

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 28, 2009

Improved Commerce in Delaware: When William Penn laid out Dover in 1683, near the geographic center of his "Three Lower Counties on the Delaware," transport was slow and the new settlers isolated. Small sailing ships plied the rivers flowing into Delaware Bay, carrying grain and supplies to small inland towns, such as Milford, Frederica, Dover, Smyrna, and Cantwell's Bridge (Odessa). In the early to mid-19th century, steamboats took over, mainly connecting Delaware to the markets of Philadelphia.

In 1832 the New Castle and Frenchtown horse-drawn railroad was built, connecting the Delaware River with access to Chesapeake Bay, thereby providing some limited commerce between Philadelphia and Baltimore without sailing all the way around Cape Charles. This was soon superceded by the first Chesapeake and Delaware Canal with its locks at both ends. There was also primitive rail service provided by the construction of the Philadelphia, Wilmington & Baltimore (P W & B), but people and goods had to be ferried across the Susquehanna River near its mouth. The first railroad bridge from Perryville to Havre de Grace was opened in 1855.

The Delaware Railroad was built the length of the state in 1859, with considerable opposition. Some important towns were thereby connected, others sprang up along the new railroad. What a difference that made in getting Delaware's produce to market and manufactured goods and supplies into the First State, not to mention the jobs the railroad provided! Coming off the P. W. & B. above Newport, the new line passed through New Castle, then followed the old New Castle & Frenchtown right-of-way through what is now State Road and Bear, turning south to Kirkwood, Mount Pleasant, Middletown, Townsend, Clayton, Cheswold, Dover, Wyoming, Felton, Harrington, Bridgeville, Seaford, and Laurel to Delmar on the southern border with Maryland. My grandfather Shallcross, while holding political jobs in Wilmington, commuted daily from Mount Pleasant, the closest station to his home at Belleview Farm. Spurs were soon built westward to Eastern Shore of Maryland points and southeastward from Harrington to Milford, Georgetown, Millsboro and Selbyville. As service increased, so did Delaware's ability to compete with other states in the growing nation.

Again there was opposition when T. Coleman du Pont proposed to build a paved highway for automobiles the entire length of the state. His plan was accepted (as he agreed to finance it), and an 18-foot-wide concrete road was planned from Claymont in the north to Selbyville on the southern border with Maryland. Constructed mostly in 1918, shortly after Mr. du Pont retired as president of the DuPont Company, its route was generally parallel to but slightly east of the railroad. The Philadelphia Pike, with its electric trolley line, already covered the 8 miles or so between the Pennsylvania line and Wilmington and from there the DuPont Highway headed almost straight south. By-passing New Castle and Middletown, it went through St. Georges and Odessa instead and kept to the east of Townsend, Clayton and Cheswold, going through Smyrna before entering Dover, where it went right down State Street past the Old State House and the Dover Green. From Dover, it kept some distance east of the railroad, passing through Magnolia and Frederica to Milford, then to Ellendale, Georgetown, Millsboro, Dagsboro, and Frankford to Selbyville. Mr. du Pont supervised the building of the entire road, using his big Model 66 Pierce Arrow. Other major road improvements did not come along until about 1930.