong Chinese food is now, in order to save it from being razed.

Turn right into the strip shopping center.

We hope you’ve enjoyed this tour of some little known spots. You’ve earned some refreshments at Pat’s Pizza or the Chinese restaurant or another Middletown eatery! Thanks for coming!

N.B. Thanks to Louisa Zeh for some extra information for this tour.