

# Dennis Township History

Newsletter Winter 2015

Old School House Museum

## *Poor Bessie's Almanac*

### **“Things You Should Know about Dennis” by Janet Clark McShain**

My Grandmom Bessie taught me many things, one thing was that, “the world is so full of so many things, we all should be as happy as kings!” Sometimes, I think that the world around me is too full of things and we could be happy with a lot less.

Last week, I went to a wonderful celebration up at the Wheaton Arts Center. It was an exciting American Indian Festival filled with dancing, singing, and the music of drums and flutes. There was storytelling and colorful dress that they called “regalia” not costume. They said that costume is like the clothes we wear at Halloween or for fun for dress up for a day, but theirs is who they are. Everything they wear is meaningful, it is part of their history. I loved seeing the decoration with glass beading sewn on with bones, feathers, and shells as well. They used all parts of nature and appreciated all the world around them, wasting nothing. They honored who they were by what they wore and put on themselves, honoring the Earth, which they called “Turtle Island”. One of the first people I met that day was Chief of the Lenape Tribe, Chief Gould, a kind friendly man with a tall regal stature.

I mentioned that I was from Dennisville and was interested in Indian history. He told me that our town of Dennis Creek was where the Lenape used to have their ceremonial grounds long ago. I wondered where it was held and he said I should speak to the Lenape historian. I did meet him but they were both busy that day so I plan on finding out more on a less busy day. I have been studying Lenape history since the 1970's when my husband and I bought a house in Philadelphia on the old Lenni-Lenape path which became Old York Road. Some of my art has been about telling stories of the Native Americans of the Delaware.

(continued page 2)



William S Townsend House

read more of her work in future editions of

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this newsletter—Editor's note.

(cont'd from 1)

When the English first came to the land of "Lenapehocking", the Delaware Bay area, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the young braves wanted to attack. The old chiefs said there was room on the Lenni-Lenape trail for both the English and the Indians to "take a nap". Maybe this is why there was so little fighting in New Jersey between the colonists and native people. To me that is a comforting thought, that they could be happy and relaxed enough to rest on the path. The chief told me that there are 4000 registered Indians here in South Jersey and another 8000 who are not listed. I suppose we are surrounded by Indians! Let's hope they have all listened to their elders and are willing to share their path here in Dennisville, the one we now call Delsea Drive. Many stories have been passed down from generation to generation in the Lenape families like mine, with my Grandmom Bessie. I'm hoping to learn more about the peaceful co-existence of early settlers with the Lenapes here in the Dennis Creek area of Lenapehocking.

*In addition to being an accomplished writer, Janet is a professional artist. Her studio is located at her home in Dennisville. The William S Townsend House, once known far and wide as Five Chimneys is on both the state and national registers of historical buildings. She is writing "Poor Bessie's Almanac" as a serial column. We hope to*

**Museum OPEN 1<sup>st</sup> and 3rd  
Saturday of the month from  
9am-1pm**

### *St Elizabeth of Hungary Church*

The Catholic Church on Route 47, frequented by many residents and visitors to Dennis Township for so many years, actually began its existence in Port Elizabeth as a school house. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, that sleepy Cumberland County village was a busy metropolis and as early as 1798, was known as an educational center in the young USA.

Students matriculated from far and wide at ↓ Port Elizabeth Academy where they studied the arts and sciences for more than half a century. The town itself flourished an important commercial and shipping center until the 1840's when it was overshadowed by faster growing metropolises including Philadelphia.

In 1846, the building was purchased by the Catholic Church. In 1878, the one story structure with the its sharply pointed roof was moved to Dennis Creek, That feat was accomplished by Captain Augustus Meerwald and his son, Augustus Jr. who sailed the disassembled building (held together with large wooden dowels making for easier handling of sections) by flat bottomed barge.

**purchased for \$250, and the land**

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(continued next page) -2-

Upon arriving at Dennis Creek, the building sections were transported by horse and wagon down the “old road” to its present location.

The church was dedicated on September 10, 1879 in honor of St. Elizabeth of Hungary.



St. Elizabeth of Hungary RC Church

(Editor’s note: *Information for this article gleaned from “The Port Elizabeth Academy” by WJ Hawthorne in South Jersey Magazine, Fall 1977).*

### **Dennis Township School House Museum and History Center—**

**The old Dennisville school house, on the corner of Petersburg Road at Hall Avenue, is now enjoying its third career. Its story began in 1872 as a real estate transaction. A parcel of land was**

**designated for a new school.**

**Two years later, the school began operating, a two story affair housing all**

**grades through 8<sup>th</sup>. It served as a school house for three-quarters of a century.**



**(Old School House Museum—at night!)**

**On April 15, 1948, a fire destroyed the second story. The building was repaired but as a single story structure. The Board of Education, needing additional space for a growing student population, arranged a property “swap” with the township. The result was the construction of the Academy Road School, which opened in 1952.**

**The school house began its second career, as the township’s Municipal Hall. It served in that capacity for 42 years until 1994, at which time the present Municipal Complex was built.**

**But the old school house still had work to do. Township Committee gave permission to use the building as a museum. Local citizens worked hard to restore the**

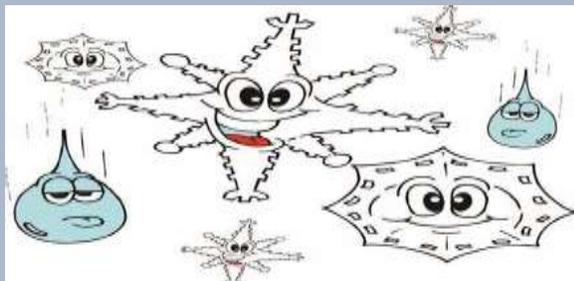
-4

(continued page 4) -3-

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**existing structure, gathering artifacts and photographs and other memorabilia detailing the area's long, rich history.**

**The old school house continues to serve Dennis Township as a museum where visitors can explore the area's history and perhaps discover a bit of their own pasts in the process.**



Actually, the museum is open the first and third Saturday of the month, from 9 am to 1 pm. But we'd LOVE to be open more hours. To do that, WE NEED YOU. Anyone interested in Dennis Township history, having a few hours to spare, can become a volunteer curator at the Old School Museum. To learn more, email Ray Rebmann at [rebmannray@gmail.com](mailto:rebmannray@gmail.com) or call the museum (609) 861-1899 and leave a message.

If you think Dennis Township in mid February 2015 has been a bit nippy, you should have been around in 1816. Even the summer months were frigid during what locals somewhat unimaginatively called, The Cold Summer.

The ornery weather began with snowfall in early November 2015 and the white stuff continued, accompanied by howling winds and freezing temperatures well into the following summer. Ponds and marshes, even Dennis Creek, froze over into June and July. Farmers helplessly watched their crops fail, killed by the cold.

It wasn't until September that the thermometer nudged above the freezing point.

I guess folks back then would have welcomed a bit of that global warming we keep hearing about these days.

*Information for this item comes from Cape May Spray by Charles Tomlin.*