PORT PENNINGS

Spring 2025

Serving the Port Penn Area Community since 1981. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, care for, maintain, instruct and encourage public interest in all matters, facts and things of any nature relating to history.

Dear Friends,

As we begin 2025, I want to thank you for your continued support of the Port Penn Area Historical Society. Your dedication helps us preserve and share the rich history of our community.

We continue to focus on raising funds to replace the Waterman statue with a more durable version to ensure its legacy for future generations. ***We invite you to join us in this important effort.***

Our Fall Members' Event at Fort Delaware was a fantastic opportunity to step back in time and experience local history in a truly immersive setting. Thank you to everyone who joined us and made it such a special occasion!

We encourage you to attend our quarterly meetings or share your ideas for projects and events. Your involvement makes a difference!

To learn more or get involved, contact us at info@portpenn.org or check out the website https://www.portpenn.org.

Warm regards,
Wes Jones, President, Port Penn Area Historical Society

2025 Dates To Remember:

Annual Members' Event to be held in the fall!

More information to come!

Historical Society Quarterly Meetings

Currently:
Fort Delaware State Park Office. 2540 Colter Road, Delaware City, DE @ 6:00 p.m.

• March 6th •
• June 5th •
• December 4th •

Open to the public
PLEASE JOIN US

Visit:
www.portpenn.org
for upcoming events and more information
E-mail:
info@portpenn.org

Port Penn Interpretive Center Recap & Photos by Mark Wise

Park Superintendent of Fort Delaware State Park, Fort DuPont State Park & Port Penn Interpretive Center

January 2023 – during an indoor project to "refresh" the artifacts on display in the Port Penn School House, several doors we opened that normally would not have been opened.

When the project was completed the doors that had been opened were extremely hard to close. It was decided to go into the crawl space to inspect the support beams underneath the schoolhouse.

Upon inspection, much of the support structures underneath the schoolhouse were deteriorating to the point that the schoolhouse was settling at an uneven level. The root cause was poor ventilation in the crawl space and poor drainage conditions around the schoolhouse.

An engineering study was conducted and based on that study, designs were made to replace the support structures underneath the schoolhouse.

March 2024 – All artifacts that needed climate control were moved to the Fort Delaware Park office. Artifacts that did not need climate control were moved to a warehouse at Fishing Point in Fort Dupont.

A plan was developed to raise the schoolhouse and construct new support structures. The first phase was to secure and strengthen the roof portion of the schoolhouse.

November 2024 – the schoolhouse was lifted off its foundation and new support walls/cross members were installed.

The schoolhouse was lowered back on its new foundation in mid-February 2025.

We hope to have programming return by the Fall season '25.

The Port Penn Area Historical Society, Inc. is a 501 (c)(3) organization. Contributions are tax deductible, to the extent allowed by law.

BLACKBIRD CREEK, A "SLUGGISH REPTILE STREAM" AND THE U.S. SUPREME COURT CASE OF 1829

By: Robert Meadows

In my wanderings through Delaware's marshes over the years as an Environmental Scientist for the Division of Fish & Wildlife, I have come upon many wonders, both natural and manmade. What follows is one of those chance encounters which would lead to a bit of long-forgotten Delaware history. Let me be your guide to a glimpse into the life of Delawareans in the early 1800's.

From "Atlas of the State of Delaware", Blackbird Hundred. D. G. Beers, 1868.

In the spring of 2013, while working on a native *Phragmites* project near the mouth of Blackbird Creek, I noticed an odd-looking wooden structure sticking out of the embankment along the northern shoreline *(Figure 1)*. The tide was extremely low that day, and a wide expanse of river bottom was exposed along the shoreline. As I couldn't navigate my small boat there, I dropped anchor and walked 50+ yards to reach this unknown structure. The photo in *Figure 1* shows this isn't just a stick or some kind of lumber sticking out of the bank, this is an obviously significant structure. After a thorough walk around, my speculation began. Is this an old duck blind… NO. Possible framing for an old building, boat, barge, or fisher/trappers' cabin? This structure was put together with mortise and tenon joinery *(Figure 2*), no metal nails, just oaken pins/dowels similar to old barns from the early 19th century. At this point I knew I needed some expert help from someone familiar with this kind of construction and landscape placement!

Figure 1: Photo by Robert Meadows 2013 ©.

Wooden structure extending from riverbank, note exposed tenons at ends of upright timbers. This structure forms a long, low wooden box (ca. 30' long x 12' wide x 3' high) or culvert that was totally covered with wood planking, top, bottom and sides (a few side planks can still be seen as the example in Figure 3). The marsh side end (the portion of the structure still buried in the embankment) was totally open, while the exposed end, out in the creek, had a flap gate door affixed to it (see example in Figure 4) which only let water discharge from the creek but prevented any water from the Delaware River to enter the marsh, thus draining it.

My first call was to the Delaware Division of Historical & Cultural Affairs in Dover to hopefully enlist their services with interpreting this discovery. After sharing a few photos, documenting the structure, they realized this was a significant find and agreed to a site visit in late May 2013. State archeologists, Craig Lukezic Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs, and Cherie Clark, Division of Parks and Recreation, joined me that day to lend their expertise.

After some investigation, Craig shared the early history of Blackbird Creek, having been diked back in the 1820's by the Blackbird Creek Marsh Company (BCMCo). Back then, landowners could petition the State Legislature to establish a charter and form a "Marsh Company" empowered to build dikes and drain their marshland, thus allowing farming on these fertile fields. These companies were run very much like tax ditch districts today. A governing board was elected from landowners and had the authority to collect the cost of building and maintaining dikes from all landowners in the impounded basin. These boards also had the power to place liens on properties of those who didn't pay.

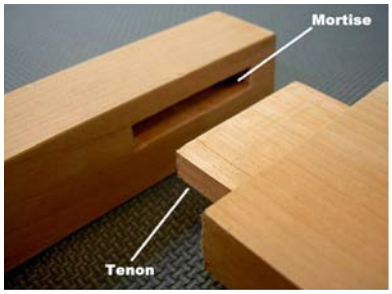


Figure 2: Wood Joinery - Mortise and Tenon Joint (Quiet-Corner.com)

These Marsh Companies were very important in the early settlement of the Delaware Valley. Settlers needed to plant and produce a crop shortly after arrival to sustain them through the first winter and months to follow. A major barrier to farms in early settlements was the presence of a primordial forest in the uplands, which would take years to clear before planting crops. Since many of the new settlers came from countries where they had a long history of diking/draining wetlands, it was natural to continue this practice in their new land. By throwing up a quick dike, many settlers were able to drain these treeless marshlands, thus making available, seemingly overnight, many acres of fertile soils, derived from runoff from prime upland topsoils … all without the burden of having to remove thousands of enormous trees!

Another benefit promoted by those in favor of diking and draining these marshes was the reduction in the vast number of mosquitos and other biting insects which caused a real pestilence to the settlers and their livestock. To learn more visit: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iitELlaA0kU

Overtime, as settlement in Delaware grew, conflicts between neighbors became increasingly common. This was indeed the case on Blackbird Creek with the formation of the Blackbird Creek Marsh Company by a group of landowners. At the time, roughly half the landowners were in favor of diking, while the other half were opposed. In the early part of the 19th century, there were very few land-based roads and the few that did exist, were poorly maintained and very limited in coverage. The creeks, cripples, rivers, and canals provided the only means of travel and transport for the 1) import of needed farm supplies and 2) export to market of the farms harvested crops, livestock, and timber.

One landowner, Thompson Willson, was one of those owners opposed to the diking, since he owned a very prosperous lumbering business which depended on the ability to export his bulky cargo to distant markets. After failing to reach an agreement with his neighbors and in frustration, he and a few sympathetic neighbors who also didn't approve of the dike, rammed the dike, causing it to fail and partially wash out. Things escalated from there as the BCMCo filed lawsuit after lawsuit against Mr. Willson in the State of Delaware. The case was eventually elevated to the U. S. Supreme Court in Washington D.C.

The U. S. Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of the plaintiffs (BCMCo) and against Mr. Willson. The reasons for the Court decision can be reviewed by scanning the QR code below. This served as a precedent-setting case which would have ramifications for years to come.

Back to my discovery in spring 2013, what is that structure and how does it relate to the dike and the turmoil that followed? To make a long story short, this old wooden structure is one of the original tide or flap gates built when the dikes were originally constructed in the 1820's. The dike permitted the discharge of accumulating water on the land side of the dike, while preventing the inflow of the tide from Delaware Bay twice a day. Remember, Blackbird Creek serves two basic natural functions, one as a tidal river off Delaware Bay and the second as a natural stream, conveying runoff of periodic rain fall from the surrounding uplands.

WILLSON v. BLACK-BIRD CREEK MARSH CO., 27 U.S. 245 (1829) | FindLaw

I plan to return to this site in February or March to see what, if anything, is left of this structure since my visit more than 12 years ago. Keep in mind that the rate of shoreline erosion along the Delaware River & Bay is considerable, upwards of 5 to 10 feet/year. As historians say, time and tide wait for no man.

Maybe I can post a few photos of what I find on my return?

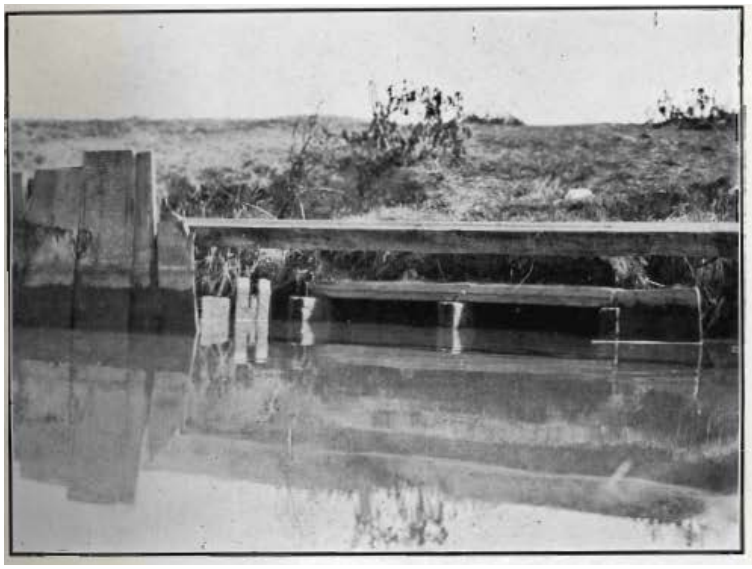


Figure 3: Partially submerged tide gate at the Lang Marsh, St. Georges Creek Marsh Company (Tidal Marshes and their Reclamation. Warren, George. USDA, 1911).

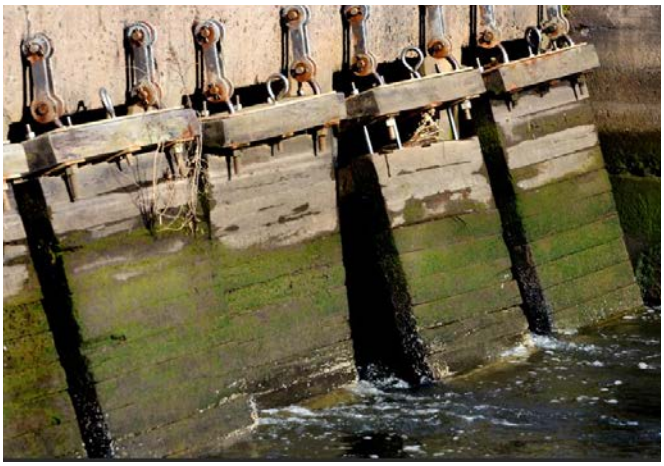


Figure 4: These wood flaps or doors are hinged at the top on the downstream side of the wood trunk or box and only allow water to discharge from the marsh, thus dewatering the upstream marshlands. (Photo by Melanie Stengel, New Haven Connecticut Register)

Brief Biography of Author

Robert Meadows was born and raised in Ithaca, New York, graduating from Cornell University in 1972. He went on to work on various fisheries projects in the Delaware estuary related to the construction and operation of the Salem Nuclear Power Plant. In 1995 Bob was hired by the Delaware Division of Fish & Wildlife, Mosquito Control Section working on marsh restoration projects in the State. In 2016 he earned his master's degree, studying both native and introduced Phragmites in the Mid- Atlantic region. Bob is currently the de facto manager of the Russell W. Peterson Urban Wildlife Refuge near Wilmington, on the lower Christina River.

Division of Parks & Recreation Port Penn Programming 2025 Season

For more information: Call (302) 834.7941 • www.destateparks.com • e-mail: jacob.miller@delaware.gov

All programs meet in the parking lot for the Interpretive Center, unless otherwise indicated.

Historic Town Tours

Saturdays: March 1, May 31 August 9, September 27, November 22, and December 20, 10:00 a.m.
Saturday March 22, 2:00 p.m.
Saturdays: June 14 and July 26, 5:00 p.m.

Port Penn has a fascinating history going back to the 1760s! Join our park historian as we walk through town and explore how this town developed, plus many of the stories that highlight life in this historic community. These programs are free, but it is suggested that you register in advance by emailing Jake at jacob.miller@delaware.gov.

Wetland Trail Walk

Saturdays: February 8, March 15, & November 15, 10:00 a.m.
Saturday July 5, 5:00 p.m.

Many residents of Port Penn supplemented their income throughout the year with hunting, trapping, and fishing, all of which made use of the proximity of the wetland. For this program we will enjoy the wetland trail, talk about the wetland and its importance to Port Penn, and keep an eye out for the incredible wildlife that makes Delaware so special. We will also talk about the elements of the seasonal economy that was so important to the residents of Port Penn throughout much of its history. This program is free, but participants are encouraged to register in advance by emailing Jake at Jacob.miller@delaware.gov.

Waterfowl Walk

Saturday March 8, 10:00 a.m.

For this program, we will head into the wetlands for our final look at the winter waterfowl before they head north. Some of our target species include Northern Shoveler, Green-Winged Teal, and Hooded Merganser. We will meet at the Port Penn Interpretive Center. All ages and skill levels are welcome!

Explorer's Walk

Saturday April 5, 2:00 p.m.

Kids, did you know adventure waits in your own backyard? Let's go exploring! Who knows what natural treasures we might find!

Sandpiper Stroll

Saturday April 12, 10:00 a.m.

Migration is starting to pick up speed! Come out and join us on a guided bird walk to see what a perfect layover spot the Port Penn wetlands are for migrating sandpipers. Our target sandpipers include Dunlins, Least sandpipers, and Greater and Lesser yellowlegs. We will meet at the Port Penn Interpretive Center. All ages and skill levels are welcome!

Warbler Walkabout

Saturday May 10, 10:00 a.m.

And so, the magic finally begins: the warblers are starting to arrive! The iconic bright-colored little songsters are popping up in Port Penn, so come join us as we search for Common Yellowthroats, Palm warblers, and Pine warblers. We will meet at the Port Penn Interpretive Center. All ages and skill levels are welcome!

Netmaking 101

Thursday June 26, 4:00 p.m.

Port Penn fishermen relied on their nets! Many fishermen wove their own nets, and fixed them on their own, too. In this program, we will learn how to make a simple net, while also talking about the local Port Penn fishermen. This program is free, but please register in advance by emailing Jake at Jacob.miller@delaware.gov or by calling 302-834-7941. This program will be held at the Port Penn Interpretive Center.

PPAHS Membership Application (annual membership)

Please return this form and check to:
Port Penn Area Historical Society•P.O. BOX 120•PORT PENN, DE 19731-0120

Name_____

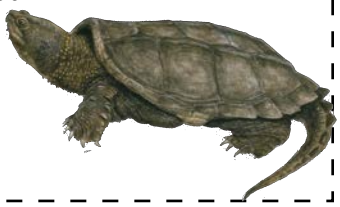
Address_____

City_____ State_____ Zip_____

Telephone_____ E-Mail_____

Membership Categories: *Individual $15.00*_____ *Joint $20.00*_____

*Family $25.00*_____ *Life Membership $200.00*_____



_____ I/We would like to volunteer to help with PPAHS events.

The Port Penn Historical Society is interested in your comments and ideas.
Please contact us at the above address or send us an e-mail: info@portpenn.org

The Port Penn Area Historical Society, Inc. is a 501 (c)(3) organization. Contributions are tax deductible, to the extent allowed by law.