

# INTRODUCTION

The earliest permanent settlers to establish roots in Milford came to Kent and Sussex Counties between 1664 and 1676 after the English took control of Delaware from the Dutch and Swedes. Most early settlers came from old Somerset and Accomac Counties in Maryland and Virginia where English families were staking claims to small land grants of 200 acres on Maryland and Virginia's eastern shore. Other families moved north from Lewes after that town was founded in 1631 by the Dutch West India Company.

Henry Bowman obtained a patent from the Duke of York in 1680 to settle a 2,000-acre tract of land called "Saw Mill Range" that now encompasses Milford. Alexander Draper settled in Slaughter Neck in 1677, Luke Watson was granted land in Cedar Neck in 1676, Mark Manlove moved to Milford Neck in 1677, and Isaac Mason settled along Canterbury Road about 1685.

Milford was settled at the headwaters of the Mispillion River at a location called "Three Runs," at the confluence of the Mispillion River and Bowman's and Clark's branches. These early English settlers were industrious millers, farmers, merchants, and sailors. Milford got its start as a landing site and trading post built by a mariner-turned-trader, Joseph Oliver. Oliver was born about 1727 in Slaughter Neck near the plantations of Alexander Draper and Nehemiah Davis. He migrated north to the Mispillion River headwaters and during 1771-1773 purchased a 115-acre tract of farmland on the north side of the Mispillion River, where he established his home and wharf.

In 1787, Oliver divided his farm into a town grid and began offering lots to newer settlers, costing from \$3 to \$8 per year under the old English system of ground rents. The first lots were sold along Northwest Front Street in December 1786 and January 1787. By 1790, Milford had more than 80 structures built on Oliver's 115-acre farm extending from the river to the present location of Banneker School on North Street.

By 1791, Oliver had petitioned the General Assembly in Dover for a drawbridge over the Mispillion to be constructed along "Kings Highway" leading from Kent to Sussex County. The bridge permitted traders and travelers easy access to Sussex County along the road leading to the court at Lewestown. At the same time in 1787 that Oliver was selling lots for his new village, Parson Sydenham Thorne, rector of the Savannah Church located three miles west of Milford, decided to relocate his church to a plot of land donated by Oliver along Church Street in Milford. Parson Thorne married a wealthy widow, Betty Crapper, and purchased the stately "Silver Hill" mansion and 263-acre farm owned by the Cullen family. He soon built a gristmill just west of Oliver's landing. Together, these two enterprising leaders assured the survival of Milford as a new town through their tireless efforts to bring business, culture, religion, and civility to a primitive area.

Milford obtained its town charter in 1807, the same year Joseph Oliver died. New merchants established stores, wharves, and granaries along North Walnut Street, extending the business district two blocks to the Mispillion River.

The Mispillion River was the primary avenue of trade throughout the 19th century and it is not surprising that Milford became a major shipbuilding town around 1790, with John Draper's shipyard located on the north side of the Mispillion at Northeast Fourth Street where it meets the river. Between 1790 and 1815, William DuPrey operated another shipyard near New Wharf east of Milford, and by 1815, Nathaniel Hickman was building wooden sailing vessels farther east at his farm near Delaware Bay, known as Hickman's Landing. By 1860 Milford boasted seven shipyards employing hundreds of carpenters, loggers, caulkers, and scroll workers.

Following the Civil War improvements in technology ushered Milford into the lucrative era

of canning and fruit drying. Before the invention of refrigeration there was no efficient and safe method of preserving and transporting perishable vegetables and fruits to city markets in Wilmington, Philadelphia, and New York. The first boiler-powered fruit drying machines were introduced in 1870 and the effect on local farm products was immediate and dramatic. When the railroad finally reached Milford in August 1859, a new method of transportation provided a reliable alternative to steamboats and sailing ships. Milford grew to a town of 3,500 inhabitants by 1900. The town boasted new electric lighting installed in 1887 and a public water system completed in 1892.

In 1900, two local dentists brought a fledgling dental supply business to Milford after the death of the owner, Levin D. Caulk, in 1896. Drs. Frank and G. Layton Grier saw the need for new advancements in the development of synthetic porcelain for tooth repairs. They started a new manufacturing plant in Milford that expanded in 1908 and again in 1912 to become the most advanced research facility of its kind in the field of dentistry.

Drs. William (II) and Sam Marshall, guided by their mother, Mary Louise, led a drive with support from the Grier brothers to establish a hospital in Milford between 1907 and 1921. The Milford Emergency Hospital was incorporated in 1913. It was located at 110 Northwest Front Street in the former Purnell Lofland home; it was relocated across the street in 1921 in the remodeled Reynear Williams home. In 1938, the hospital was moved to its present location on Clark Avenue and was reincorporated as the Milford Memorial Hospital.

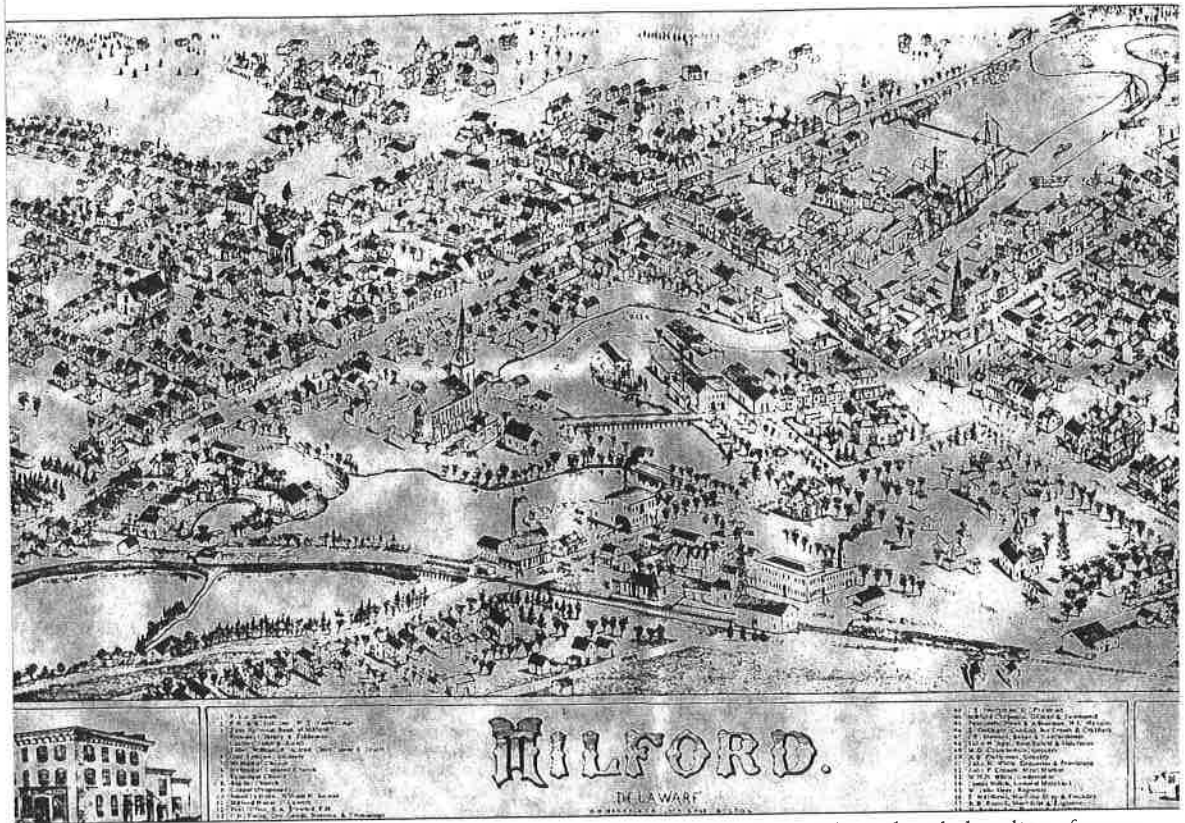
Milford and its local environs have been home to nine governors since 1787. Some of its most historic homes were built and owned by these community leaders over the past two centuries. Today, Milford claims the first woman governor in the history of Delaware, Ruth Ann Minner, elected in 2000.

As Milford enters the 21st century it has grown to a town of 7,500 citizens, proud of a heritage that extends back to the earliest period of European settlement. Delaware is one of the original 13 colonies and the first to ratify the federal constitution on December 7, 1787. The historic district, riverfront greenway, and civic-minded residents lend a quality of life to Milford that is not found in every small town. As Milford enters the 21st century, it will continue to treasure its past and preserve the best examples of its early history. We hope this pictorial history of Milford will keep the past alive for the next generation proud to call Milford home.

—Dave Kenton



The 2001 Milford Historical Society Trustees are, from left to right, (front row) Ralph Prettyman, treasurer; Carolyn Humes; Marvin P. Schelhouse, president; Dave Kenton; Dr. Ed Hendel, secretary; Dawn Willis; and Susan Emory. Absent from the photo are Barbara Jones, F. Brooke Clendaniel, and Mort Whitehead (deceased).



**1885 LITHOGRAPH OF MILFORD.** This map of early Milford provides a detailed replica of every structure and landmark in Milford when the population was 2,500. The Mispillion River begins at the original Silver Lake tumbling-dam site at the peninsula. The river meanders eastward past Hiram Barber's saw mill, Draper-Reis Cannery, Walnut Street Bridge, and east to the South Milford shipyards. The Causey mansion is visible at the corner of S. Walnut and Causey Avenue. The business district is centered on Walnut Street on both ends of the drawbridge over the Mispillion.

# One

## EARLY LAND GRANTS AND LANDMARKS

### 1676-1776

Milford was settled gradually after 1680 when Henry Bowman was granted a patent for a 2,000-acre plot called "Saw Mill Range." Between 1680 and 1787, when the first lots were plotted, many patents were granted in the eight-mile area surrounding Milford. Early mills were constructed and landings were established along the Mispillion River. The following diagrams, maps, plots, and photographs attempt to describe Milford during the colonial period prior to the American Revolution.

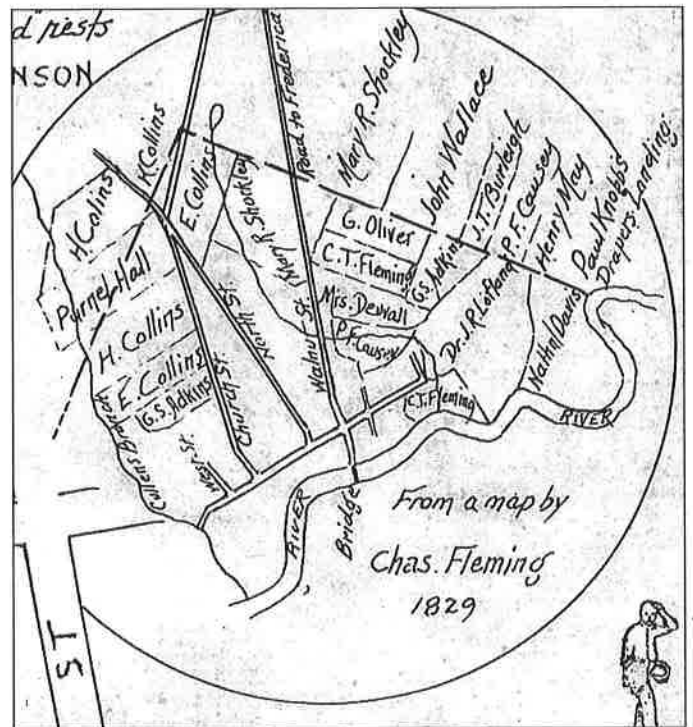


**THE 1778 PLOT.** The earliest detailed survey plot of the Saw Mill Range and South Milford was done to divide Levin Crapper's plantation among the heirs following his death in 1775. This plot shows the location of "King Highway" (dotted-line road) crossing the Mispillion River at the headwaters of Silver Lake, and the location of Levin Crapper's first mill built in 1768 at Crapper's Mill Pond, now Haven Lake. Presbyterian branch is shown in the center flowing into Silver Lake at the former site of the old Presbyterian Meeting house (Jack and Mary Lou Shaeffer's home today).



**PARSON THORNE MANSION.** This photo was taken in 1960 just prior to James R. Draper gifting the home to the newly formed Milford Historical Society. This home is the oldest structure standing in Milford today. Joseph Booth built the rear, frame-section of this home before 1735. This home has had a succession of owners.

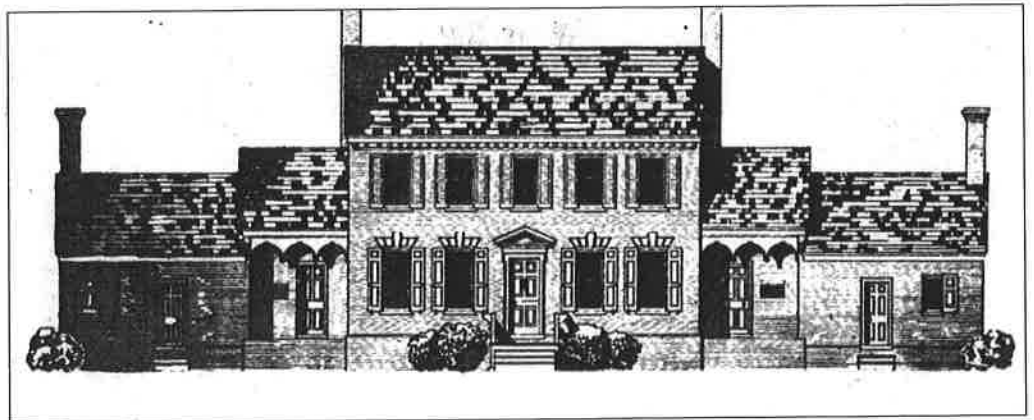
**CHARLES FLEMING MAP, 1829.** This early map of Milford was drawn by a noted surveyor and shows the town limits shortly after it was incorporated in 1807. The western side of the plot shows Cullen's branch that flows along Truitt Avenue and behind Avenue Methodist Church today. This stream was called "Tanner's branch" later when three tanneries were operating along its banks. In the 20th century, the stream was called Mullet's Run.



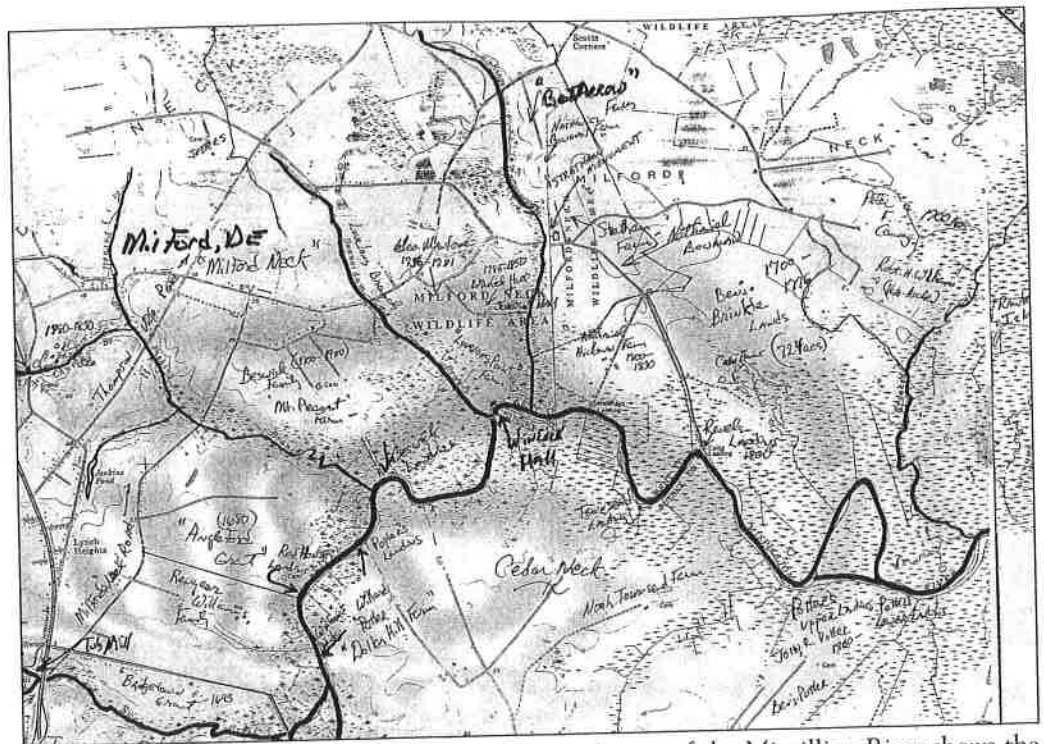




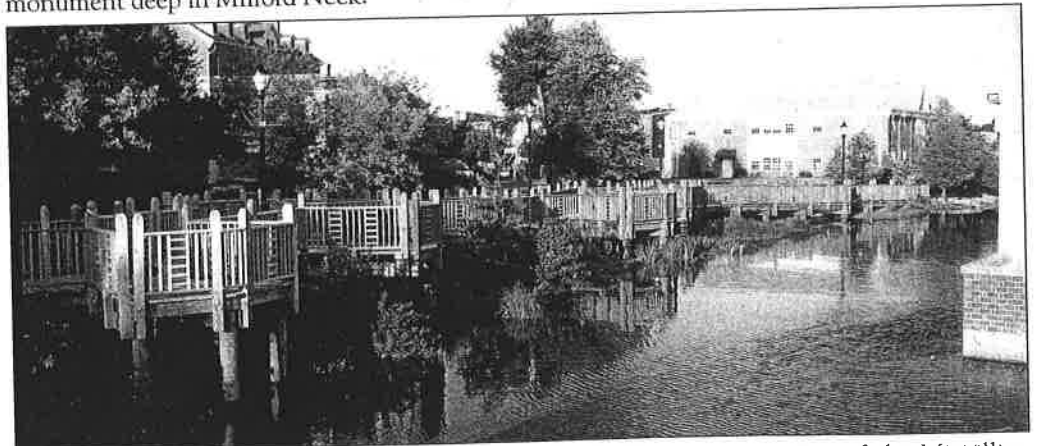
**LEVIN CRAPPER MANSION.** The Crapper Mansion was designed in a five-bay, Georgian-style architecture and constructed in 1763. The front door formerly faced southwest, overlooking the 500-acre plantation that encompassed nearly all of South Milford. In 1850, when Gov. Peter F. Causey purchased the old home, the front was changed to face the Mispillion River and Walnut Street. Wings were added to the early structure and the architecture was changed to Greek Revival style, popular in the 1850s.



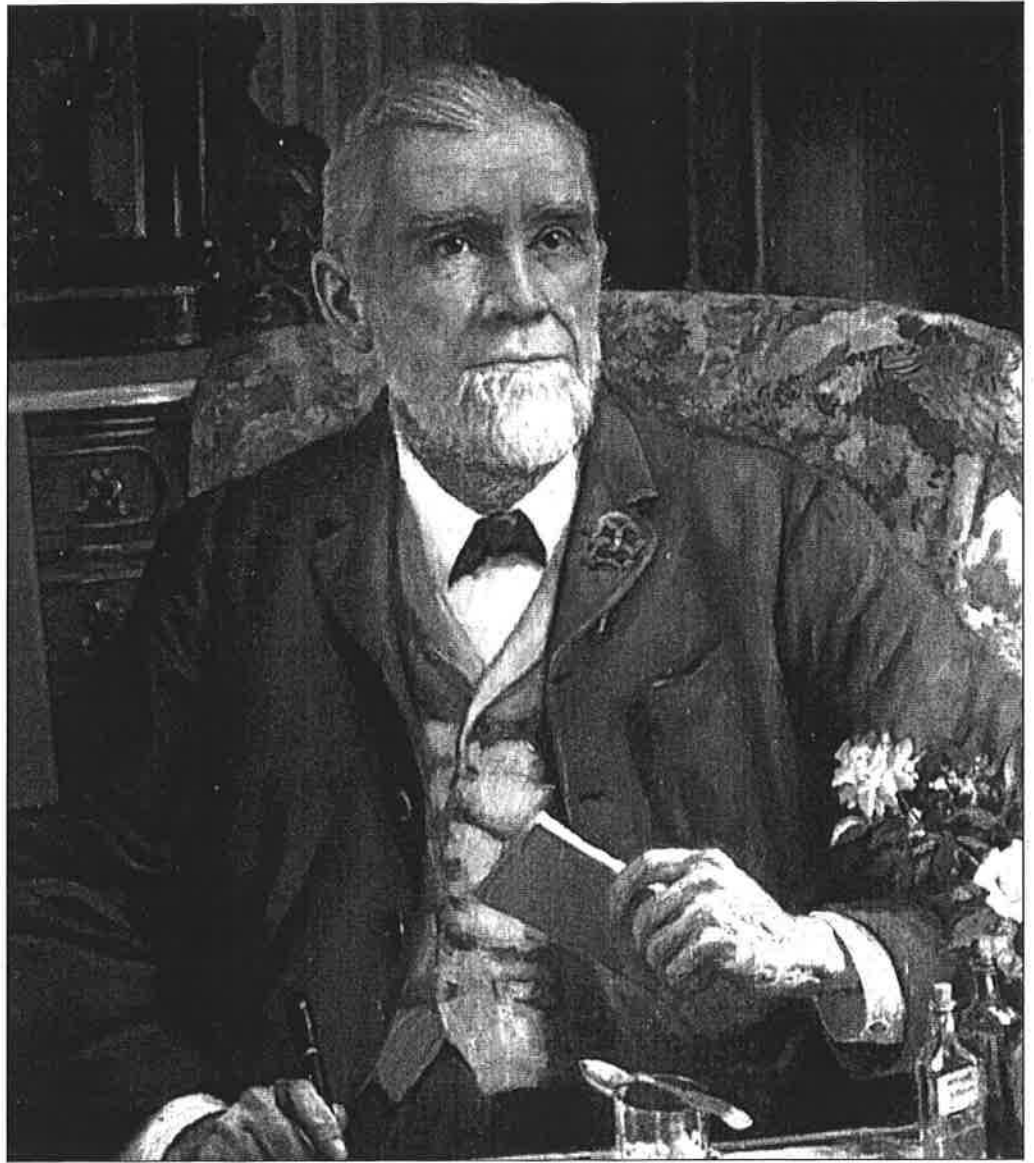
**COLONIAL VIEW OF PARSON THORNE MANSION.** Architect R. Calvin Clendaniel did a sketch of the Parson Thorne Mansion for the Milford Historical Society. The drawing represents what the brick section of the Thorne Mansion may have looked like between 1746, when it was built, and 1879, when it was modified to Victorian styling by banker Henry Fiddeman. This view shows the mansion in classical Georgian style without an elevated roofline and without three distinctive gables that are familiar to us today.



**EARLY LANDINGS ALONG THE MISPELLION RIVER.** A map of the Mispillion River shows the early land grants and farms located along the section of river starting at New Wharf at the left margin and progressing eastward past "Red House Landing" at Angleford, Beswick's Landing at Mt. Pleasant farm, Winlock Hall's Landing at Lovelong Point Farm, Hickman's Landing at Hickman farm, Reville's Landing on the Brinkle plantation, Potter's Landing at John R. Potter's farm, and the Mispillion Lighthouse landing at the entrance to Delaware Bay. This map also shows the location of the first Baptist Meeting House on the DeWeese tract at Baptist Branch and the "Bent Arrow" farm settled by Nathaniel Bowman in 1750 at the "Stratham" monument deep in Milford Neck.

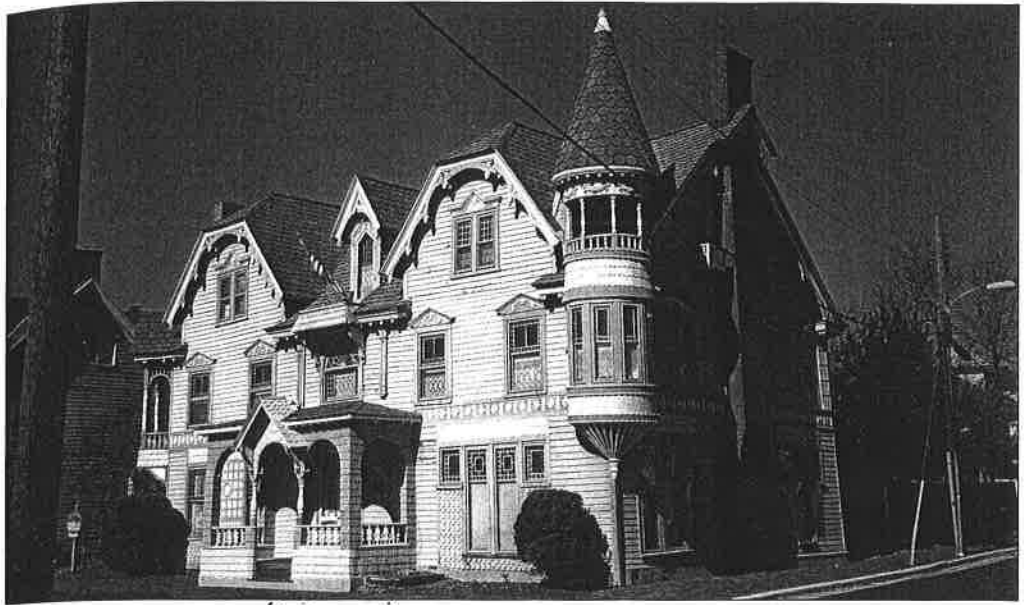


**MISPELLION WALKWAY, 2001.** The walking bridge built as an extension of the Mispillion greenway project allows residents to walk the banks of the Mispillion River from Thorne-Oliver Bridge at Walnut Street, westward to Silver Lake and the site of Thorne's original gristmill built in 1787.



**DR. WILLIAM MARSHALL.** Dr. Marshall was born in Milton near San Hill Church and spent his formative years in Georgetown. He studied medicine at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia and returned to Milton to practice in 1847. After gold was discovered in California, he joined the Gordon Expedition as a surgeon in 1849 and spent two years in California without finding the "mother lode." When the Civil War broke out in 1861 he was commissioned as a surgeon with the Union army in the 3rd Delaware Regiment. He was wounded in 1862 at Antietam and later served at Fort Delaware. He returned to Milford to marry Hester Angelina McColley, daughter of Trusten P. McColley of South Milford. Dr. Marshall raised four children, one of whom, George W. Marshall, followed his father's path to the medical profession. By 1870 Dr. Marshall was involved as a partner in business with the shipbuilding firm of J.W. Abbott & Co. as financial manager. He purchased the Marshall Mill operation, expanded to a brick making business, and converted the water mill to steam power. He was active in all phases of Milford life until his death in 1900.

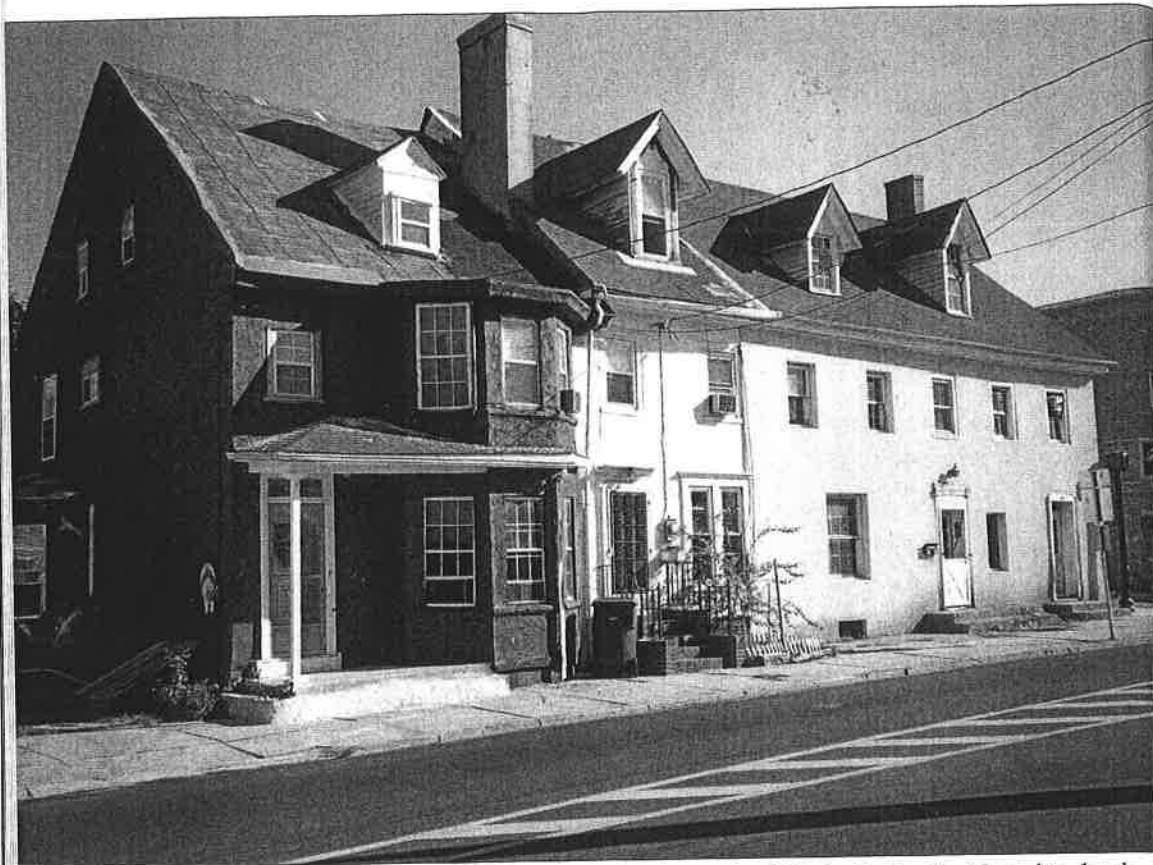




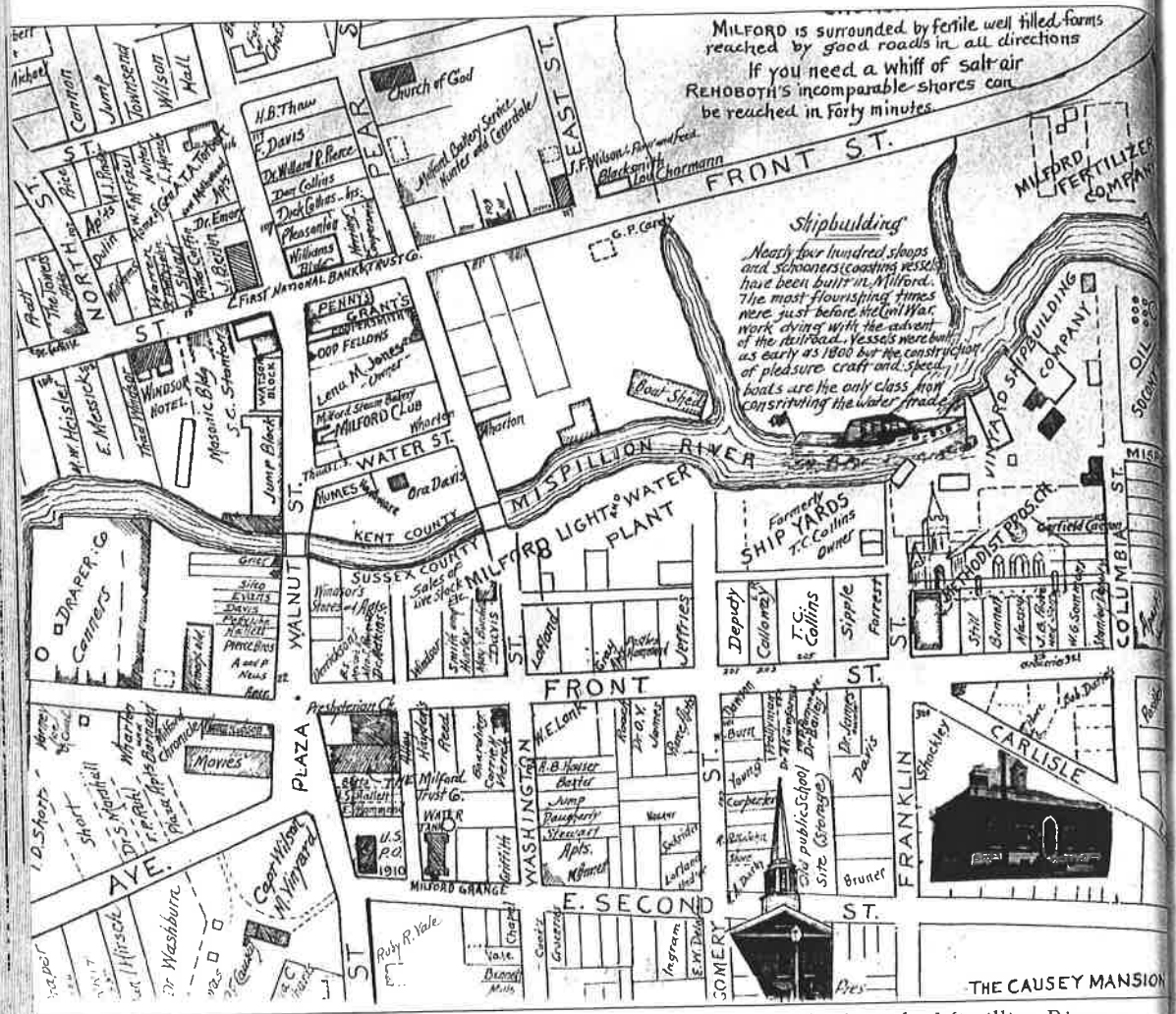
**THE TOWERS.** This landmark structure located at 101 Northwest Front Street was one of the first buildings constructed when Joseph Oliver surveyed his farm into lots in 1787. John and Cynthia Wallace built a home and store on this corner in 1783 and were succeeded by their son, Thomas. Later the home was purchased by Gov. William Burton and descended to his daughter, Rhoda, following his death in 1866. Rhoda Burton married a wealthy New York businessman, Clinton Roudebush, who sponsored her restoration of the old home in 1891.



**GENERAL TORBERT HOME, 1907.** The three-story, Greek Revival home was at first a store built by Benjamin Wadhams and later used as a tavern for James Starr around 1810. Daniel Currey, merchant and father of Mary Currey Torbert, purchased this home from Governor Causey about 1854 and lived here until his daughter married Gen. A.T.A. Torbert in January 1866, after which the newlyweds made this mansion their home. Alonzo Reynolds, a noted architect from Port Deposit, Maryland, upgraded this home to modern standards in 1850.

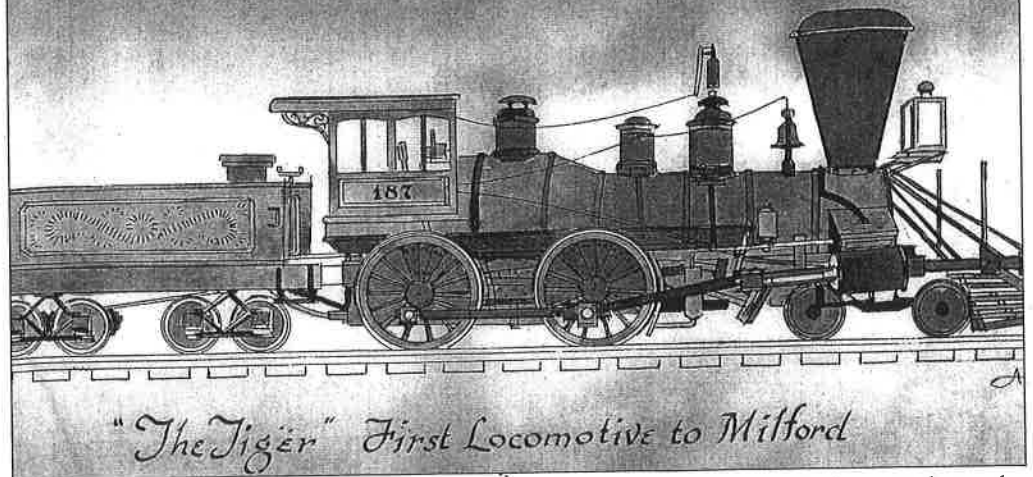


**RALSTON/SUDLER HOME.** John Ralston built this home in 1795 for his family. Upon his death, his son-in-law, Dr. Joseph Sudler, inherited the home and conducted his medical business from the corner office. Later in 1848 the building was used to launch Milford's first newspaper, the *Beacon*, published by John H. Emerson from Denton. Daniel Godwin used the building as a store prior to moving to the opposite corner to the Williams (Jewell's Store) building in 1830. This building was home to Milford Seafood Market from 1940 to 1955 when Dennard Conner owned the building. Today the property is owned by Frank Fioca and shows signs of old age. It is 206 years old.



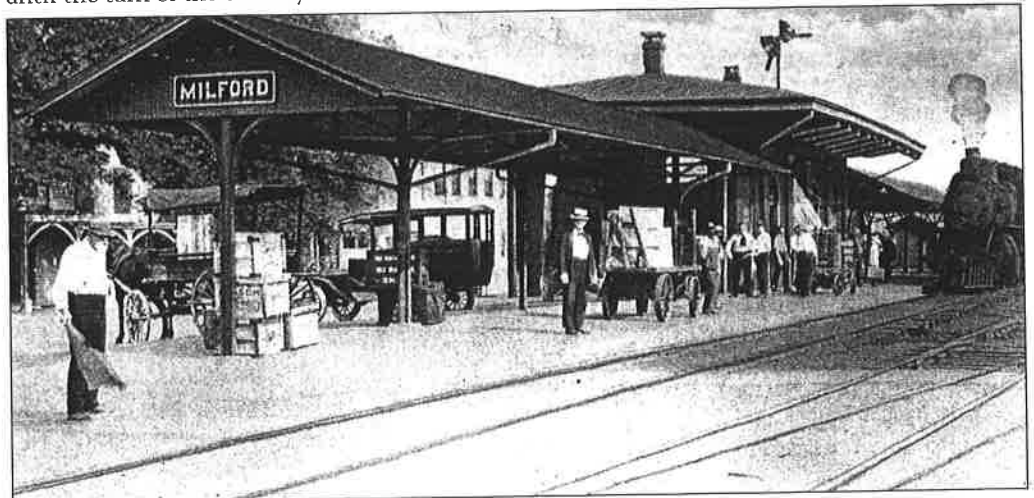
**MILFORD SHIPYARDS, 1780-1920.** Sailing ships were being built along the Mispillion River as early as 1750 at Millstone Landing (New Wharf) and Wyncoop's shipyard near Marshall's Mill. Shipbuilding began in Milford about 1782 when John Draper established a two-acre shipyard site at the base of East Fourth Street where it meets the river (Domino's Pizza). His son, Alexander Draper, purchased the shipyard in 1801 and built several wooden sailing vessels at this site before moving to New Castle County. The Drapers built about 22 vessels between 1780 and 1809. The bulk of shipbuilding, however, was conducted along the south bank of the Mispillion between S. Washington Street and Fisher Avenue. This map was charted in 1938 by W.P. Richards, a civil engineer, and depicts the location of the main shipyards between Montgomery Street and Columbia. David West began building sloops in 1818 and built nine from the wharf behind his home at 205 S.E. Front Street (T.C. Collins) before his death in 1832. Sylvester Deputy and his son, James H. lived next to David West on the west side and at the N.E. corner of Front Street and Montgomery. The father-son team began shipbuilding in 1828 and continued until 1872 when James H. Deputy retired. William A. Scribner who lived in the Lank home at the southeast corner of Washington owned the entire riverfront block between South Washington Street and Montgomery Street and Front Street. Scribner began his shipbuilding career in 1846 and built 21 ships before his death in 1882.

## "Tiger" - First Locomotive - 1859



*"The Tiger" First Locomotive to Milford*

**"THE TIGER."** Milford businessmen fought the first railroad that made its way down the peninsula beginning in 1855. The railroad was forced to locate its tracks west of Rt. 13 and nearly 10 miles west of all river towns including Smyrna, Dover, Frederica, Milford, and Milton. Small towns sprang up around the railroad just as fast as tracks were laid. The towns of Clayton, Cheswold, Viola, Farmington, Harrington, and Greenwood were all built when the railroad came downstate in 1856. After resisting the railroad for two years and enduring a treacherous eight-mile trip to Harrington, Milford businessmen formed the Junction & Breakwater Railroad in 1857 to extend tracks to Milford, Georgetown, Lewes, and Rehoboth. The line opened to Milford on September 7, 1859, with the arrival of "The Tiger." This locomotive served the line until the turn of the century.



**THE RAILROAD DEPOT, C. 1915.** The railroad depot was the center of activity for businessmen from 1859 until 1940, when trucking began to carry the bulk of farm produce, coal, and freight to the cities. This scene shows a northbound train in 1915 with hotel hacks lined up to carry passengers to local hotels. From 1890 to 1920 as many as seven trains passed Milford daily.

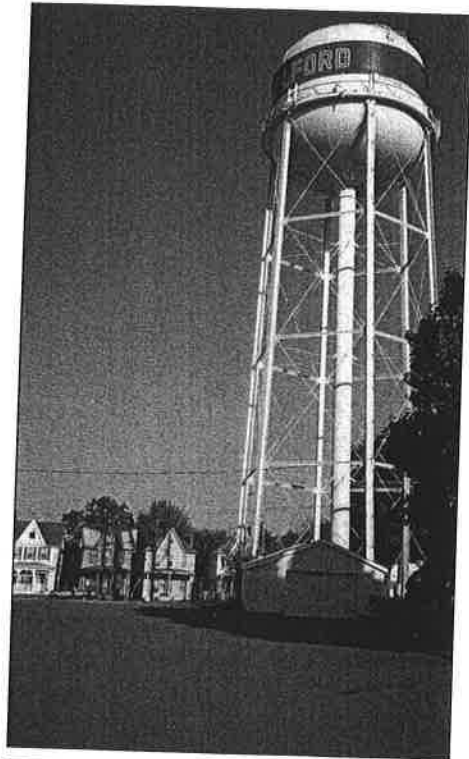


**RUTH ANN MINNER, FIRST GOVERNOR FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM.** The campaign for governor of Delaware in 1999 saw two Milford candidates square off against each other in a hard-fought race. Mrs. Minner emerged victorious and became the first woman to win the governor's office in state history. She is currently enjoying wide support among all Delawareans and lives at "Woodburn," the Governor's mansion. Milford has not sent a Governor to Dover since William T. Watson served in 1895 following the death of Gov. Joshua Marvil.



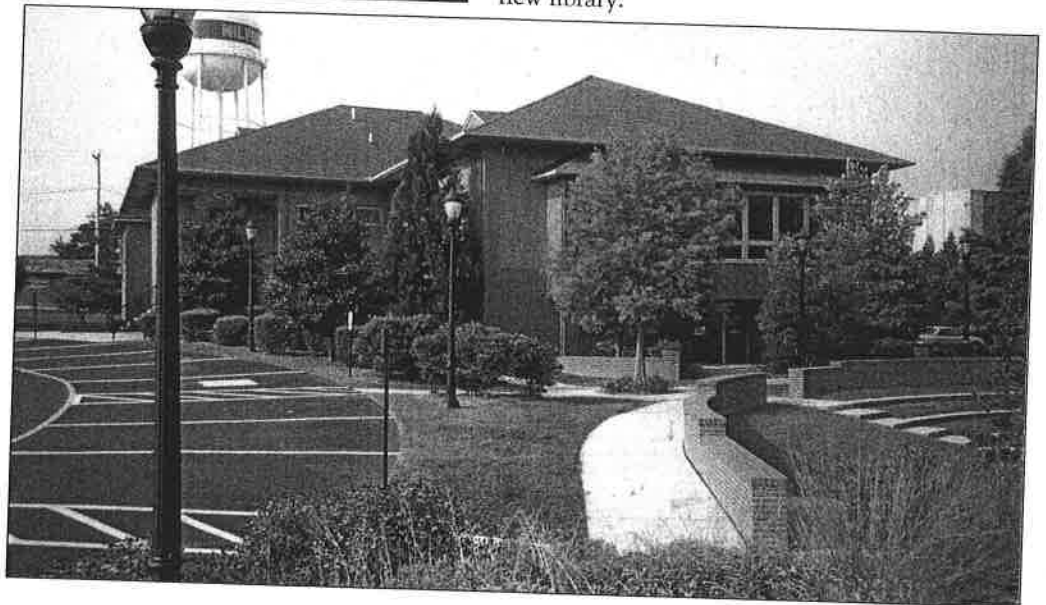
**THORNE-OLIVER BRIDGE AND GREENWAY, 2001.** The Milford Greenway was extended to the west side of Walnut Street in 1999 and provides a walking view of the site behind Northwest Front Street where Joseph Oliver established his first wharf in 1772. Oliver petitioned the General Assembly in 1791 to build the first drawbridge over the Mispillion to connect Kent with Sussex County.





**THE OLD AND THE NEW.** The Milford water tower was erected on the site of the former water "stand pipe" built in 1892 following the disastrous fire in 1891 that nearly burned the town to the ground. In the background are modest row homes built in 1855 by Curtis and Bethuel Watson located on South Washington Street. These homes were rented to tradesmen and shipyard workers during the 19th century. They are still serving as rental properties 150 years later.

**NEW MILFORD LIBRARY.** The Milford Library was built with funds pledged from local residents (60 percent) and a state grant (40 percent). David G. Burton, local businessman, former councilman, and civic activist, led the drive to raise \$2 million for the library in the face of daunting odds. The community project is the most outstanding example of Milford's revitalization efforts over the past decade. The library provides a community meeting room and outdoor amphitheater that serves as a focal point for community events. It sits on the site of Henry Hudson's home, built in 1810 that was demolished to make way for the new library.



*The Commission on Landmarks and Museums and the Milford Historical Society sincerely hopes you have enjoyed this pictorial history of Milford and the Mispillion River. We have tried to provide a collection of previously published photos along with many new ones that tell the story of Milford during its 215-year history as the town that was built at the headwaters of the Mispillion River in an old land grant called "Saw Mill Range."*