

The Lewes That



Nearly Was

We might take for granted the preservation of historic homes, the creation of an impressive public park, and the safeguarding of a clean environment, but those achievements did not happen by luck in the First State's First Town. Citizen activists made them happen.

BY CHRIS BEAKEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLYN WATSON



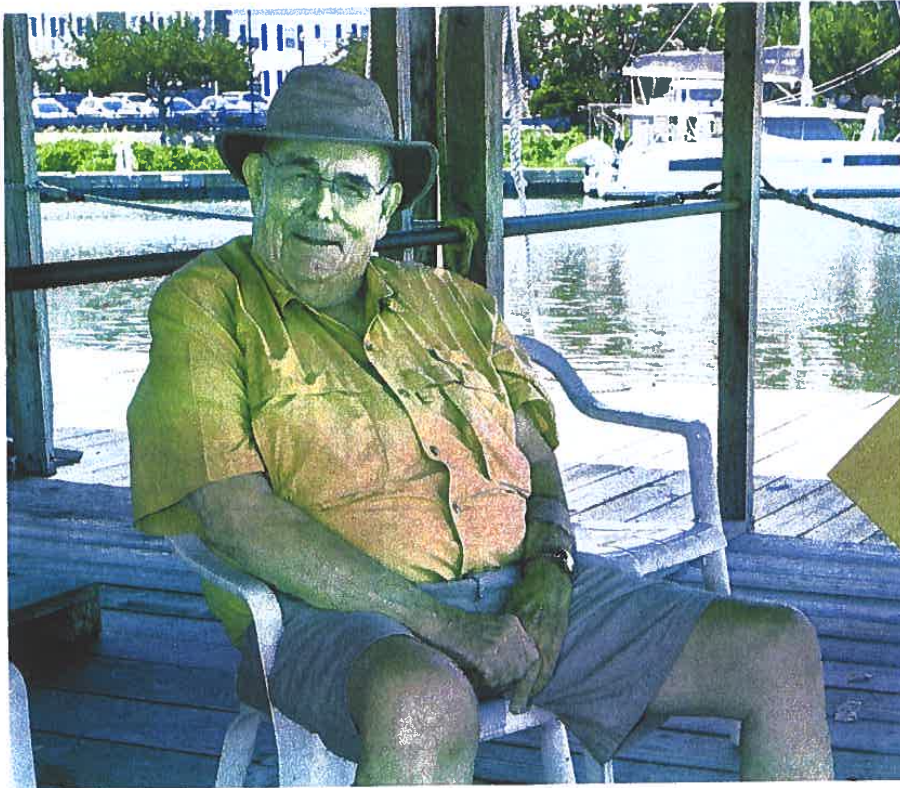
Whether you've just escaped from Route 1 traffic or taken a detour on your way home from a day at Cape Henlopen State Park, you're apt to feel a special kind of peace as you encounter historic Lewes's most picture-perfect places. The bustling marina alongside the Savannah Road bridge. Canalfront Park, with its performance spaces and public boat launch. The quaint downtown surrounded by beautifully preserved Colonial, Victorian and craftsman homes.

But what if it wasn't there, as you see it now?

That's a question some longtime local residents contemplate every time they look back on three pivotal events that almost turned Lewes into a very different place: a town challenged by chronic pollution, reduced access to its picturesque canal, and the loss of prized historic buildings.

While their memories illustrate the dangers of relying solely on temporary market forces to determine a community's course, they also show what can be achieved when local citizens work together to create economically vibrant neighborhoods that stand the test of time. >

As new owners of the historic William F. Marshall house, Ted Hack, far left, and Patty Joyce, second from right, are enthusiastically embarking on renovations tied to Lewes's preservation guidelines with direction from architectural designers and old-house specialists Stephanie Boright, second from left, and Justin Travis, far right. Those guidelines have been crucial to maintaining the town's charm.



Dale Parsons can share firsthand accounts of the thwarted coal port and the creation of the Canal-front Park while waiting for fishing boats to return to the docks next to The Wheelhouse restaurant alongside the Savannah Road drawbridge.

Steady paychecks and black dust

In 1981, long past the shuttering of the fish processing plant that had been the town's largest employer from the 1940s into the 1960s, good jobs in and around Lewes were hard to find. That had a big impact on the success of downtown businesses.

As longtime resident and businessman Cliff Diver recalls, "I was president of the Chamber of Commerce in 1981, when we had a 50 percent vacancy rate among the businesses and also didn't have a strong residential base. Rehoboth and Lewes were also very different in terms of desirability. I think some people were ready to sacrifice Lewes to bring in more jobs for the region."

To many, what happened next initially felt like a miracle. It was a proposal from Annapolis, Md.-based developer T. Phillip Dunn, who acquired 16 acres with an option for 63 more for the potential creation of what he first identified as a "bulk product facility." However, it didn't take long for locals to learn the product would be coal. *Lots* of it — enough to fill up to 200 railroad cars traveling daily toward a massive port that would be built on the land currently occupied by the Cape Shores community. Each year that port would receive between 3 million and 6.7 million tons of coal destined for barges that would carry it to massive ships offshore.

You don't have to be an economist or political scientist to know how this was received. With a promised abundance of full-time jobs for people who didn't have a college education, the port offered what seemed like a magic formula for rebuilding the population base and ensuring no more downtown businesses moved out.

Yet from the beginning, longtime local Dale Parsons, who owned the drawbridge-area marina that depended on anglers and sightseers drawn to clean water and air, was among many who pointed to environmental dangers that could have extended beyond the coal port's proposed location.

"The whole town knew I was against it because I could just see it messing every damn thing up," he recalls. "I told them we got plenty of wind that's gonna blow the dust everywhere and that if you don't like that you'll have to take your house somewhere else."

Diver heartily agrees.

"I had a friend in Morehead City, N.C., where there was another coal port, so I saw what Lewes would become. One day of breathing in coal dust won't kill you, but many days of coal dust will."

Others were more circumspect, and some were determined to make it happen.

"The mayor [Al Stango] was against it, but he was trying to look out for the well-being of the town ... trying to keep jobs," Parsons adds. And two City Council members went on record with sustained and strong support.

Still, the resistance endured. David Swayze, an environmental attorney hired by a group of Lewes Beach property owners to argue against the port, notes that "the current of opposition was powerful but it also ran deep. ... They were content to let the process take its course and make sure the stars were properly aligned."

In retrospect, two key events steered that course toward the

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The City of Lewes is planning an ambitious city park and vital civic space that captures the character and history of the town and provides an opportunity to reconnect the historic core to the waterfront.



Panoramic view of the old Lewes boat yard

Citizen advocates mounted an ambitious effort to transform an aging boatyard (pictured here in a fundraising flyer) into a vibrant public park. The group produced pamphlets, which included messages like this, and hired planning experts to raise public awareness.

a beloved two-story Colonial-style structure on Second Street.

"We like the cedar shingles, the lap-board siding and the small-paned windows and their proportions. We also designed a lot of open space ... with a 50-foot arch, two stories tall, to open a view to the canal from Front Street. We've also completed an environmental analysis, so we know what we have to clean up."

That clean-up was especially important to Parsons, who had led the fight against the coal port. He was the owner of the boatyard, which had become filled with derelict watercraft and would have been replaced by the condo building. Yet other local residents were willing to go to extraordinary lengths to create something very different.

Second Street resident Joe Stewart relishes how that effort succeeded.

"Once the project began getting publicity, a group of people started meeting in my dining room on Sundays at 11 a.m. to talk about something better because they realized this was the last undeveloped piece of land that would give Lewes a connection to the water ... our last opportunity."

The group, which included individuals with expertise in community planning, took a two-tiered approach to real-

izing an alternate vision. They hired an attorney and a traffic engineer to ask important questions when the condo project came before the city's planning commission. And they embarked on a public awareness campaign to help people imagine a different use for the site: a public park.

While the turnout for the group's first public discussion was astounding, Stewart, who spent decades following public policy in Washington, D.C., knew that support from federal and state agencies was vital.

"Lawmakers know everybody's looking for support for something, but what really stands out is when people show they're willing to put in their own money as well," he says. "Over a four-day period we fanned out and knocked on doors and by ... Sunday we had 100 people who had agreed to give \$100 apiece toward whatever it took to build the park. We had these pledges in hand when we went to meet with Delaware's congressional delegation shortly after."

That enthusiasm was compounded during the years that followed, with donations from 1,600 local residents, businesses and people who simply love Lewes. Together these groups donated nearly \$2.7 million to create the park.

clean air and water that Lewes enjoys today. One was the prospect of long-term litigation to determine if the coal plant would be grandfathered in as an allowable use for the property despite the 1971 Coastal Zone Act, which restricts industrial operations along Delaware's waterways.

The other was a collection of first-hand accounts of what happened to coastal towns with coal ports. Dennis Forney, editor of *The Whale* newspaper, flew to Morehead City in a plane piloted by University of Delaware Marine Sciences Director Wadsworth Owen. The way he describes his reaction all these years later shows why so many locals were grateful the plant never came to fruition:

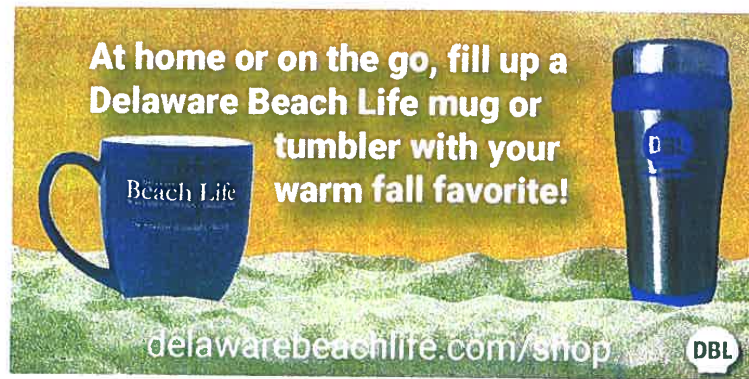
"Seeing the train tracks and coal cars — dirty, of course — going through the center of town was enough to make the decision easy. There would have been jobs, of course, but imagine a coal port instead of Cape Shores. [That] pretty much sealed the deal in terms of Lewes becoming a tourist town versus an industrial town."

Against tall odds, a public park

Situated alongside Front Street as it transitions to Pilottown Road, Canalfront Park is a treasure. On many warm days you'll find children climbing and swinging at its playground, families crabbing and fishing from the public pier, or crowds lounging on its vast Village Green during live musical performances.

If you close your eyes knowing about its dramatic history, however, it's easy to imagine a very different view, with today's green space replaced by a large building with dozens of condominium residences above retail stores and a vast parking garage. Stretching from the edge of today's Inn at Canal Square toward the tennis and basketball courts, the building would have significantly reduced public access to the Lewes-and-Rehoboth Canal.

The story about what happened instead is filled with local heroes — and no real villains. In a June 1998 *Cape Gazette* article, Jim Kiernan of Coldwell Banker Resort Realty described his vision for the condo development as "reflecting architectural aspects of the building that housed King's Ice Cream,



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This was in addition to a \$2 million grant from the Save America's Treasures program at the National Park Service and generous support other government agencies, including the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control. Ultimately, it took nearly \$11 million to create the park the public enjoys today.

Stewart also appreciates the collective vision that evolved once the land was secured.

"Everybody wanted a waterfront park, but we also had to decide what it was going to be. We got a grant from the city to bring in a group of planning experts, who helped us develop a vision with input from people throughout Lewes. It took 10 years but we ended up with a naturalistic refuge that preserved the nautical flavor, with boat slips and public restrooms and a playground."

Greater Lewes Community Foundation Executive Director Mike Rawl also credits Kiernan as an ardent philanthropist who graciously ceded his dream, paving the way for the park's development.

"Once he became aware of how strongly the community felt, he created an agreement that benefited everyone," Rawl recalls. "His laughter, Kathy Newcomb, went on to serve on the Greater Lewes Foundation Board and created a scholarship in her father's memory. We're very grateful to the entire family for all of the wonderful things they've done to make Sussex County such a great place."

Once he became aware of how strongly the community felt, he created an agreement that benefited everyone."

Historic preservation as a vital force

In 1974, long before the coal port or park were even a possibility, Carol Garner and her husband opened R&L Liquors on Second Street, just steps away from restaurants that were operated by her father, Lou Ianire, from 1959 to 1980. Strolling through the area on a recent afternoon, she easily recalls a town center that was far more utilitarian than the hospitality-oriented streetscape people encounter today.

"Friday nights were when people got their paychecks, so that's when they came downtown to cash them and do their weekly shopping. We had Franklin Hardware where Kids' Ketch is ... Graves Uniforms around the corner, a shoe store, a barber shop, a couple of grocery stores and Fox's Five and Dime. Back then you could pick up everything you needed right here."

As a businessperson, Garner understands the consumer tastes that drove the development of big box stores outside of town. Like so many, however, she's grateful that the quaint buildings where those utilitarian businesses once operated are still intact and perfectly suited for boutiques,

upscale restaurants and art galleries.

She's not alone. Lewes is filled with people who cherish downtown's Norman Rockwell vibe and stately historic homes, including some built well before 1800. They also love the campus of the Lewes Historical Society, replete with mostly Colonial-style structures that were disassembled and moved to the site, and places like

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Carol Garner, who opened R&L Liquors on Second Street alongside her husband in 1974, recalls a town center that was far more utilitarian than the hospitality-oriented streetscape people encounter today.

the Zwaanendael Museum, a grand building constructed in 1931, despite the Great Depression, to honor the town's Dutch heritage.

That widespread appreciation was a key force in the development of preservation rules that have been enthusiastically supported by longtime residents and newcomers alike. The process of getting there, however, was spurred by some deep pain as Lewes became more popular in the late 1980s.

"There was a run on demolitions. ... We lost some beautiful old places, including a couple that meant a lot to seniors at the time," local preservationist Barbara Warnell recalls. With Barbara Vaughn, another preservationist who has held various elected positions, leading the charge, "a group of us started meeting and going to preservation workshops with speakers from the National Trust and other organizations. Finally, in 1992, we had a locally designed ordinance for the Lewes Historic District."

Although that looked like progress for those who wanted to protect homes and commercial buildings, the regulations tended to be advisory. And by the end of the decade, demolition danger signs were still apparent.

As Mike DiPaolo, who served as the Lewes Historical Society's executive director from 2001 to 2019, sees it, "for a long time, local preservationists had the sentiment that people would be inclined to do what's right with their historic houses. That was justified because from the 1970s, as a result of the U.S. Bicentennial, there was a deepened appreciation



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for Colonial architecture. By 2000 and 2001, though, a lot of the people who'd restored local houses were selling, and we started seeing newcomers with a different mindset."

As a result, the effort to strengthen protections was significantly ramped up between 2001 and 2004, when the mayor and City Council put their full support behind a citizens group that created official guidelines to ensure that new construction and renovations in the historic district reflect Lewes's architectural heritage.

A group of us started going to preservation workshops and finally, in 1992, we had a locally designed ordinance for the Lewes Historic District."

Not surprisingly, conflicts do arise, often when a homebuyer is unaware of the restrictions prior to embarking on a renovation. But the bottom-line result is that the stately homes and other buildings that have stood watch over the town's evolution for a century or more are there to stay.

When asked whether that could hinder Lewes's vitality by causing homebuyers to choose less restrictive neighborhoods, DiPaolo has an unequivocal response: "Lewes real estate certainly hasn't cooled off because of these rules. ... I believe it's because they protect the flavor that people come here for. But if you start to let the historic properties go one at a time, suddenly Second Street won't look like Second Street anymore. People know the businesses and neighbors will come and go, but the streetscape will stay the same. That's what preservation is all about: protecting the places we know and love ... and often making them so much better." ■

Chris Beakey is a frequent contributor to Delaware Beach Life, and the author of "Fatal Option," a thriller distributed by Simon & Schuster.

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Tuned In to the Classics

Siblings' musical efforts prove to be rewarding in more ways than one

BY CHRIS BEAKEY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLYN WATSON



If you ask winners of an Academy Award or a Nobel or Pulitzer Prize to name the most significant drivers of their success, you're apt to get some common responses:

"I had amazing mentors."

"I had a world-class education."

"I mainly just worked very, very hard."

While they're all good answers, 15-year-old Nathaniel Hoang and his 13-year-old sister, Ava, could easily cite one more factor as key to earning scholarships from Coastal Concerts, a classical music ensemble known for sold-out performances at Bethel United Methodist Church in Lewes: The abiding strength of a devoted family, with mom and

dad and every sibling inspiring one another to achieve their best.

That's all abundantly clear on an early spring afternoon at the family's colorful and comfortable home in Coastal Club, a few miles from downtown Lewes. In a cozy front room with dark gray walls and bright modern art, Nathaniel plays a lively rendition of Sergei Rachmaninoff's "Prelude in C Sharp Minor" on the family's grand piano, followed by Ava's delightful performance of Gabriel Faure's "Morceau de Concours" on her flute. Both performances are polished and engaging and played with ease by the two young musicians, who seem to love every moment.

Unlike some teens who resist the rigors of music lessons, Nathaniel and Ava Hoang embrace them. That commitment has resulted in their earning scholarships from Coastal Concerts.

A journey of ups and downs

Shortly after, they're joined by younger brother Louis for a discussion of the challenges the older siblings have faced en route to their prestigious honors. It's a fun conversation with lots of smiles from kids who genuinely enjoy one another's company, with helpful historical input from devoted stay-at-home mom Monica and their dad, Gil, a physician at Bayhealth.

Nathaniel recalls: "I started playing in first grade when my mom first introduced me to it, but I didn't really take it seriously at first. I stuck through it even though there were times when I wanted to quit."

His trajectory began to shift once he connected with one particular piece of music.

"I heard 'Midnight Rhapsody' [composed by Melody Bober] in fourth grade and thought it was so nice, with so many different dynamics. I started working harder, figuring out the louds and the softs because I wanted to play it just right. I also like 'Prelude in C Sharp Minor' because it's nice and quiet and alternately light and dark."

"I first joined the band at Beacon Middle School when we moved here," adds Ava, a seventh-grader there. "When I got into county band" — that is, the audition-based Sussex County Junior Band — "I knew I was going to be around better players and realized I could sound better if I practiced more."

Louis, who's now a fifth grader at Love Creek Elementary School, declared his love of music even earlier, an announcement Monica recalls with a laugh.

"He was 3 years old when he told us he wanted to play the cello, which didn't seem quite right because he was so little, and when I said, 'You probably mean the violin,' he said, 'No, Mommy, it's the big one you play standing up just like this.'"

Fortunately cellos come in different sizes to accommodate growing artists, and Louis is now building his proficiency with a model that's about three-fourths as large as the ones played by adults.

While all three musicians emphasize their love of performing, they're quick to admit it doesn't come easy.

"My hands get so sweaty, I'm afraid I'm going to drop my flute," Ava laments. ▶



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"I have to tell myself, 'Just do it,' and always try to go first at auditions because the longer I wait the more fidgety I get."

Nathaniel, a freshman at Cape Henlopen High School, empathizes.

"I'm always so nervous when I'm performing and really have to grind it out for several weeks before. ... Even after I've memorized a piece, I have to keep refining it. But even when it sounds good, my legs are shaking."

That draws a good-natured frown from Monica.

"It's interesting to hear him say that, but I don't see that leg shaking," she says. "Once they call his name up to play, he just gets right up and turns it on."

Strengthening a legacy

Coastal Concerts board member Lee April is well aware of how challenging performances can be for young players, and he hopes the scholarships are a fitting reward for so much hard work:

"These student musicians are so incredibly talented, and we're thrilled to help them further their education in this small way. We showcase winners at our last concert of the season, where they receive their awards, and one of the students performs on our stage for our audience each season."

While the awards of up to \$1,500 to high school students and up to \$1,000 to middle-schoolers may seem modest, the organization has bestowed more than \$50,000 overall to 56 young residents of the Delmarva Peninsula since 2002. Applicants are required to provide a letter of recommendation from a music teacher, a YouTube video of a performance followed by an in-person audition, and a brief essay on the impact music has made on their lives and education.

Ava's flute teacher, Jody Stein, is particularly enthusiastic about that educational impact.

"Opportunities to learn and play music are so important because neuroscientists have proven how it develops both sides of your brain," she says.

"There's so much multitasking. ... When you're young, you're worried about finding the right notes, breath control, articulation and developing a sense of rhythm, which is extremely difficult. But if it wasn't difficult, everyone would be doing it."

During more than two decades of teaching private lessons, she's also seen how the opportunity to play a solitary instrument or as part of an ensemble can help kids academically and beyond.

"When you're with other musicians, you can get so much

“.....
I always try to go first at auditions because the longer I wait the more fidgety I get.”
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camaraderie and support,” she explains, “and by the time ‘band kids’ get to high school, they’re mixed in with all grade levels, with older kids looking out for younger kids. Over the years, I’ve taught people who’ve gone into medicine and law and all kinds of challenging professions, and all have told me how the rigors of learning to play music helped them get there. I even had one student tell me music saved her life by giving her a reason to stay in school.”

Monica and Gil Hoang happily agree with all of those points and are grateful that their three kids are good students who genuinely appreciate the balance between the academic subjects they enjoy and the hours they spend every week with their music. All are apt to go on to college, with Nathaniel leaning toward science, Ava loving English language arts, and young Louis currently insisting he’s going to be a zookeeper.

The certainty expressed by these three that they’ll keep playing throughout their



Now a fifth grader at Love Creek Elementary, Louis Hoang declared his love of the cello long before kindergarten.

adult lives for the sheer pleasure of it is ... well, music to Monica’s ears.

“They all have good days and bad days in terms of how well they’re doing, but they know they have to keep going and get over that hump — which is a knowledge they can apply to other life challenges,” she says.

“A benefit to all three playing different instruments is that they don’t feel competitive — they can do three different things and go with their natural gifts.”

The Hoang kids smile in response to that praise, which prompts a comment from their proud mom that they may or may not have heard before and probably won’t forget any time soon:

“I have to admit it’s my dream they’ll play together in a little mini concert some day on a stage or maybe just right here at home.” ■

Chris Beakey writes from his home in Lewes. His most recent novel is “Fatal Option,” published by Simon & Schuster.

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Earning good grades and business accolades is hard work, but when you win the Delaware Middle-Level Professional Cup from the Business Professionals of America it's time to celebrate. Encouraged by their teacher, Daniel Shockley, center, Mariner Middle School students, from left, Natalie Longo, Macy Davis, Aubrie Sylvester and Caleb Marcus do it with gusto.

Future Assets

Business Professionals program is paying dividends at Mariner Middle School

BY CHRIS BEAKEY | PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLYN WATSON

A group of high-achieving students from Milton's Mariner Middle School can justifiably brag about the multiple honors they received earlier this year from the Delaware chapter of Business Professionals of America, the nation's foremost career and technical student organization. Yet on a spring afternoon they're having a lot more fun talking about the challenges they faced in earning those awards. It's a free-for-all sharing of recollections:

"Figuring out who would do what — the strategy, the flyers, the spreadsheets."

"But before that, the objectives. Like what are we really doing and how's it gonna work?"

"Also the deadlines ... and time management, because if you can't do that there's no way you can make the deadlines."

"Plus, dealing with your other homework and sports and honor society stuff."

"And trying not to get too annoyed with everyone ..."

The last comment inspires scattered laughter, which inspires an important question from their business teacher, Daniel Shockley: "So how did you all address those challenges?"

Hannah Wells, who earned a fourth-place award for her demonstration of Business Fundamentals, sums it up nicely.

"Well, we finally realized we'd have to delegate based on who was better at what, meaning strengths and weaknesses. And then when we struggled, we lifted each other up a lot."

With an approving nod, Shockley stays on the topic of lessons learned.

"So what do you think is the ultimate takeaway?"

"The whole thing helped prepare us for working with other people," says Macy Davis, a member of the team — alongside Elena Booth, Kate Hill and Emily Wells — that won first place in the Administrative Support team category.

“And how to make everything fit even though you have to accept that not everything is going to go smoothly,” adds Blair Chubb, who won a third-place Graphic Design Promotion award for a flyer promoting another upcoming BPA conference.

“But the bottom line is you worked through your differences,” Shockley summarizes.

Individual and group efforts

Amid nods all around, it's apparent that preparing for the high-intensity event in February was a unique bonding experience. There is zero acrimony in the room and lots of camaraderie as the middle-schoolers reminisce about the honors they achieved as a group: The Middle Level Professional Cup, awarded for overall excellence, and the Quality Chapter Distinction Award for member participation, planning, officer team selection and development, and effective budgeting.

It's an auspicious achievement for all of Shockley's BPA students, who form the only BPA chapter in the Cape Henlopen School District. Now in its sixth year, the chapter's development was shepherded by Shockley, a former member of the organization and judge for its state competitions. It was an arduous process that required approval of a chapter handbook detailing a formal structure, a membership development plan and a lengthy application that had to be approved by the BPA national office.

The biggest reward to date, Shockley says, came from the group's opportunity to participate and perform so well in the state conference, which brought 1,300 middle and high school students from Delaware's public and charter schools to Wilmington's Chase Center for the first live such gathering since the end of COVID pandemic restrictions. (Several Mariner winners went on to attend the BPA national competition in Anaheim, Calif., in late April, where they earned five more awards as individuals and collectively on behalf of their school.)

Joining Hannah, Macy and Blair on the honors stage, Caleb Marcus, Aubrie Sylvester and Addison Zimmerman earned a first, second and fifth place, respectively, in the Business Fundamentals category. Ariel King won second

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place in Graphic Design Promotion. Addison also earned the top award for Computer Literacy alongside Kate Dowd, who came in second in that category. Emily Wells was first in the competition to design a “state pin” reflecting Delaware’s unique characteristics. And Natalie Longo and Kate finished second and third in Word Processing.

Prepping for real-world challenges

It was a heady experience for the Mariner students who made live presentations to the judges, and an illuminating opportunity for all who took part in workshops led by experts in human resources, entrepreneurship, business management and other topics. Throughout the event there were many reminders of how the project-based learning they’ve experienced in Shockley’s business class reflects real-world challenges related to all kinds of enterprises.

“I joined BPA at Mariner in seventh grade because I liked the community service and other things they were doing,” Caleb recalls. “I got interested in digital citizenship, which teaches you the basics of online etiquette, do’s and don’ts of posting on the internet, and just being digitally smart and safe online.”

Questioned on the assumption that those lessons are a precursor to a career in technology, he adamantly answers: “No, not at all. I want to go into the culinary arts — probably as a pastry chef. But you can’t really do much of anything in business unless you can deal with the web.”

Two other groups of students collaborated to create concepts for special events with a Delmarva flavor and a strong likelihood of earning a profit. Proposals created by Blair, Kate, Allison Ortiz-Revera and Mia Scott celebrated the achievements of Jimmie Allen, a country music star and Milton native. In tune with efforts to recognize Allen, the students had to create activities that would attract lots of attendees while setting a price for admission that made financial sense.

Local band performances, a singing competition, and a softball tournament made the cut for the proposed events, with proceeds going to the Cape Henlopen Education Foundation. To demonstrate their fiscal prowess, the students proposed partnerships with Schell Brothers, Bayhealth, Preston Automotive, Irish Eyes restaurant, SoDel Concepts, Beebe Healthcare, Dogfish Head Brewery and Highway One Productions for funding.


In pursuit of those same audience-inspiring and profit-making

“You can’t really do much of anything in business unless you can deal with the web.”

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goals, another group composed of Liam and his friends Harper Kaser, Jackson Williamson and Thomas Draper proposed an event to honor the late Thomas H. Draper, Thomas's grandfather and the founder of Draper Media, which operates television and radio stations throughout Delmarva. They proposed tours of Dogfish Head Brewery (co-owned by Draper's daughter Mariah Calagione and her husband, Sam), a 5K run, tours of the Draper Media Complex, and helicopter rides.

Looking ahead to careers in business and beyond

Virtually all participating students also had the opportunity to pursue individual projects. As a seventh grader and new BPA member, Aubrie learned she wasn't nearly as shy as she thought herself to be after excelling in interviewing exercises related to her interest in human resources, while fellow seventh grader Zoe Hennessy actively engaged with all of her fellow BPA members on a variety of projects and learned the importance of flexibility.

Meanwhile Gabrielle Hamstead and Lelia Hughes explored the possibility of creating a video encouraging students to attend Mariner Middle instead of alternative schools serving sixth-through-eighth graders.

Looking out at the entire group, Shockley emphasizes his own pride in their awards and the experience they've all gained through the workshops and hands-on activities.

"I appreciate all of the time you've taken to be part of this, and

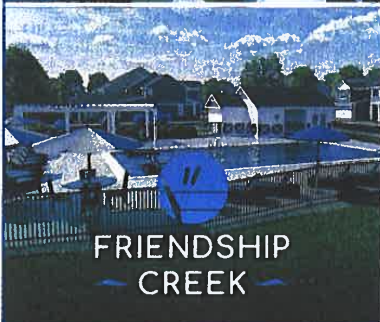
am glad to see the networks of friendship you're building beyond the classroom and the opportunity to experience what you'll face in the real world," he says with an easygoing smile.

The students seem to agree wholeheartedly with that sentiment and, when prompted, begin offering examples of how BPA participation will support their success in future careers in nursing, graphic design, broadcasting and farming as well as avocations that aren't distinctly within the business world.

That discussion is still going when Shockley gets called into the hallway to assist another teacher, which gives the 20 or so students a chance to talk behind his back. Prompted by the question "What do you think of the guy who's started this and is keeping it going?" they speak at length about the tremendous amount of time their teacher devotes to every single student, emphasizing his ability to balance instruction, team-building and individual mentoring.

It's a fine tribute to Shockley, who holds a doctorate in education and speaks in equally glowing terms about every student in Mariner's BPA chapter. And it's also another telling moment for the group of seventh and eighth graders who've found that friendship and teamwork can help fuel the pursuit of academic excellence, career preparation and a productive future. ■

Chris Beakey is a frequent Delaware Beach Life contributor and the author of "Fatal Option," a thriller published by Simon & Schuster.



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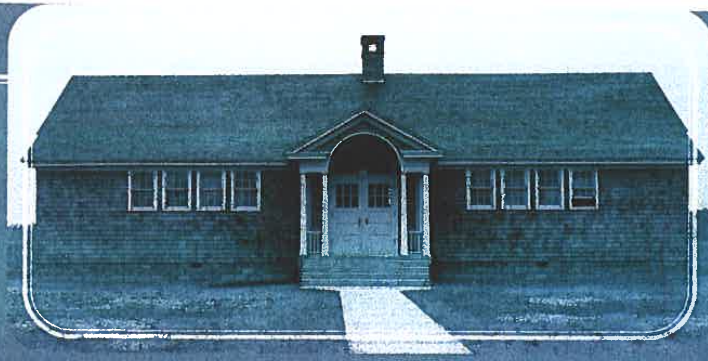
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A Haven Amid Unjust Times

BY CHRIS BEAKEY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLYN WATSON

Edification and uplift were on the curriculum at the segregation-era Nassau School, whose former students want to preserve this happy part of their past

Years from now, when local historians recount the effort to save the Nassau School, an architecturally distinct building just steps from the roaring traffic at the Five Points intersection, they're bound to spotlight Sandra Neal, Jeanette Williams Peterson and other former students of a certain age. Their memories and the circa-1922 edifice are testaments to a community where children were protected yet challenged to prepare themselves for successful lives.

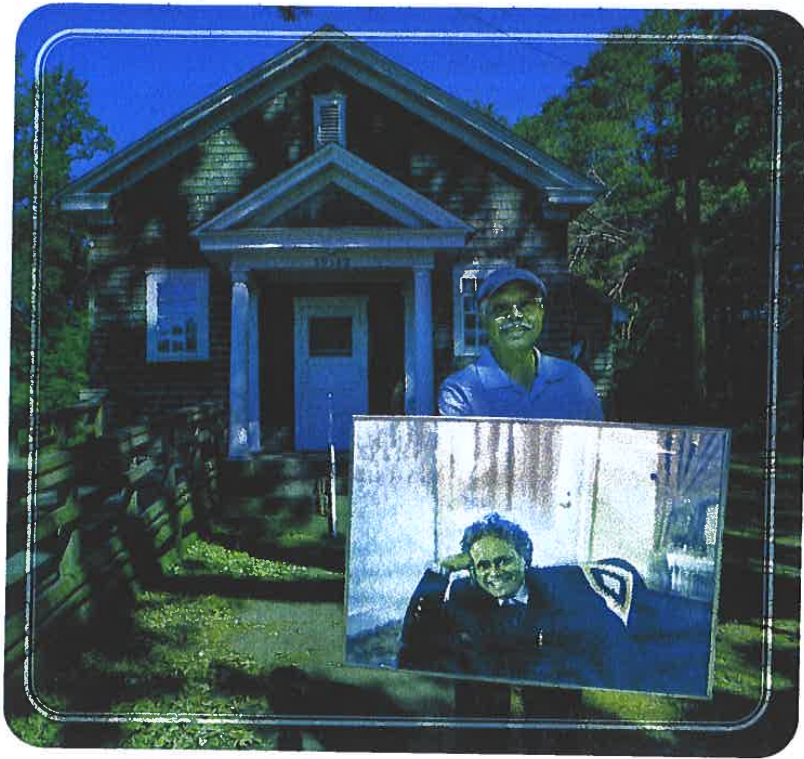
"The school was where we found our sanctuary, but it was part of a larger neighborhood where we all felt connected," recalls Neal, who attended grades one through six in the two-room building prior

to desegregation. "The church was right across the street, and farther down was Al Wiltbank's store where we got penny candy ... and at the intersection of Route 1 was the Five Points Beer Garden, with a white side and a black side."

"It was a community that took care of everybody," adds Peterson, who attended the school from the first through fifth grades. "My dad was a cook who was known all over town. We played outside but made sure we were home when that street light came on. We had teachers who really cared and who spent plenty of time making sure you learned. Back in those days in our neighborhood they helped you, but you really had to help yourself." ▶



Longtime friends Sandra Neal and Jeannette Williams Peterson share happy memories of their days at the Nassau School, pictured here in its current state, and on the facing page in 1941. A broad coalition of local church and civic leaders are collaborating to save the historic building.



LEFT: Rabbit's Ferry alumnus Paul Selby visits the school with a photo of his Aunt Hilda, who taught the youngster there from first through third grades. The school is now a community center for the Israel United Methodist Church and other groups.

BELOW: Rabbit's Ferry students enjoy recess at the school's playground in 1952, more than a decade before many African-American children would transition to integrated schools.

Most of the physical aspects of that neighborhood — known as Belltown — have disappeared. The former John Wesley United Methodist Church has been vacant for years. The general store and the beer garden are distant memories to residents who now have vast shopping and dining options for miles along Route 1. And without strong support from the Southern Delaware Alliance for Racial Justice and the Nassau School Coalition, there's no guarantee the school wouldn't have been damaged or moved as the Five Points intersection is redeveloped by the Delaware Department of Transportation, which owns the building. DelDOT is working with the coalition to preserve it, but eventually the group will have to buy the school from the state and raise additional funds to turn it into a museum.

"We're a diverse group who are absolutely committed to preserving and restoring this school to remember a part of our history," says coalition member Drew McKay of Lewes. "We can't do that with a historical marker. We want a building people can go into — a physical place where people can learn about life during segregation."

If the coalition succeeds, it will likely be due to the influence of several civic organizations, current and retired pastors of local churches, and help from real estate developers as well. Together, they're determined to replicate similar efforts that have repurposed school buildings from the segregation era as educational and community gathering places for years to come.

History rooted in discrimination

One of the best-known efforts to save Delaware's segregation-era schools was the renovation of the Rabbit's Ferry School off Robinsonville Road near Love Creek. Like Nassau, it was one of more than 80 schools built for African American students by Delaware industrialist and philanthropist Pierre S. du Pont between 1922 and 1925. Today it's a community center serving many different groups, including members of the Israel United Methodist Church.

Architecturally, the Rabbit's Ferry and Nassau schools are



very similar, as described in detail by former Delaware State University Associate Provost Bradley Skelcher, author of "African American Education in Delaware: A History Through Photographs, 1865-1930."

"[D]uPont hired James O. Betelle, an architect who was also a professor at Teacher's College at Columbia University, to design the schools," Skelcher wrote. "There were plans for one-, two- and three-room school buildings that were designed to look like homes. The thought was that this would reduce trauma for young children because it would look like they were entering another home when they went to school."

We want a building people can go into — a physical place where people can learn about life during segregation."

Architecture buffs may be quick to notice features such as Nassau's arched portico and the large windows and elegant woodwork at both schools, all of which are also intentional and practical, Skelcher adds.

"The schools were designed to maximize interior space to allow good air quality, with natural light that was considered better for reading than artificial light. They also had efficient and modern heating, interior wash rooms and efficient ventilation to air out the students' coats. The exteriors were in the Classical Revival Style, which was popular in the 1920s during a time of nostalgia for the past," Skelcher says.

Design considerations aside, du Pont was focused on the future when he embarked on the project as a philanthropic and business endeavor. As chairman of General Motors and president of E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Co., he was concerned about the poor quality of Delaware's public school system for students of all races, and about its impact on his workforce.

Low attendance among African American students was a problem

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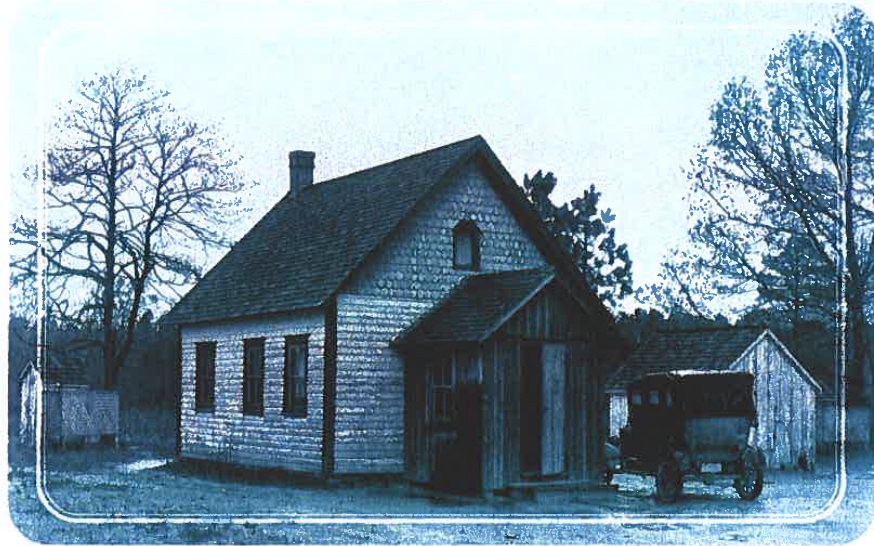
because many were the children of migrant farmers and were discouraged by landowners from attending. Another challenge was inequitable distribution of tax revenues, which put schools serving African American students at an extreme disadvantage. When African Americans rented a house from a white property owner at that time, for example, their tax revenues only supported schools for white students.

It's important for the Nassau School to become a museum and education center because there's often been an attitude to erase us, or pit us against each other, or cast all memory of us aside."

As a result of advocacy by du Pont and others, including Alice Dunbar-Nelson, an African American teacher at Howard High School in Wilmington, lawmakers in 1919 passed the New School Code requiring equal distribution of school funds. But when Delaware residents balked at the prospect of raising taxes, the industrialist founded the Delaware School Auxiliary Association, which directed more than \$5 million to build schools for students of all races, including more than \$2 million specifically for African Americans.

While court-ordered desegregation of the state's public schools took place in 1959, students attending at least one of them, Rabbit's Ferry, didn't transition to integrated schools until the 1960s. Rabbit's Ferry is also one of just a few such schools in Sussex County that are still standing. Others include the former Rehoboth Colored School on Oyster House Road, which served as the Immanuel Shelter until 2019; the Richard Allen School in Georgetown, which may soon become an educational center; and the Warwick School also called the Harmon School on Route 24 near Oak Orchard, which is now home to the Nanticoke Indian Museum.

The Rabbit's Ferry school was one of more than 80 built with funding from industrialist Pierre S. du Pont and designed by architect James O. Betelle to resemble modest homes.



Indelible memories and lessons learned

For Paul Selby, protecting the Rabbit's Ferry school has been a poignant way to preserve warm memories of fellow students and teachers who thrived despite discrimination.

"I went to Rabbit's Ferry for first through third grade and was taught by my Aunt Hilda, who was one of four teachers in my family," he recalls. "Like all teachers in those schools, she was the principal, nurse, counselor and expert in all of the subjects from first to eighth grade. All of the parents were more involved back then but the teacher was the authority. The kids knew that and behaved accordingly."

In hindsight, Selby appreciates that disciplined environment, but emphasizes it came with a sense of camaraderie among teachers and students who didn't dwell on the inequities of their school experiences compared to those of white students.

"There wasn't a lot of conversation about those separate venues," he says. "It was the way of the world in which we lived. Right out back of the school we had a softball diamond set up and in later years we added a swing set and sliding board. That made it feel like Christmas all year long. And even though we went to separate schools, we loved the weekends when we could play with our friends of different races."

Neal speaks warmly of what it felt like to attend the Nassau School.

"Teachers and students always came dressed for school. Mrs. [Levata] Glenn, one of our favorite teachers, was usually in a dress with a cinched waist and a belt but sometimes in a suit skirt. We had to use second-hand textbooks but she would bring in all of her magazines. And we all had jobs — like cleaning up the erasers. We also had hot lunches — like soup and sandwiches with cherry pie — prepared by a lady named Lillian Maull."

Preserving the Nassau School at its current site, she says, is the best way to honor the struggles and successes of many generations.

"It's important for it to become a museum and education center because there's often been an attitude to erase us, or pit us against each other, or cast all memory of us aside. We need to save it for the sake of remembrance of the Jim Crow era, as an anchor to our history."

Paving the way to preservation

While the successful preservation and reuse of other school buildings should bode well for protecting Nassau, the passage of time has put the structure's stability into question. DelDOT recently made repairs to its roof, but there are concerns that the condition of the foundation could make it difficult to repair or move the building to a new site.

That's all the more reason, McKay says, to redesign the Five Points intersection in a way that protects the building from further harm while amassing the financial support to ensure it becomes an educational resource. (Due to coronavirus delays, cost estimates have yet to be formulated.)

"I really want to emphasize that this is a multigenerational, multiracial coalition," he says. "Right now it feels like we're just getting our oar into the water, but I know we have the staying power to protect and renovate this historic structure. It's the best way to honor the achievements of students and educators who overcame the inequities of segregated, second-class education. We're going to ensure it's an active reservoir of history that will not be forgotten." ■

Chris Beakey is a frequent contributor to Delaware Beach Life and the author of "Fatal Option," a thriller available in hardcover and paperback at barnesandnoble.com.

To Join In

For more information, or to donate to and/or get involved in the Nassau School Coalition — a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit — contact Drew McKay at belltownnassauschool@gmail.com.