

Newsletter

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YET ANOTHER WENONAH HISTORY

Wenonah was a housing development created by the Mantua Land and Improvement Company. This organization was a mix of men associated with local businesses, the West Jersey Rail Road and Philadelphia investors. The West Jersey tracks in Deptford Township below Woodbury had been realigned and a new station built called the new Mantua Station at Wenonah. This was sited in the middle of what was previously Isaac Stevenson's sweet potato field. This was the area proposed for the new town on the West Jersey Railroad. In December of 1870 the decision was made to form this land company and to buy 572 acres of land in this area for \$69,575. The members present at the meeting subscribed to half of this amount.

One of the men attending this preliminary meeting was William Fredrick Allen, Resident Engineer of the West Jersey Rail Road. He was the son in law of Thomas Jones Yorke, president of the railroad and director of the Land Company. Allen's role in the creation of Wenonah was vital as it was his plat plan that would be the guideline for the future evolution of this new town.

In this plan the focal point was to be a "boarding house" facing a two-block park area. Adjacent to this was the new railroad depot. The streets were laid out in a grid pattern, roughly north and south, east and west. Wenonah was an early example of a

railroad suburb that was established around a transportation node both to derive profit from the sale of land and to provide ridership for the railroad itself.

The proposed Wenonah House hotel was to be 45 by 52 feet, three stories high with a back building 26 by 40 feet surrounded by a veranda 12 feet in width. It was described as being Doric in style but the cupola on top gave it a distinctive Italianate style, very Victorian. Each room was

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Meetings second Friday of the month at the Community Center except June, July and August

to have water and gas, a luxury for this period. An interesting feature was a windmill to provide power to pump water into a tank on the roof.

Bids came in from as far away as Cape May City. One bid of interest for the "Boarding House at Mantua Station" was for a sum of \$15,800 and was signed by Sterling Clayton, guaranteed by E. Stokes Co. of Woodbury, dated April 3, 1871. The lowest bidder was Harden and Brother of Camden in the amount of \$15,000 for which they were awarded the contract.

In 1872, the new Wenonah House opened for its first summer season with Benjamin Packer, a local resident in charge. Although the town was sparsely populated with only ten houses the hotel was fully booked up for the season. Newspaper accounts give a glimpse into the activities of the boarding house. Mentioned were plays, cakewalks, pigeon matches, a turtle supper for fifty people and concerts. One such event is described in the local newspaper.

"The guests of the Wenonah House prior to closing enjoyed a reedbird supper, and the last hop of the season, impromptu. At the supper the reed-birds were invitingly imbedded in the only toast offered as if they were anxiously expecting appreciation, which they fully met with, in connection with the hot waffles and dressing of "sugar and spice and all that is nice." Every luxury was included in the amply spread table, and all did full justice to the repast, and were reluctant to leave the supper room radiant with brightness and good cheer. Dancing on the "light fantastic toe" was heartily enjoyed until the participants were well tired. This was followed by a tableaux and stair dance, so vivid, so real that all could participate in the mirth. The respected proprietor and his lovely wife have our warmest thanks for their cordial hearty efforts for the comfort and pleasure of their guests, and as we parted it was with the earnest wish and prayer that they might be encouraged for many years with the same well filled house of cultured and pleasant people".

Wenonah was never a "boom town" and has had its periods of depression. One such period was in the early 1880's. Bookings at the hotel became meager; houses built on speculation by the Land Company remained unsold. It was decided to hire a resident agent to create momentum to the land development. The man hired was Ephram J. Lloyd of Salem. He pursued his job with vigor, his first action was to persuade the Mantua Land and Improvement Company to get out of the hotel business and sell the Wenonah House. The sale was to an Ann Linen of Philadelphia and then to a Samuel Shreeve of Mt Laurel in the same year and finally to Mahlon Newton of Woodbury in 1884.

Newton was an experienced, young hotel manager. He entered the hardware business at the young age of eighteen and four years later opened and managed the Newton Hotel at Broad and Delaware Streets in Woodbury. The first new approach at the suggestion of Lloyd was that the hotel would be opened all year. Flyers were distributed which read "*GO TO WENONAH the new town on the West Jersey Rail Road 11 miles from Philadelphia before making arrangements for the summer or for the year No healthier location in the vicinity of Philadelphia fine rolling country and the best of water, boating and fishing.*".

In 1884 Newton opened the Wenonah House with a reception with one hundred invited guests. There was a stringed orchestra from Philadelphia, Chinese lanterns, flags and flowers. This set the stage for the coming season. There were elaborate dinners, tableaux, lectures, yachting parties and hops. General William Sewell, a frequent guest of the hotel, who was the supervisor of the West Jersey Railroad, on several occasions provided private cars to be added to the excursion trains for trips to the shore. This period of 1884 to 1887 was very successful.

Unfortunately the ownership by Newton ended in 1887 when the building and grounds were sold to Senator George Pfeiffer, Jr. of Camden for \$12,000. He was a successful businessman owning a coal and lumber business, also the water supply business for the city of Camden. His hotel experience was the ownership of a hotel at

Brown's Mill In-The-Pines. Business at the Wenonah House diminished rapidly, possibly because of absentee ownership and lack of interest. In 1890 the building remained empty and reflected poorly on the financial condition of the community. The newspaper wrote "*There is no probability that the hotel will open this season. As things go at present the Wenonah House is of no advantage either to the owner or to the borough.*"

Finally in May of 1891, there was a public sale of the House and its furnishings by M. Thomas and Son of Philadelphia. The sale was a disaster, only the furniture was sold. Charles Middleton of Philadelphia held a \$7,000 mortgage on the building and foreclosure soon followed. The building was put on the market and sold for \$5,000 to Stephen Greene of Philadelphia.

Stephen Greene was one of the early pioneers of Wenonah. He was the owner of Helfenstein, Lewis and Greene, one of the largest printing firms on the East Coast. Mr. Greene vacationed for several years in Wenonah with his family as a guest at the Wenonah House. In 1880 he purchased a large tract of land and built a large home with many outbuildings including a large barn, stables and a greenhouse suitable for him to go into the florist business. His love was Wenonah and he became very supportive of the growth and betterment of the new village. One large philanthropic gesture was the financing of the construction of the new Methodist Episcopal Church.

In 1892, Stephen Greene created a syndicate incorporated as the "Wenonah Inn Company" made up of himself, Thomas Whitney Synnott, Dr. George Washington Bailey, J. Frank Shull, and Charles M. Wilkins. Mr. Synnott was the president of the Whitney Glass Works, Glassboro and had retired the year of the formation of the syndicate. Dr. Bailey, a Civil War veteran had been a medical doctor but because of overwork had health problems. He then went very successfully into the coal business and amassed a considerable amount of money. J. Frank Shull was the owner of the wholesale grocery firm of Shull, Wireback and Company, Philadelphia. Charles M. Wilkins was the owner of Patrick, Carter and Wilkins, manufacturer of electrical supplies.

Plans were formulated to build a new hotel on the site of the old Wenonah House, which was to be demolished. It was designed to accommodate one hundred fifty guests, three times as many as the old hotel. The total cost would exceed \$70,000, a considerable amount of money in that period. The paper reported *"a sufficient supply of water has been secured and the electrical apparatus is of the latest design, the plumbing, always one of the most important in a public house, has been put into the most competent hands."* There was a bowling alley, billiard room, barbershop, a 32 by 60 foot amusement room, and laundry and an engine-dynamo room."

The West Jersey Railroad started construction of a new "handsome" station as part of the agreement with the syndicate in their guarantee to build a new larger hotel. This station that opened in 1893 still stands today as the Wenonah Community Center.

Other improvements followed the 1892 construction of the Wenonah Inn. In 1894 servants' quarters were built on South Marion Avenue. Additional "shedding" for carriages and horses of the guests were erected on East Cherry Street. A large athletic field with a grandstand was laid out on East Cedar Street. An extensive sewage system was built not only for the hotel but also for the houses of the community. Remains of the system still exist today. A park area called "Camel Back" was created for the hotel patrons and the citizens of the town. This is now known as Comey's Lake, a Frank H. Stewart Estate acquisition. A wooded area on West Cedar Street called the "Glen" was cleared and "put into good order" for the visitors of the Inn. A new lake was formed at the foot of South Clinton Avenue with a large boathouse. This created accessibility to the Great Mantua Creek for canoeing which was quite popular during this period. This pond was called Greene's and later Parker's Lake. A small golf course was built extending from the recreational field to "Camel Back". Sidewalks were "flagged" replacing the old wooden walkways.

The hotel was an instant success and business was described as "booming". This brought back memories, to the townspeople, of the Wenonah House under the management of Mahlon Newton

in the 1880's. The staff consisted of a manager, chief clerk, room clerk, night clerk, chef, headwaiter, head cook, head engineer, head porter, master of ceremonies, waiters and bellboys.

On several occasions special trains were put on the railroad siding for large dances and special affairs for the convenience of the patrons. One such affair was the performance of an opera advertised in July of 1890. *"WENONAH INN, N.J. extraordinary event grand opera "FAUST" by Gounad sung in concert by the Wolffunger Grand Opera Company of Philadelphia chorus of 40 people"*.

Another interesting account was in 1895: *"A novel parade took place last Saturday afternoon by the guests of the Inn who have their teams here. There were about 35 turnouts and these were gaily decorated. The occupants carried flags and flowers while handsome horses held their heads high and seemed to feel as though they were engaged in the novelty as much as their owners. After parading through the borough they drove to Mantua and Woodbury"*.

In 1899 the Wenonah Inn Company sold their real estate holdings back to Stephan and Martha Greene for an unknown reason. It could have been that there was a growing apprehension that trains previously carrying guest to the Inn were now transporting them to seashore points. The railroads during this period had created spurs to most of the off shore islands giving access to the growing popularity of salt water bathing. The advent of the automobile after the turn of the century gave freedom to explore new vacation spots. Wenonah was no longer considered a summer resort.

In 1903, Stephen Greene started extensive restoration of the first floor of the building and the grounds. Rumors circulated that he was even going to build a large swimming pool. These changes seemed strange considering the dim outlook for the future of the building. These doubts were answered on September 20, 1904 when the Inn building opened under a new name – "The Wenonah Military Academy".

from the Milton H. Webb archives

WENONAH HISTORICAL SOCIETY



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