



The Delaware City Marina is a focal point of the quaint, historic town. Photo by Butch Comegys

Boom Times At Last?

& Dan Linehan
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Founded on unrealized ambitions, Delaware City is in the midst of its biggest redevelopment in living memory

Delaware City's auspicious name is a window into the aspirations of its founders, who hoped their small town would be a rival to Philadelphia.

Their lofty ambitions were grounded in geography and economics. The town was founded in 1826 at the entrance to the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, which opened three years later. Sitting aside the canal and serving as gatekeeper for the goods passing between Baltimore and Philadelphia, Delaware City held the potential to become a major trade hub.

Man plans and God laughs, as the old Yiddish proverb goes. Early competition from the railroads limited canal traffic, and its shallow, narrow, lock-and-dam entrance was soon inadequate for larger ships. By 1927, the main canal had been dredged and its entrance at the Delaware River moved two miles south, to Reedy Point.

The city has long since shed its big-time dreams and eased into an identity as a sleepy yet vibrant small town. In the 1950s, it had a small college, a hardware store, pharmacy, an elementary and secondary school, three grocery stores and four gas stations. Most were gone by the 1990s, though the city's population continued to hover around 1,700.

Today, Delaware City is in the midst of its biggest redevelopment in living memory. The 325-acre Fort DuPont site, annexed by the city in 2016 after a 287-to-150 vote referendum, could add hundreds of new residents and give the city an economic boost.

The second annual music festival, Fortify (see accompanying story), is scheduled for Saturday, Aug. 10, and is in part an effort to publicize the redevelopment.

Fourteen homes are being built this summer, but the biggest impact may be yet to come. Jeffrey Randol, executive director of the Fort DuPont Redevelopment and Preservation Corporation, said in June that he's received offers to build the following: a 300-unit apartment complex; commercial and retail space; a 425-site campground, and a hotel and conference center.

All of these projects are expected to be underway within 12 months, Randol says. Total construction spending is estimated at \$211 million over seven years, peaking next year and in 2021.

Delaware City's motto—"Historic Past, Bright Future"—reflects a preoccupation with history while hinting at an unslaked thirst for greatness. It's been like that here for some time, according to a 1938 Delaware guidebook that was part of a series funded by the Depression-era Works Progress Administration.

Unlike other cities that withered with the loss of shipping trade, "Delaware City is different," according to "Delaware: A Guide to the First State." The guide claims that "there is always, going on in the vicinity, or planned for the future, some large undertaking that may restore prosperity."

In the mid-19th century, that undertaking took the form of a massive peach boom—a local "peach king" had more than 110,000 trees—that helped popularize the fruit nationwide. A major blight ended the boom in the late 1880s.

Sturgeon and their eggs, caviar, soon replaced the peach as the next economic boomlet. But pollution and overfishing cratered the industry. According to a 1908 article in *Popular Science Monthly*, Delaware City prepared more than a keg a day of caviar in 1895. By 1901, it produced only six the entire year.

Dealing the city yet another blow was the postwar closure of forts Delaware and DuPont, which eliminated much of the regular foot traffic.

But the city soldiered on. And today, it continues to inject a little bit of "Slower Lower" into New Castle County.

A Brief Tour

The Delaware City Refinery would not be most residents' choice for a tour's first stop, but the facility dominates the horizon and visitors drive past it along Delaware Route 9 to enter the city from the north.

Built on 5,000 acres and opened in 1956, the refinery now employs about 570 people. It processes crude oil into fuel and is one of the largest refineries on the East Coast.

Though it once regularly belched noxious odors, the refinery today has little impact on the daily lives of residents and is undeservedly tied to the town's reputation, says Jill Snow, a lifelong resident and chair of the town's Planning Commission.

Take Route 9 into town and you'll soon hit the only stoplight, at Clinton Street, the main drag, named for the sixth governor of New York.

Take a left onto Clinton and you'll find a hodgepodge of 19th century and modern architecture. Cars are parked along the street because in the core of this old city there are few driveways.

Economic stagnation after the closing of the canal in the 1920s prevented the development that might otherwise have led to the city's modernization. It's a common phenomenon, more famously on display in Old New Castle, that's often referred to as "preservation by neglect."

"The abruptness of Delaware City's decline contributed to the preservation of its historic buildings and to the historic integrity of the town," according to a city website.

Citywide, about a third of the homes were built in 1939 or earlier, according to census data, compared to just 11 percent of homes in New Castle County as a whole.

That charm and history captured the attention of Kimberly Davis, a realtor who plans to open an office in Delaware City in early August under the name Innovations Realty.

"I was in Delaware City one day and it just struck a chord, that this is where your new home is going to be," she says, adding that the town's growth in recent decades demonstrates its potential.

"It's a little town that's off the beaten path," says Davis. "The revitalization that's happening is just amazing."

Perhaps the town's most popular outdoor recreation amenity is a trail beginning at the Delaware River and running along the branch canal. At the edge of town, it turns into the 12-mile Michael N. Castle Trail, which was completed in 2017 and spans the width of the peninsula. It's ideal for running, walking or biking.

Bird-watching is another popular activity, especially at Fort Delaware State Park. In fact, in 2013, the American Birding Association moved its headquarters to the Central Hotel. Built in 1830, the hotel is on the branch canal.



Visitors often go to the Delaware City Hotel to eat at one of the town's busiest spots, Crabby Dick's. Photo by Butch Comegys

There are two dining options: the family-run, traditional Kathy's Crab House and the livelier Crabby Dick's, often the town's busiest spot, especially on a summer weekend.

There is a slate of community events and parades, but the biggest annual event is Delaware City Day, a celebration that was held on July 20 this year.

Many of Delaware City's homes are affordably priced. As of 2017, its median home value was \$188,700, about 31 percent cheaper than the county as a whole. I moved here in

2016 in part because it was one of the few places where my wife and I could find an affordable home.

Jill Snow prefers to think of Delaware City as a mixture of different types of people. "I always describe it as a slice of the (American) pie," she says, meaning that it contains a little bit of everything.

The visitor may also have the sense of being surrounded by water. Delaware City is technically an island. There is the Delaware River, of course, and the old canal, navigable by small craft to where it meets the new canal near Reedy Point. And most of the city's western and northern edges are bounded by marsh.

Much of the city is located in the federal government's 100-year floodplain, meaning it has at least a 1 percent chance to flood each year. The city has been flooded several times, sometimes from hurricane-induced high tides. The river once flowed four blocks down Clinton Street to lap at the curb across the street from Snow's house.

The city has taken several steps to protect itself from the Delaware River. Last year, it installed a large permanent pump in a flood-prone downtown area. More substantially, the city built a downtown floodwall system in the early '00s that hasn't been breached since.

Snow says she and most residents feel well protected from the water, though she hedges that bet by buying flood insurance.

But for a place that looks backward as often as Delaware City, no tour is complete without a look into the past.

A Connection to the Past

The town treasures its history. One of the outlets for that enthusiasm occurs at the storied fire hall each Wednesday, when a small cadre of old men sit in plush chairs in the garage and reminisce.

One of them, Herb Bright, traces his family all the way back to the 1820s, when one of his ancestors came to the budding town as a tinsmith. He likely would have sold belt buckles, harnesses and other wares to the men who dug Delaware City's branch canal by hand.

These men paint an idyllic picture of the small town in the 1950s. As a boy, lifelong resident Mike Cook experienced the community's tight-knit atmosphere every time he stayed out late playing.

"Someone would call your parents and by the time you'd got home, someone in your family would be waiting," he says.

The town's history also is written in the two nearby forts, DuPont and Delaware, both built strategically overlooking the Delaware River. A ferry emblazoned with "Take Me to 1864" transports visitors to the island Fort Delaware, where re-enactors provide a glimpse into the martial and domestic life of the time.

The city's military history is linked to what may be its most tragic moment. In 1944, two brothers, ages 10 and 11, were killed in the explosion of a fragmentation rifle grenade they'd used as a toy. Townspeople immediately combed the city in search of similar explosives, and found about a dozen.

Reliving Delaware City's history is a popular pastime here. But there's the "Bright Future" part of its slogan, too, and few topics are more discussed than the Fort DuPont project.

A New Hope?

Just as it did for the nearby island fort, history passed by Fort DuPont without a shot being fired in anger. The site limped on in the postwar years. Part of it became a state park in 1992 and the rest is dominated by a mix of state agencies.

Jeffrey Randol first toured the site in June 2015 and says it was then like a "ghost town." It's not like that anymore; besides the seven homes being built this year, he's planning another 20 or so next year.

It's hard to predict the impact of the redevelopment, but it could eventually increase the town's population by 50 percent.

Randol says he is careful to market Fort DuPont as being of a piece with, not separate from, Delaware City.

Though many cities experience economic and social dividing lines—"the other side of the tracks," as it's sometimes called—Delaware City has largely avoided this phenomenon.

The homes in Fort DuPont are more expensive than the typical Delaware City home. The condos are priced in the upper \$300,000s, while the single-family homes are at \$450,000 through the \$600,000s.

Initially, there were plans to link Fort DuPont to the rest of Delaware City with a pedestrian bridge over the branch canal. But it would be expensive—it would need to swing up or side-to-side to accommodate boat traffic—and the city would have to pay. There is no indication that it's willing to do



Jeffrey Randol, executive director of the Fort DuPont Redevelopment and Preservation Corporation, is hoping that an additional 20 or so new homes will be built next year. Photo by Butch Comegys

so, meaning pedestrians from downtown Delaware City would have to walk about three-fourths of a mile up the branch canal and cross it at Route 9. Snow, a longtime resident, likes the idea of resurrecting a former canal-crossing ferry, the Dolly Spanker.

It's impossible to predict whether this connection to Delaware City's past will enliven its future. But, as shown in its residents' embrace of small-town life and its buildings' preservation by neglect, even stagnation has its fruits. And residential housing and commercial development are afoot. Stay tuned.

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Dan Linehan is a Minnesota native who moved to Delaware in 2016 when his wife got a job over here. After an 11-year career as a newspaper reporter and a one-year stint as a high school science teacher, Dan started freelance writing full time in 2017. He enjoys soccer, reading and hanging out with his two cats, Balrog and Buster.

