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Chapel has long, varied history

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By WALTER AULT
For The Times Herald

UPPER PROVIDENCE — One of the few places in Montgomery County that hasn't become heavily commercialized and still retains its picturesque 18th and 19th century rural charm is the peaceful village of Port Providence.

This small community alongside the old Oakes Reach section of the Schuylkill Canal and bordering Mont Clare has no gas stations, convenience stores or office buildings; just some quaint old homes, a tavern/restaurant and a few small churches.

Yes, Port Providence is quiet and peaceful, with very little traffic and the main activity usually being a few people walking on the nature trail along the canal or fishing in it, but this proud community has a rich history.

One of the aforementioned churches, the Union Chapel, built in 1832, also has a history tied closely to the community of Port Providence and how it has evolved over the years.

Port Providence's heyday was during the years of the canal's biggest popularity (its beginning in 1827 until the late 1850s). Nevertheless, Port Providence was an important commercial center even before construction of the canal, an old clipping from the Daily Republic Newspaper stated. As its name suggests, Port Providence was a "busy and important port on the Schuylkill River," the article adds, "with much activity on the waterfront, before nearby Phoenixville was even chartered."

"Port Providence was a thriving community in the beginning," said Port Providence resident and executive director of the Schuylkill Canal Association, Betsy Daley.

"The Schuylkill was heavily used and that made Port Providence important.

"Boat building was big business in Port Providence," Daley said. "There was also an ax factory, a general store, a tackle shop and a post office."

"In the late 1700s (before any good roads were built) the Schuylkill River was the principal means of transportation between Philadelphia and settlements west," the old newspaper article explained, stating that "all along the river's course there were small villages where boatmen would look for lodging, food and supplies." Port Providence was one of those villages.

"Eventually," Daley said, "just like any other community that relied on the river, when the canal opened more people moved to Port Providence and it became more residential than commercial."

Port Providence has had such a diverse and active history, it has had three names.

The riverfront community was originally called Jacobs, the newspaper clipping said, explaining that Israel Jacobs, a wealthy Quaker, was the original owner of the land that is Port Providence, as well as Mont Clare and other land along the Perkiomen Creek.

According to the newspaper article, when plans for the canal reached fruition in 1821, a speculating West Chester lumber dealer named Thomas Jones purchased part of the village of Jacobs “and built a dock for the purpose of shipping lumber by canal boats to Philadelphia.” Jones, the Daily Republic article said, renamed the village Lumberville.

However, as the article pointed out, when the village got a post office the name Lumberville had to be dropped because there already was a Lumberville elsewhere in Pennsylvania. Residents chose the much more colorful name of Port Providence.

Through all of these changes in Port Providence there has stood the Union Chapel. Even in its physical features — it is small and with rather plain architecture, resembling a one-room schoolhouse — parallel those of Port Providence.

“The Union Chapel was built jointly by the Dunkard Brethren and Methodist congregations in 1832,” Daley said.

“Both sects believed in simplicity and humility,” Daley added, explaining the chapel’s plain features.

“Services,” Daley continued, “were for many years conducted by visiting ministers called circuit riders.

“There were originally stables on the church property to cater to the horses of the traveling ministers, as well as those of churchgoers.”

There is little to see inside the one-room stone and stucco church, Daley said, other than the original pews.

The chapel was first called the Lumberville Meeting House, then the Union Meeting House and eventually the Port Providence Chapel, a historical document about the chapel states, adding that the chapel served residents and canal workers who passed through the area.

The two local denominations that founded the chapel eventually vacated it, the document states.

“The Brethren members built the Green Tree Church of the Brethren in Oaks in 1845 and worshipped there,” the document says. “The Methodists also left and formed the Ottebein United Methodist Church in Mont Clare.”

Despite these departures, and even in spite of a devastating flood in 1972 that damaged the chapel, it is not only still standing, but is in excellent condition, thanks in large part, the document reveals, to local residents who rose to the occasion and have maintained the structure since it was deserted in the mid-19th century.

Consequently, the chapel was utilized for another 100 and some years: well into the 1960s, part of that time serving as the home of Calvary Bible Church, now located in Phoenixville, and for many years serving as Port Providence Union Sunday School.

The chapel, which was not used after the severe flood of 1972, according to Daley, was eventually deeded to the Township of Upper Providence, which renovated it, and is working in conjunction with the canal association to include the chapel in a Schuylkill Canal master interpretive plan.

The Union Chapel is located at 929 Port Providence Road.

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