



# Downingtown Area Historical Society *History Notes*

Interesting bits of Downingtown area history

February 14, 2019

Volume 2, Issue 3

## A Train Derailment, the Destruction of the Chestnut Street Bridge, and a Downingtown Hero

*The Chestnut Street Bridge over the Amtrak/SEPTA tracks closed on January 28th and will be replaced over the next 18 months (give or take!). But did you know that when construction of this bridge began in late 1939, its predecessor had already been gone more than three years? In this issue of History Notes we will tell the story about a train derailment, a fire that destroyed the bridge, and a local hero who may have saved Downingtown from catastrophe.*

Despite being in the middle of the Great Depression, railroad traffic along the Pennsylvania Railroad's Main Line remained busy in 1936. Just after midnight on August 13th of that year, a train with a mix of box cars, tank cars, and gondolas roared past the station in Downingtown's west end heading toward Philadelphia. As the train approached the Chestnut Street Bridge in the Borough's east end, one of the crew members felt something was wrong when he heard an object dragging from the train. Before the crew could stop the train, the dragging item caused 18 cars to derail, including some that went off the tracks under the Chestnut Street Bridge.



*Workers are seen here on August 13, 1936 cleaning up an 18-car train derailment in Downingtown's east end at the Chestnut Street Bridge. Homes along the north side of Jackson Avenue can be seen in the background.*

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Fortunately, none of the crew were injured, and for the Pennsylvania Railroad this was a routine clean-up. Train crews and section gangs were immediately called in from throughout the Philadelphia area, and by the time the sun was up, hundreds of men were working to clear the wreckage and repair the damaged tracks. Two wreck-crane were quickly brought to the site as well. While the clean-up was going on, trains were diverted over the Railroad's Philadelphia and Thorndale branch (route of the Trestle Bridge). About twelve hours later, by noon of the 13th, all four Main Line tracks were repaired, and a steady stream of passenger and freight trains began to roll through. Though considerable wreckage of the derailed train remained off to the side, the worst was behind them and the emergency crews started to be sent home. But that was about to change.



*The old Chestnut Street Bridge provided a great spot for local residents to observe the clean-up of the train derailment. Notice the overturned tank car underneath the bridge. This and other tank cars were transporting highly flammable naphthalene. Not long after this photograph was taken a cinder from a passing locomotive ignited the naphthalene leaking from one of the cars resulting in a fire that destroyed the bridge.*

Work crews did not notice that one of the wrecked tank cars was leaking until wisps of smoke began to appear underneath, coming from a fire that most likely started from a cinder from a passing locomotive. Before the fire department could be summoned to the site, the car was fully engulfed in flames. Thick black smoke ascended hundreds of feet into the air. The smoke was so thick that drivers on nearby roads could see only a few feet in front of them.

The tank car that was aflame contained a highly flammable liquid called naphthalene. Four other wrecked cars carried the same substance, and each of them caught fire in succession. The Chestnut Street Bridge soon caught on fire too. Just a short time prior, dozens of bystanders used the bridge to watch the clean-up. Now it was a mass of flames. Fire burned up the bridge's wooden planks and the intense heat caused the steel structure to crumble. For the second time that day trains were rerouted onto the Philadelphia and Thorndale Branch.

As the fire raged out of control, Palmer Raysor, a Downingtown-based detective with the Pennsylvania Railroad checked the contents of several of the derailed train's boxcars that had been moved to a siding and discovered one which contained smokeless gun power. If this car caught fire and exploded, the lives of not only workers and bystanders nearby would be endangered, but the entire town of Downingtown was at risk, as flaming naphthalene from the tank cars would be hurled all throughout the Borough.

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By now, an assistant trainmaster from Lancaster named Wiltsie was apprised of the situation and he and Raysor jumped into action. First, they moved two acetylene tanks left near the gunpowder-laden boxcar by welders earlier in the day. The tanks were so hot the men burned their hands. Next, despite the entreaties of nearby workers, Raysor and Wiltsie ran to a locomotive that was used in clearing the wreckage. Wiltsie jumped into the cab and Raysor swung onto the step of the coal tender. While Raysor directed, Wiltsie backed the locomotive into the siding, hooked onto the boxcar which was now smoldering, and the two men pulled it a half mile to the east where the fire department from a safe distance doused it with water from their hoses. A major Downingtown disaster had been averted.



*The large gang of railroad workers cleaning up the derailed railroad cars paused for a moment when a train passed the site. The photograph was taken facing east from the old Chestnut Street Bridge.*

It is not known if the men were rewarded for risking their lives that day. No other information about Wiltsie could be found. Palmer Raysor continued to work several more years as a railroad detective in Downingtown. In 1939, after 30 years with the Pennsylvania Railroad, Raysor was granted a four-year furlough in order to serve as the new chief detective for Chester County. On August 28, 1943, he was driving away from the Downingtown police station after attending a hearing when he suffered a heart attack and died. He was 58.

Downingtown Borough Council urged the Pennsylvania Railroad for their help in rebuilding the Chestnut Street Bridge as soon as possible. But the Railroad objected. They were in the beginning stages of a major infrastructure project that involved the electrification of the Main Line between Paoli and Harrisburg. Electrification poles needed to be erected and wires strung before the new bridge could be built. It wasn't until the late summer of 1939 when a contract was awarded and construction of the bridge began. On January 4, 1940, a new Chestnut Street Bridge finally opened to traffic, over three years after it was destroyed by fire.

*Note: The photographs of the derailment in this article came from the Lewis Collection in the John W. Barriger III Railroad Library.*

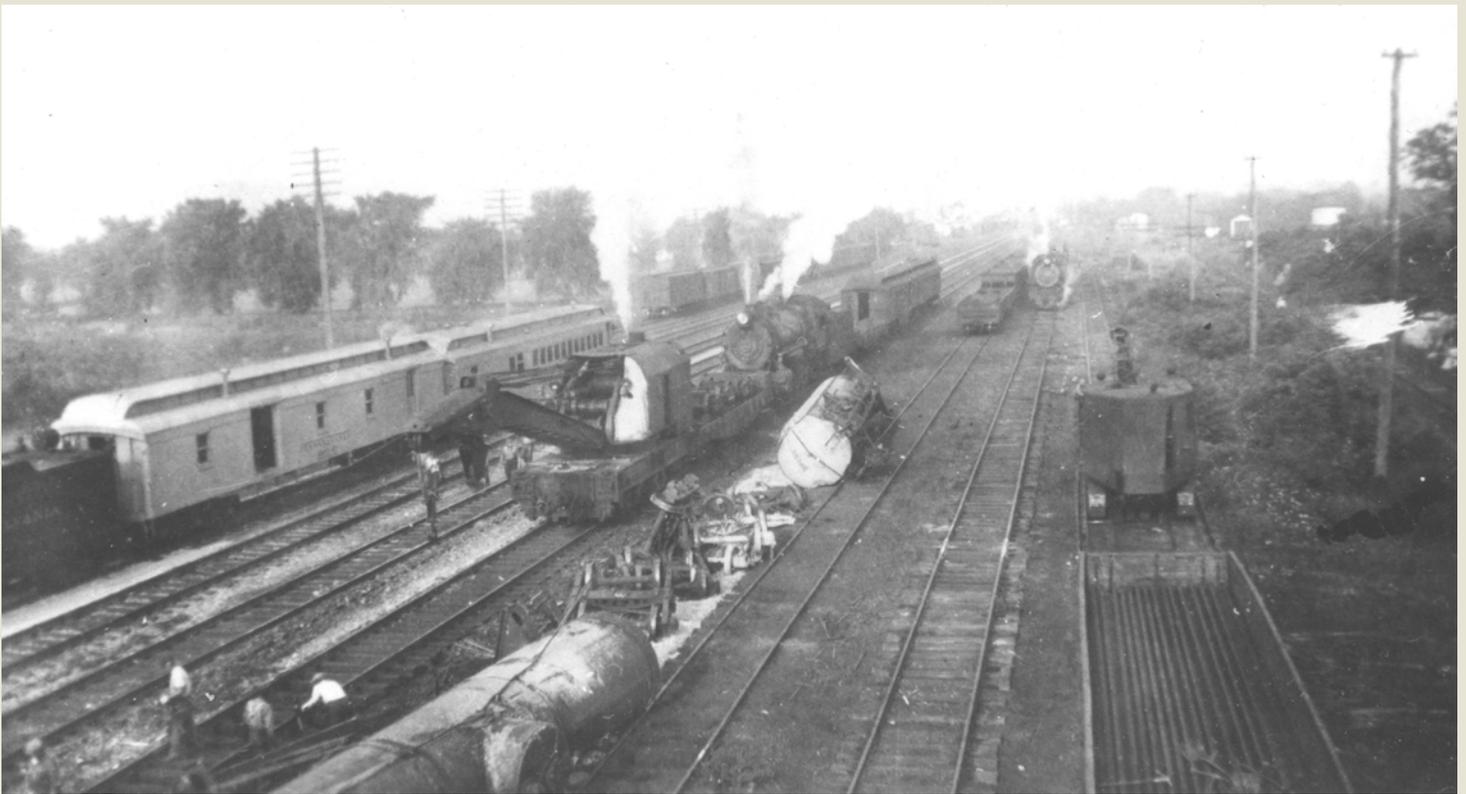
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*Above, the photographer took an image of the clean-up from under the bridge. The image below was taken on top of the bridge facing west. Some of the derailed cars were pushed off to the side so train traffic could resume on the Main Line. The sidings on the left served the Downingtown Paper Company. The company's smokestacks can be seen in the background.*



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*Above is another image taken on August 13, 1936 from the old Chestnut Street Bridge before it burned down that same day. By the time this photograph was taken, workers had cleared most of the wreckage from the 18-car derailment in order to allow regular passenger and freight service to resume. There were eleven tracks on the west side of the bridge: three siding tracks for the Downingtown paper company, four main line tracks, three tracks used as an interchange with the Reading Railroad's Chester Valley Branch, and the single tracked Chester Valley Branch itself (on the far right). Below is how the same view looks today. This section of the Main Line was electrified in 1938.*



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The Downingtown Archive announced the opening of the Chestnut Street Bridge in its January 4, 1940 edition (right).

Coincidentally, right above the article in a section of short snippets of the goings-ons of Downingtown residents, it mentions Palmer Raysor purchasing a car! Raysor and another railroad employee pulled a boxcar carrying gunpowder away from the derailment site in 1936.

Below, an aerial photograph taken in 1937 shows the missing Chestnut Street Bridge. The bridge caught fire and was destroyed on August 13, 1936 after the contents of several derailed train cars near the bridge ignited.

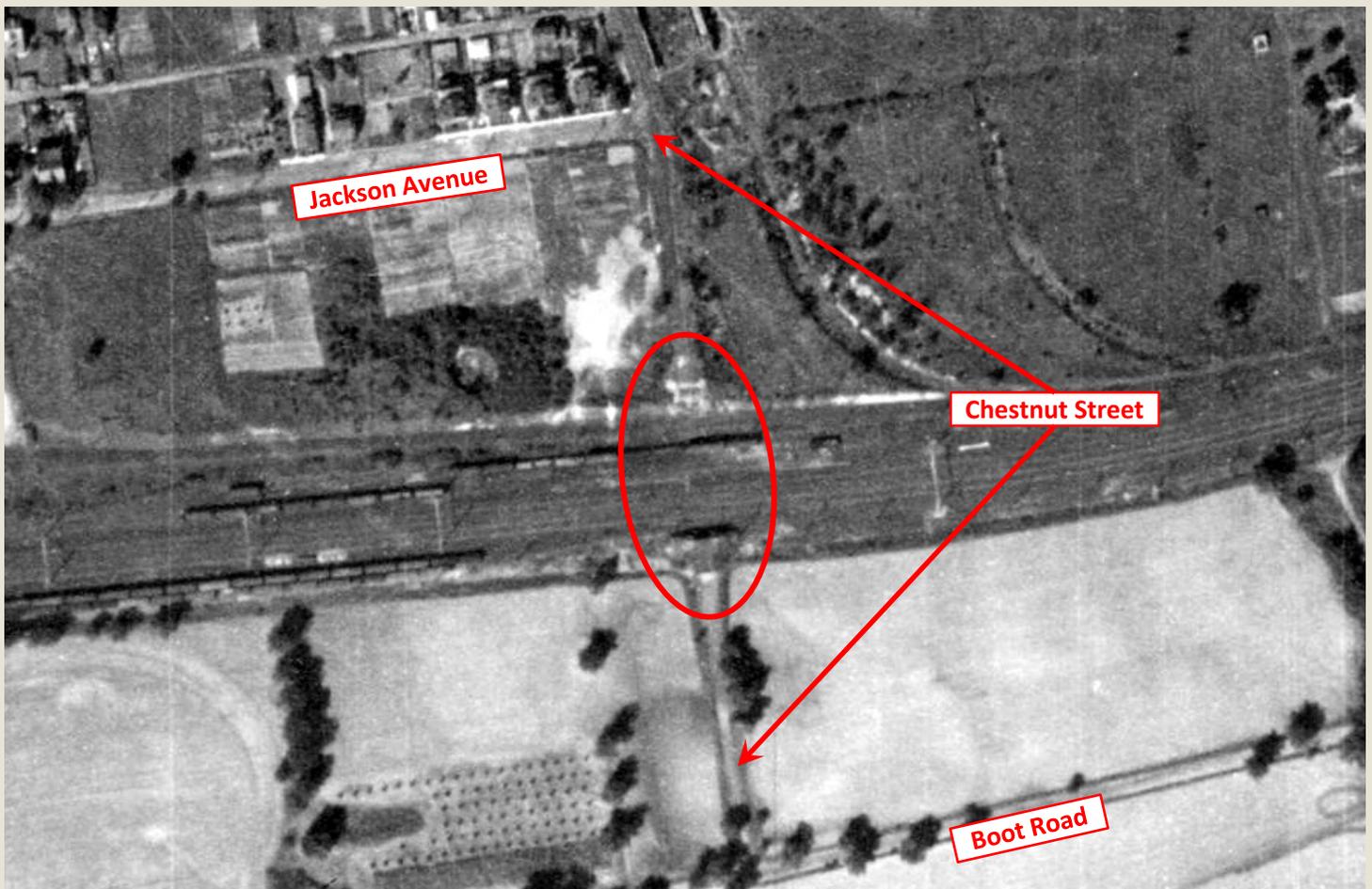
Palmer Raysor, chief detective of Chester County, has bought himself an automobile.

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## Chestnut Street Bridge Opened to Traffic

Boro Superintendent, Edwin Wagner, announces that the P R R railroad bridge on Chestnut Street was this morning thrown open to traffic.

The bridge was destroyed by fire several years ago, and persistent efforts by Boro Council to have it rebuilt have finally been rewarded.



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*The photograph above shows the Chestnut Street Bridge under construction in the late summer or early fall of 1939. Notice the structure was fabricated by Bethlehem Steel. The crane was on the track of the Reading Railroad's Chester Valley Branch which paralleled the PRR's Main Line for a short distance in the eastern end of Downingtown. The image below shows the completed bridge. In both images, notice the new electric poles recently installed by the Pennsylvania Railroad. Electrified trains first ran west of Paoli in 1938.*



## Downingtown Area Mystery Pic

Can you identify the location in the photograph below? The first person to correctly identify the location of this photo will be recognized as a truly perceptive scholar. Bonus points if you can name the school that operated out of this home in the late 1800s. Please send your response to: [dahs19335@gmail.com](mailto:dahs19335@gmail.com).



## Last Issue's Mystery Pic

**Nancy Duca** is truly a perceptive scholar because she was the first person to correctly identify this image as being on East Lancaster Avenue, now part of Dane Décor. **Hank Hamilton**, owner of Dane Décor, helped us get our bearings. The image faces south and the building in the left background was part of the Downingtown Manufacturing Company on Washington Avenue. The building on the right was incorporated in an addition to Dane Décor, but was destroyed when a fire swept through the store in 2006. The large maple tree, as you may know, has been a feature inside the store.

**Richard Keister** also responded to the Mystery Pic. Richard didn't know the location but believed the car in the image was a 1948 Lincoln convertible coupe. He added that the car was the last production U.S. car with a V-12 engine.



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# Advertisements for Non-Profits

## ***West Caln Historical Society***

The West Caln Historical Society will hold a meeting on Tuesday, February 19, 2019 at 7 P.M. in the West Caln Municipal Building, 721 West Kings Highway, Wagontown, Pa on the subject of: **United States Supreme Court**. The speaker will be Ross Kershey, Hall of Fame coach, historian, and college history professor. The event is free and all are welcome. The Historical Society also wants you to know that you can bring your old or outdated Rx drugs for safe disposal.

## ***Wallace Township Historical Commission***

The Wallace Township Historical Commission will hold a *Scherenschnitte* (paper cutting) workshop on March 16, 2019 from 2pm-4pm at the Wallace Township Building, 1250 Creek Road, Glenmoore, PA. Registration can be made at the Township building or by calling 610-942-2880. Leave your name and phone number in case of bad weather. The workshop is limited to 10 people. Participants should bring an 8x10 photo frame, a pair of sharp pointed scissors, and an X-ACTO knife. All other materials will be provided.

## ***Chester County Marine Corps League Detachment***

BINGO on the first and third Saturday of every month, 420 Chestnut Street. Public welcome. Kitchen opens at 5:30, Bingo Cards on sale at 6:00, Early Bird Special 6:30. Food available for purchase. Funds used by the Marine Corps League and Marine Corps League Ladies Auxiliary to help veterans from all branches of the service as well as others in the community.

## ***Community Luncheon***

Central Presbyterian Church, 100 W Uwchlan Ave, Downingtown, holds a monthly Community Luncheon from 11 AM until 1 PM on the first Thursday of each month, October through May. Their popular chili, chicken corn noodle, vegetable beef, and cream of potato soups are sold, along with sandwiches, salad platters, homemade desserts and beverages. For take-out service, call 610-269-1576 and ask for the kitchen. Bring a friend, meet a neighbor, or come alone and enjoy good food and fellowship.

## ***Greater Downingtown Business and Professional Women (BPW)***

Meets monthly on the 2nd Wednesday evening, at 6 pm, in the Thorndale Inn for a dinner, networking, program and meeting. All area women are welcome. Most nights there is a program such as a speaker. Call Mary Coyne for your reservation for dinner at 610-380-8869. We meet each month from September to June.

## ***Joseph's People, Downingtown chapter***

An ecumenical support mission to help unemployed or underemployed people. The group is entirely conducted by volunteers, and has been at St. Joseph's since 1995. Meets at 7:30 PM on the 2nd & 4th Tuesdays of the month. All are welcome. Visit web page, <http://josephspeople.org/our-chapters/downingtown/>, or just come to a meeting at St. Joseph's Parish Meeting Room behind the school, 460 Manor Ave., Downingtown. Call 610-873-7117. Leave Message. Leader: Cheryl Spaulding, Email: [cheryl.spaulding@josephspeople.org](mailto:cheryl.spaulding@josephspeople.org).

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## Historical Society's Wish List

The Downingtown Area Historical Society is a non-profit organization proudly maintaining the 310-year-old Ashbridge House and a large archives. The society can always use gifts in kind with an immediate need for:

- General household items and office supplies including:
  - Pens and pencils
  - Scotch tape and masking tape
  - Copier paper (both color and white)
  - Light bulbs
  - Paper towels
  - Large and small trash bags
  - Glue sticks (used for our newspaper clippings)
- Amazon gift cards or gift cards to Home Depot or Lowes. Sometimes we need to make quick purchases so gift cards would come in very handy.

To make a tax-deductible cash donation, use this link  
or send a check to the address below. Thank you!



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### Downingtown Area Historical Society

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610-269-1709

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[www.downingtownareahistoricalsociety.org](http://www.downingtownareahistoricalsociety.org)

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