

Wenonah Historical Society Newsletter

Next Meeting at 7:30 P.M. on
Friday, May 11, 2012

Volume 10, Issue 5, May 2012

THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE *by Charles Horan*

Dear Members,

Hello to all. May 11th will be our last formal meeting of the season. Our program will feature the abbreviated finale of Richard Dilks' "Wenonah Before it Was Wenonah" (described below). Richard, a life-long resident of Wenonah, talked at our January meeting about the land that would become Wenonah before there were inhabitants and then of the land when the first inhabitants arrived some 12,000 years ago, taking us to the 19th century. This Friday, Richard concludes his presentation with a tour through the place that was here in those mid-19th century decades that immediately preceded the founding of Wenonah in 1871. He will explore those buildings still standing and other elements still visible that continue to link us to the time and place before there was Wenonah.

Mark June 8th on your calendar as it is the date of our annual picnic. The picnic will start at 5:00 P.M. and the main course will be catered. On Friday, Jean Cowles will be asking for volunteers to provide appetizers and desserts.

I want to thank Jo Dominy for taking on the lion's share of the wonderful post meeting refreshment duties at our meetings this year, as well as all others who

generously contributed. I hope you will agree with me that this has been another good year for the WHS with insightful and interesting programs. Please feel free to put on your thinking cap and give me ideas for next year's programs. Our Kick-off Classic will be on September 14th. Details will follow.

I hope to see you this Friday, May 11th at 7:30 P.M. Don't forget our New Year's resolution to bring a neighbor to a WHS meeting. This Friday would be a great opportunity to do so.

Before There Was Wenonah: Gentle Fields and Country Lanes...

Imagine it is 150 years ago, maybe a little bit more. You find yourself in the rural fields and farmlands of Southern New Jersey, a prime agricultural area close to the markets of bustling, urban Philadelphia. The first thing you notice is how open the place is. The land

is high and well drained and surprisingly rolling and hilly in places. There are almost no trees, just fields filled with a variety of vegetables. Sweet potatoes are a common crop but there are other things too, and they are destined for the dinner tables of Philadelphia and surrounding communities. The fields had been cleared in the early 18th century and farmed for generations. There are a few trees, perhaps a hedgerow here or there and small clusters of shade trees near the scattered farmhouses. The most imposing farmhouse

has thick stone walls and is the oldest building in the area. Built in the mid-18th

2011 WHS OFFICERS

| | |
|----------------|---------------|
| President | Charles Horan |
| Vice President | Paul Lader |
| Secretary | Vicki McCall |
| Treasurer | Carol Wiltsee |
| Trustee | Betty MacLeod |
| Trustee | Louis McCall |

Meetings are held on the second Friday of each month (except June, July and August) at the Train Station Community Center.

century, it was a tavern in colonial and revolutionary times. There are a few other farm houses, barns and out buildings. One dates from the 1770's and others from a bit later. A couple are the sturdy homes of tenant farmers and one is the home of a tanner. All these structures are connected by a lacework of unpaved country lanes, usually intersecting at odd angles. One lane leads to a grist mill with the mill pond and miller's home nearby. Another leads to the banks of a navigable creek, the busiest place around

with wharves, warehouses and barges shipping goods to and from Philadelphia.

This could have been one of innumerable places in our region in 1850. But it was here. Before the railroads came and changed everything, before a group of businessmen and investors (mostly railroad men) formed themselves into the Mantua Land & Improvement Co., proposing a venture to turn these fields into a most remarkable community, this was the place that became Wenonah.

THE WENONAH MILITARY ACADEMY
by Herbert R. Rambo of the *Times* Staff
July 12, 1967

WENONAH—All that remains of the Wenonah Military Academy is a few yellowed catalogues, portions of a brick wall and memories. But to the men who called WMA their alma mater, it will always exist.

Officially the academy closed its doors for the last time in 1935 at the height of the Great Depression. The main building was razed as a fire hazard in 1937, not because it was unsafe, but simply because it was unoccupied.

At one time the campus included two athletic fields and the educational complex. The huge, main building, five stories in one place, dominated the community of Wenonah.

Originally the Academy had been the Wenonah Inn, a fashionable place for Philadelphia society to retreat in the 1880s and 1890s. In the days of horses and carriages, city people would drive out to savor the pleasures of country life.

But as trains and automobiles made their appearance, the shore resorts began to

siphon off the vacationers. The big inn was closed in 1900.

One Captain Jones—whose first name has been lost to history—got the idea for a military school while riding past the old inn on his way to Philadelphia, where he headed the now-defunct Wanamaker Cadets. The cadets were a drill team sponsored by the department store.

He approached the Stephen Greene family, Philadelphians who owned the inn, who agreed and the academy was opened in 1904. Financial backing was provided by the Greens.

In 1912, Doctor Charles H. Lorence, of Wenonah, assumed the presidency and the academy experience its greatest growth. At its peak, WMA enrolled over 200 young men.

The Depression, the opening of Valley Forge Military Academy and other private schools and other factors contributed to the closing of the once-renowned school. The institution went bankrupt.

David Knight, the last living member of the WMA faculty, lives at the site of the old academy. He taught there from 1920-25 as a mechanical drawing teacher. In 1925 he joined the county public school system as a teacher, but still taught at Wenonah as a relief officer, or substitute.

He purchased part of the academy property at a tax sale a number of years ago. He built a home there where he and his wife, Kathryn, live, often playing hosts to visiting alumni and answering the few letters that WMA still receives.

"Every once in awhile, I get a letter from somebody asking the rates for sending a boy to the school. I answer every letter that comes here," Knight said, "telling them the school is no longer operating."

A few years ago the alumni association was going to start a new military academy. It was their hope to carry on the "Wenonah tradition." Among the graduates are State Sen. Frank S. Farley, of Atlantic County, and former NY Yankee pitcher Herb Pennock (now a Cooperstown NY Baseball Hall of Fame member). But alumni were unable to obtain the rights to the name Wenonah Military Academy and gave up the plan.

The association still meets each year in Atlantic City and every year the aging grads talk about starting a new academy. But Knight feels it is just talk.

"We're getting too old now to start all over again, it just wouldn't work. But we can always hope," he said with a smile.

Getting the money wouldn't be too much trouble. Many of the WMA grads have fared well in their respective professions. They're all willing to put money into it.

Back in the days When WMA was one of the leading schools in the East, it was noted

for its athletic prowess and academic excellence. The school was frequently called "The West Point of New Jersey."

The school offered four courses of instruction: science, English, commercial and Latin scientific. Instead of honor rolls, the academy used four classifications: distinguished, honor, proficient and unclassified.

On the playing fields, WMA was known for its polo and football teams. Once the cadets beat a championship polo squad from West Point.

The only reminder of where the Academy once stood is a rampart-like stone wall that once was reinforced by two brass cannon maintained in their pristine glory by countless number of cadets whose errant ways earned them demerits, each representing two hours of extra duty.

"Gone are the barracks, the gym and drill halls where in pre-World War days the corps entertained as its guests at the mid-year dances with a drill of the "Butts Manual of Arms" done in cadence to some of the best bugling this side of taps."

Perhaps someday there may be a new WMA, but until that time, the alumni must content themselves with the only thing left to commemorate: a plaque imbedded in the old stone wall that once surrounded the academy.

It reads "Lest We Forget—on this site was located the Wenonah Military Academy — 1902-1935. Fond memories, the Alumni Association."

Gloucester County Times
Research by Jack C. Sheppard Sr.

WENONAH HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Stamp
Here

PO Box 32
Wenonah, New Jersey 08090

Wenonah Historical Society

Membership APPLICATION 2012

Membership Benefits

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

MONTHLY MEETINGS WITH INTERESTING PROGRAMS

ACCESS TO HISTORICAL ARCHIVES AND MEMORABILIA

INFORMATION BY KNOWLEDGEABLE WENONAHIANS

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

PHONE: _____

EMAIL ADDRESS: _____

RECEIVE NEWSLETTER BY EMAIL: YES OR NO

AMOUNT PAID \$ CHECK _____ CASH _____

DUES: \$15.00 PER FAMILY HOUSEHOLD PER YEAR

BRING FORM AND PAYMENT TO MEETING, OR MAIL. THANK YOU

WHS PO Box 32, WENONAH, NJ 08090
