

# Places In Time

## LAWRENCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### SUMMER 2009

#### D&R Canal - 175 and Counting! Events Planned at Port Mercer

by Laura Nawrocik

Whether on foot, bike or boat, numerous visitors descend on the Delaware and Raritan Canal every day as a place of quiet recreation in the middle of a busy state. Stretching from Trenton to New Brunswick, the canal and its feeder system is noted for its serene beauty, abundant wildlife and plant life. As peaceful as it is now, it was practical when it first opened 175 years ago, on June 25, 1834. At that time, canals were the major pathway for transporting goods across the United States and the D&R was a key component of the Philadelphia to New York corridor.

Construction on the canal began in 1830 and upon completion, was a total distance of 44 miles with 22 more miles on the feeder system. Irish immigrants performed most of the manual labor alongside local workers, digging by hand to a depth of about 7 feet and a width of 75 feet. In addition to the harsh physical labor, the construction crews faced a cholera epidemic in the summer of 1832 that took many workers' lives.

The major commodity that was shipped along the canal was coal, mostly headed north toward New York. Such freight was hauled by steam powered vessels and mule barges, with the mules traveling along the towpath that today serves as a hiking/biking path. Just to the outside of the towpath was the Camden and Amboy rail line.

Both the barges and trains needed rest stops and several small villages developed along the canal to accommodate travelers. One spot that was especially busy is the area between Brearley House and Port Mercer Canal House, known as Port Mercer. Two key features located on this section of the canal led to the development of Port Mercer. The first was a swing bridge at Quakerbridge Road which was operated by the bridge tender, who lived in Port Mercer Canal House. The second was the turning basin that allowed barges to pretty much make a u-turn on the canal. The latter made Port Mercer a prime spot to unload freight and after the bridge tender's house, one of the first structures built was a wharf with warehouse space for rent. Additional buildings included a general store, inn, tavern, lime kiln, saw mill and railroad office. For entertainment, there was a baseball field and race track.

The presence of the railroad office made Port Mercer a key communications station in addition to a freight station. Mail was passed back and forth between barges and the trains that stopped at Port Mercer. The post office even had its own cancellation mark, instead of using a Trenton or Princeton mark



George Arrowsmith, last bridge tender, stands in front of Port Mercer Canal House

Rail service eventually led to the demise of the canal system and the D&R continued to operate until 1932, even though the last profitable year was in the 1890s. Despite the rail traffic, Port Mercer was slowly abandoned as the canal traffic began to ebb. Following its closing, ownership of the D&R reverted to the state of New Jersey in 1936 and was eventually used as a water source. The canal was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 and made a State Park in 1974.

In order to celebrate the 175th Anniversary of the D&R Canal, LHS will be hosting two events at Port Mercer Canal House this June. Our annual Garden Party will take place on the patio June 14th, from 1 to 4pm. The Rhythmairs will be back and attendees can relax with a cup of ice cream or lemonade. On June 25, Port Mercer Canal House will be open for tours from 10am to 6:30pm, with a Victorian Tea Party set for 4 to 6:30pm.

*LHS thanks Vicki Chirco, D&R Canal State Park Historian, for her help with this article.*

## Mary Tanner Lecture on October 11th at Rider University

Two prominent New Jersey historical and archaeological researchers will present The Lawrence Historical Society's 6th Annual Mary Tanner Lecture on October 11th at Rider University. Howard Green and Richard Hunter will speak on the history of the Delaware & Raritan Canal, which is marking its 175th anniversary in 2009.

Six of the forty-four miles of the main D&R Canal flow through Lawrence Township, and the town is home to two historic canal structures, the Port Mercer Canal House on Province Line Road and the Bridge tender's House on Carnegie Road. Both were constructed at the time of the canal itself and served to house bridge tenders and their families.

Howard Green and Richard Hunter will discuss the history of the canal, from its construction by Irish immigrants in the 1830's, through its peak years of transporting coal from Pennsylvania to New York in the mid-19th century, to its decline as railroads took over more and more of its functions, to its eventual development into a state park and greenway. They will highlight places along the canal where you can still glimpse traces of its rich history.

The lecture will take place at 2:00 p.m. on Sunday, October 11th in the Fireside Lounge at the Bart Luedeke Center at Rider University. It is free and open to the public.

Howard L. Green is a principal at Public History Partners in Highland Park. Before founding the firm in 2005, he directed the research office at the New Jersey Historical Commission for more than twenty years. He is the editor of *Words that Make New Jersey History* and the author of numerous articles and reviews on New Jersey and public history. He is a former president of the Oral History Association, and a member of the New Jersey Historic Sites Review Board.

Dr. Richard W. Hunter is president and principal archaeologist at Hunter Research in Trenton, an historical and archaeological consulting firm that he founded in 1986. He received his Ph.D. in geography from Rutgers University and has taught at Rutgers and Drew Universities. Among the many research, survey, excavation, evaluation, and report preparation projects undertaken by Hunter Research was the excavation and survey work at the 1761 Brearley House, headquarters of The Lawrence Historical Society.

The annual Mary Tanner Lecture is presented each year in honor of long-time member and trustee Mary Tanner. Previous speakers include Gordon Wood, James M. McPherson and Admiral Paul Edward Tobin Jr.

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## Plaster Work Spruces Up Brearley House

Recent visitors to the Brearley House may have noticed the lower level is looking a little brighter these days. LHS contracted with Specialty Plaster to completely replaster one of the front parlors, the hallway and stairwell. In addition to the fine work, LHS got a history lesson from David Smith. Here are a few highlights from his assessment of the Brearley House:

The exterior walls have 3 or 4 layers of brick to provide insulation and protection from the elements. The interior portion of these walls were plastered with 2 layers of lime, sand and then another thin layer of lime. The interior walls are studs covered with hand split oak lathes that were plastered with lime, sand and horsehair with a thin coat of lime as a finish. The walls of colonial homes were often decorated with either a tint, wallpaper of calcimine. The latter was used at Brearley and consisted of lime, animal hide glue, and some form of coloring agent. The main advantages to using calcimine were its low cost and ability to breathe water through it. Soot and dirt were also easily covered by fresh coats and after several applications, the calcimine was easy to scrub off of the plaster. Unfortunately, many homes like Brearley suffered from owners who had a lack of understanding regarding calcimine and this was often left on the walls when oil paints were applied in the 20th century. Over time, water from humidity and other sources seeped through the calcimine and caused the paint to peel and the plaster to crack. The solution was to strip down to the original plaster and apply new calcimine and a lime plaster finish.

## Did You Know?

Port Mercer Canal House is not the only preserved canal house in Lawrence? The Carnegie Road Canal House is also part of the D&R State Park and was also used as a bridge tender's house. The house is currently leased to a caretaker to help ensure its security and upkeep.



Over Memorial Day weekend, the Busha family of Stormville, NY stopped by Brearley House for a tour. Roger, Julie and Iris are pictured in front of the house. Part of the purpose of the visit was to gather information for Iris's project on her ancestor, David Brearley.

## Memorial Day Parade



Lawrence Historical Society Float driven by Tom Ledwidth. Jacqi and Danny Haun ride in the back.



Freeholders Lucylle Walter and Anthony Carabelli with County Clerk Paula Sollami-Covello.



John Halvorsen, Dennis Waters and Catherine Medich, trustees, hand out flags along the parade route.

## Baseball in New Jersey

By Dennis Waters

Several dozen baseball fans and local history fans got together on Sunday, May 17th, to learn about the rich history of minor league baseball in New Jersey. The occasion was a talk by Bob Golon, author of the recent book *No Minor Accomplishment: The Revival of New Jersey Professional Baseball*.

Golon spoke at the Lawrence Headquarters Branch of the Mercer County Library. His talk was co-sponsored by the Lawrence Historical Society and the Friends of the Lawrence Library.



Bob Golon, talks about the history of baseball at the Lawrence branch of the Mercer County Library

Golon reviewed the early history of baseball in the Garden State from the mid-19th century until 1950, when the Trenton Giants played their last game at Dunn Field in Lawrence. New Jersey baseball then entered the dark ages; there were no more professional teams in New Jersey until the Trenton Thunder played their first game at Mercer County Waterfront Park in 1994.

Thanks to archival research conducted by LHS president Laura Nawrocik in the Lawrence Room at the library, Golon was able to pinpoint the exact location of Dunn Field, where the Trenton teams played from 1936 to 1950. It was at the southwest corner of Brunswick Circle at the site now occupied by the New Jersey Lottery building – and wholly within Lawrence Township.

Why is this question important? Well, when Hall of Fame outfielder Willie Mays moved from the Negro Leagues over to the New York Giants organization, he spent a year in the minor leagues with the Trenton Giants. His first season was the Trenton Giants' last – 1950 – and he hit .353. So in fact Willie Mays did begin his Major League Baseball career patrolling the outfield right here in Lawrence!



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I am enclosing a special contribution to commemorate:

**Time to Renew Your Membership**

If you haven't renewed your membership, now is the time to do so. Member rates go up with the next newsletter in October. A renewal form can be found on the last page. Members receive our newsletter and access to member events.

**LHS Membership Event Set**

LHS members are invited to attend a tour of the NJ Militia Museum on Eggerts Crossing Road on Saturday, July 11. The event will feature a morning tour of one part of the facility at 11:00am, a lunch break and a second tour of another display area at 1:00pm. Attendees will have the option to purchase a box lunch. More information about the event and a lunch order form will be mailed to members in early June.

*Places in Time* is published four times a year by the Lawrence Historical Society. Back issues and color editions of our award winning newsletter are available at the LHS website—[www.TheLHS.org](http://www.TheLHS.org). Contributors for this issue: Rina Banerjee (editor), Jim Williams (photographer), Laura Nawrocik (webmaster), Dennis Waters. We can be contacted at the following address: [webmaster@thelhs.org](mailto:webmaster@thelhs.org)