

## The Mysterious Big Stone Beach, Delaware, Located on the Delaware Bay



Delaware Bay Beach

Photographing the lovely beaches lining the western shore of the Delaware Bay would take you to unique locations: Woodland Beach, Port Mahon Beach, Pickering Beach, Bombay Hook Beach, Prime Hook Beach, Kitts Hummock Beach, North and South Bowers Beaches, Slaughter Beach, Roosevelt Beach, and Lewes Beach, to name a few sites. Another beach bears a descriptive name and a mystery about how it received its name--Big Stone Beach.

Big Stone Beach's name would lead us to believe there must be large rock formations on the beach like on the West Coast of the United States. The coastal zone along the Delaware Bay, however, does not have any steep rock formations. Rather, it is made up of low lying marshes that often lead to sandy beaches. My curiosity piqued, I set out to take photos of this beach and its unique rock structures.

As I drove along Big Stone Beach Road, I passed through two and a half miles of beautiful forests and low marshlands inhabited by a variety of songbirds and shorebirds. A half mile from the beach, the freshwater marshes lapped lazily at the grassy edges of the road, and in the distance, I could see a tall black structure that reminded me of a fire watch tower. A few cottages lined the bay, but I didn't see any inhabitants or people on the beach.

Big Stone Beach is a very quiet beach, and in the vicinity of its entrance road, there are no large natural rock formations or manmade structures composed of stone. Could the name have originated from a local Native American word describing the sizes of stones on the beach or the size of the beach itself?

The military history of the beach and the black tower dates back to the end of WWI when a commissioned fort, Fort Saulsbury, was built to protect the eastern shore. During WWII, the United States used the fort to house prisoners of war and the staff who guarded them. Was the name of the beach related to a military maneuver?



Entrance Road to Big Stone Beach



Marshes on the South Side of the Entrance Road



Marshes on the North Side of the Entrance Road



Close-up View of the Tower at Big Stone Beach

LOOK  
INSIDE

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From a Distance, What Appears to Be Tree Stumps on the Beach



Close-up View of the Stumps Lining the Beach

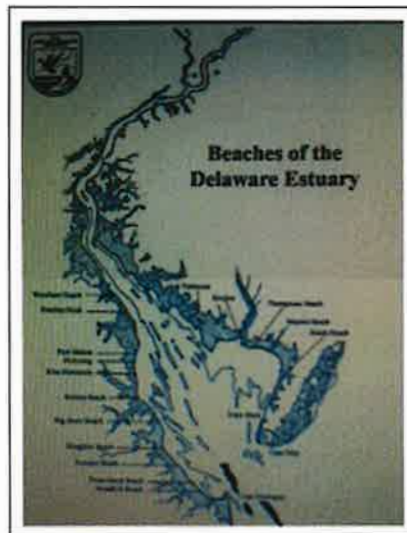
The tower in the photos was part of the Fort Saulsbury defenses that were used in WWII as observation towers and as a gun battery. In May 1941, the 261st Coast Artillery Battery B was assigned to Fort Saulsbury for the purposes of coastal defense. They watched the coast line from three steel fire control observation towers that were built at Stone Beach, Mispillion Lighthouse and Fowler's Beach. Only the Big Stone Beach tower remains, along with the mystery of how this unique location received its name. If you know the answer to this question, please add your information to the Comments section below.



Rolling Charcoal Sea Foam on the Beach

The Big Stone Beach area is environmentally protected because of Ted Harvey's foresight. Ted Harvey acquired 2700 acres along Big Stone Beach as part of the Ted Harvey Wildlife Area, giving the organization control over land that had been planned to be appropriated by oil companies for major building projects. Today, the conservation district is one of the premier East Coast wildlife refuges.

Directions to Big Stone Beach: North of Milford, Delaware, on Route 1, turn right (NE) at Thompsonville Road and go 3.5 miles. Turn right (E) onto Scotts Corner Road, arriving at Scott's Corners in 1.1 miles. Take a left (NE) onto Big Stone Beach Road. The road reaches the bayshore in another 2.6 miles after traveling through forests and marshes inhabited by songbirds and shorebirds.



Map of Delaware Bay Beaches by the US Fish & Wildlife Service

Like 3

Tweet 1

16 Comments (<http://www.norenemoskalski.com/ecology-blog/big-stone-beach-on-the-delaware-bay#comments>)



# Fort Saulsbury, DE



Delaware's Forgotten Fort

[Home](#) [Introduction](#) [Appellation](#) [WW1 Era](#) [Guns](#) [WW2 Era](#) [FC Towers](#) [Filming](#) [Defenses](#) [Contact](#)

This page explains a little about the Fire Control Towers and how they were used for target acquisition. Fire Control refers to the methods used to control the firing of the big guns and is not to be confused with a similar type tower used to watch for forest fires. The towers could be considered the "eyes" of the fort, as they housed the observers.

The entire process for firing the big guns was quite a science. Beginning with the target acquisition, the target had to be confirmed for identity "Friend or Foe," tracked for movement and location plotted. This information was then used with other variables to calculate a firing solution to provide to the gun crews with an azimuth and elevation determination. Only after all of these steps are completed, can the command to "Fire" be given.

Some of the variables that have to be considered by the cannoneers are: (1) The observer's elevated view of target, (2) Visibility over the horizon, (3) Barometric Pressure, (4) Temperature of gun powder (5) Range of target vs range of guns, (6) Surface winds and winds aloft, (7) Projectile time in flight or time to target, (8) Firing rate of gun, (9) Reduced visibility and night operations and (10) moving targets with zig-zag courses.

When the fort was built, two observation positions (Identified as BC on plan drawings or Battery Command Stations) were incorporated in the design of each battery for the purpose of Fire Control (FC). The concrete positions were located on top of the bunkers at each end of the mounds. There was a connecting personnel channel for access. Each position had an azimuth finder for target acquisition. These observation positions were limited because of relatively low elevations and basically a singular field of view. The observation positions and the connecting channel are visible in the aerial picture of Battery Hall below and marked by the yellow circles.

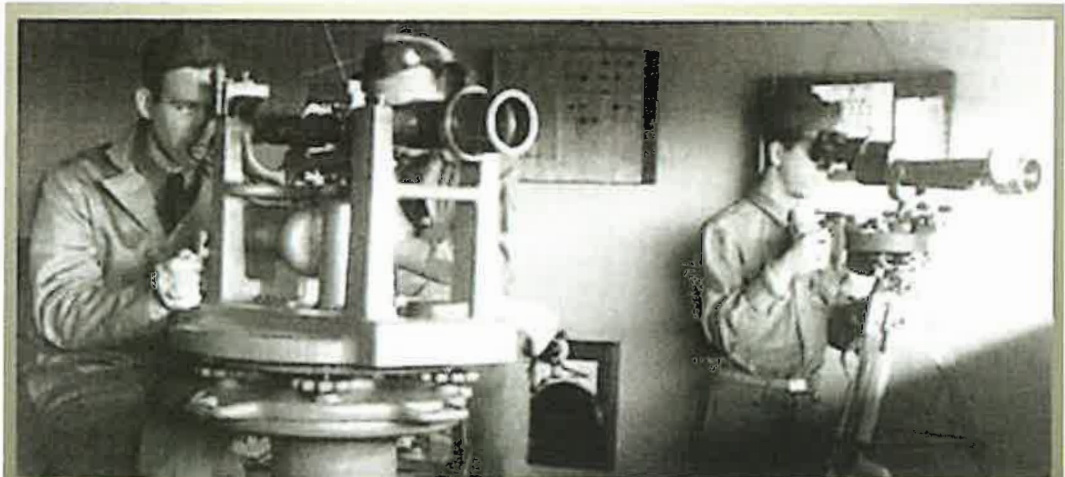
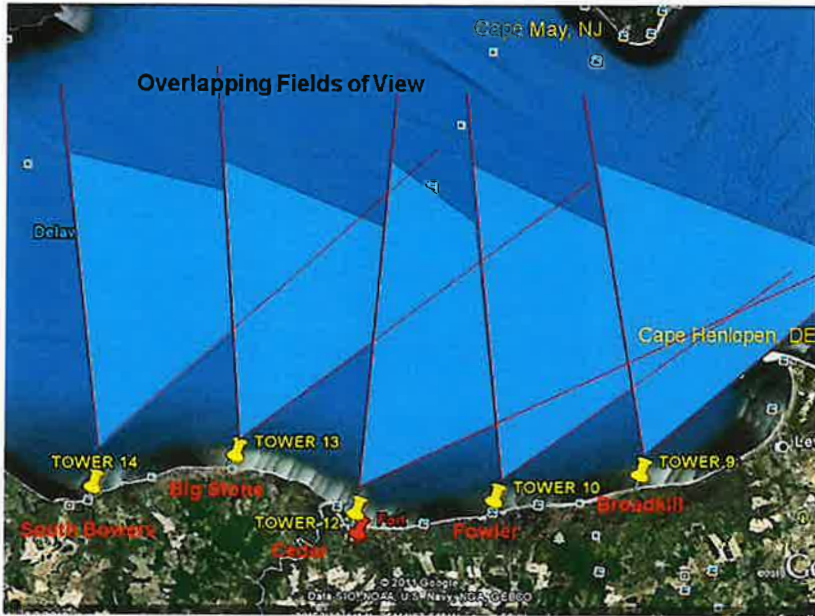


As preparations began for the possibility of another war, Fort Saulsbury had several new modifications added. One major upgrade was the Fire Control System capabilities with the construction of five observation towers in Delaware. While these towers are not to be confused with the concrete Fire Control towers for Fort Miles that most everyone has seen, they served the same purpose of target acquisition and relaying the information to fire the guns at the enemy.

The five FC towers were located from north to south in South Bowers Beach, Big Stone Beach, Cedar Beach (closest tower to fort), Fowler's Beach and Broadkill Beach. Each tower had at least two decks with some having three decks. Each deck had specific equipment and was assigned to one of the gun batteries at the fort. The two main pieces of telescopic equipment used were the M1 Depression Range Finder (distance) and the M1910A1 Azimuth Instrument (direction). The observers then relayed



the readings to the command post at the fort which was basically the plotting room.

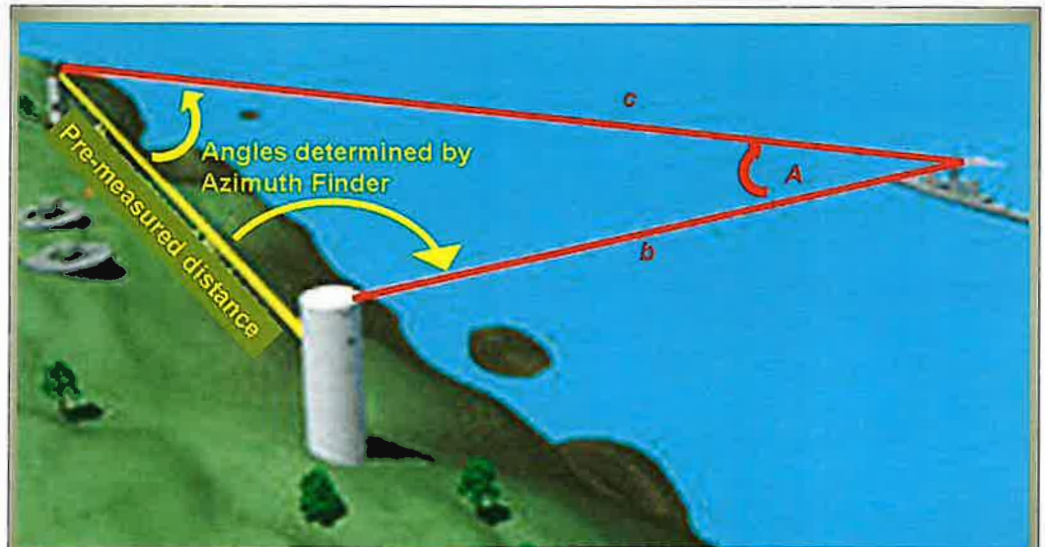


M1 Depression Range Finder

M1910A1 Azimuth Instrument



A typical plotting table room example



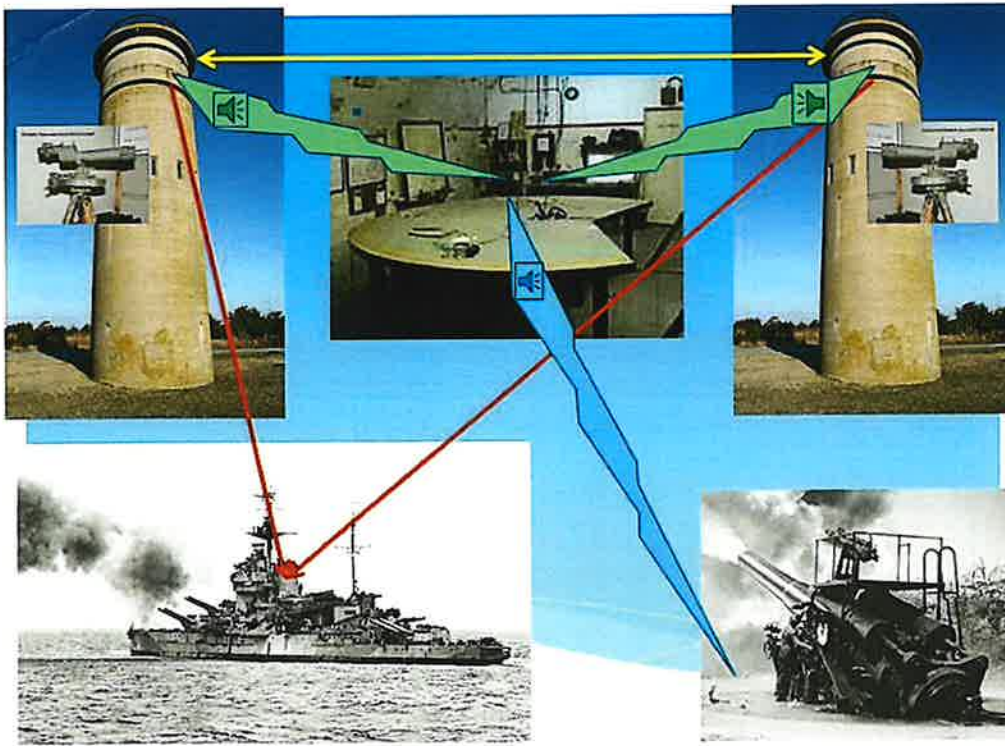
### The Trigonometry

Given two angles and included side:

$$A = 180^\circ - (B + C) \quad b = (a \sin B) / \sin A \quad c = (a \sin C) / \sin A$$

Triangulation is the process used to determine the unknown position of target by using known values. Values indicated by the yellow are known and the red values are calculated.





Using the diagram above, the relationship is depicted at left. The yellow line represents the measured distance between the towers. The two red lines represent the azimuths to the enemy ship from each tower. The communications between the towers and the plotting room is shown in green. The tower operator will report the azimuths as they track the ship. Once a position is tracked on the plotting table, directions will be communicated to the gun commander indicated in blue. The drawing below shows how the ship is tracked in this manner. The spacing between the red circle and the green square on the course line represents the distance traveled by the ship while the shell is in flight to the target.

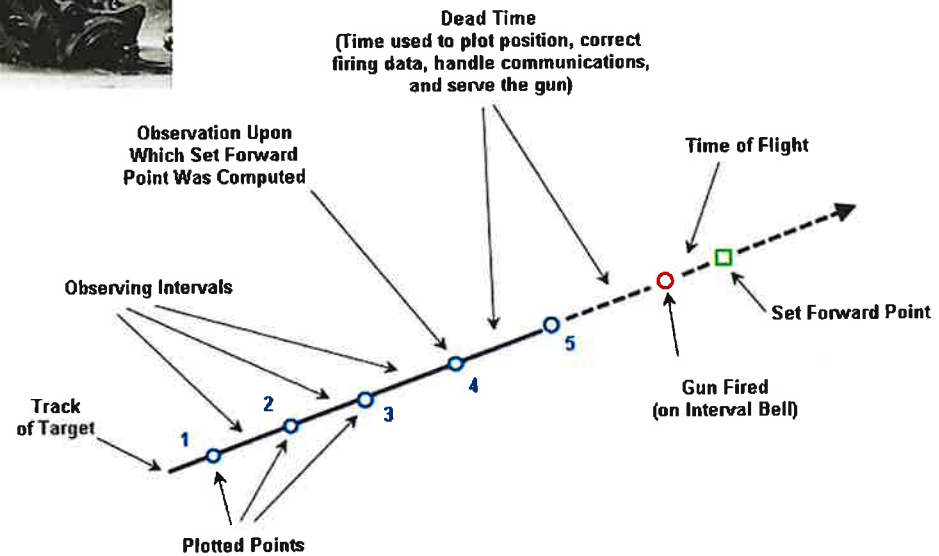
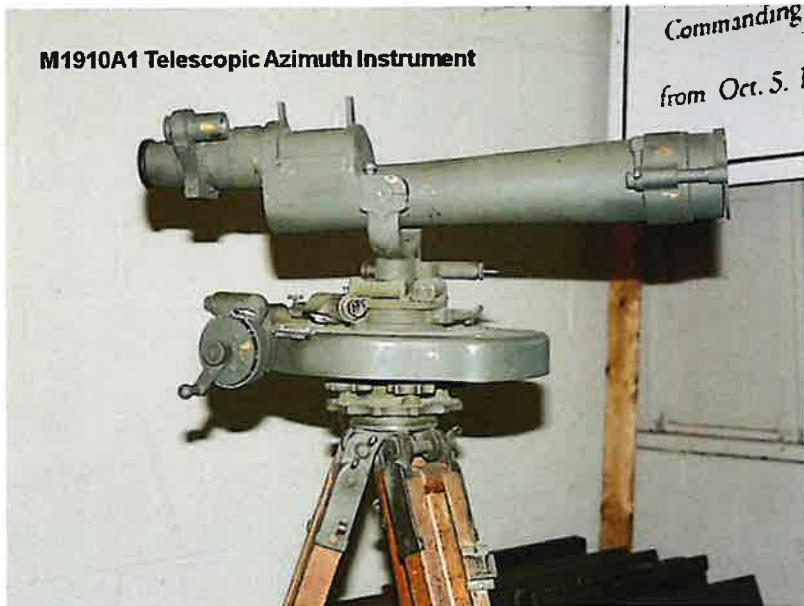


Figure 1  
**Relationship Between Observing Interval, Plotted Positions, Firing, and Set Forward Points**  
 Plotting and calculation processes determine the location, distance, and likely track of the target. Using a plotting board, the **set forward point** is determined, based upon the target's observed course and speed and an assumption about when the gun is to be fired.



## Remaining artifacts of FC Towers supporting Fort Saulisbury



The only remaining FC Tower for Fort Saulisbury that still stands is located at Big Stone Beach as pictured here. The towers were all of the same design with the metal structures and corrugated siding. While definitely showing its age, it is somewhat of a marvel that it still stands given all of the storms etc. over the last 70 years.



Fowlers Beach



FOWLERS BEACH CABLE HUT AND BASE

Aerial September 12, 2011 at low tide







# Milford Historical Society NEWS LETTER

Volume 29

Fall 1991

Number 2

## "ELLERSLIE" AND THE FRANK GRECO ESTATE

The era of large farming plantations has long since passed in most parts of the country. Mechanization and generations of sales and family distributions have relegated most 19th century plantations to nothing more than old homesteads and dilapidated manor houses.

The Milford Neck section of Kent County recently saw the first chapter unfold in the break-up of a great old plantation called "Ellerslie" which eventually encompassed more than 3950 acres of marsh and upland along the Delaware Bay. The old plantation was owned most recently by Filomena Greco Muller born October 6, 1911 in Childwold Station, N.Y. and who died in Dover, April 10, 1991, age 79 years, a victim of heart failure following a short illness.

Most residents of our area know the large tract of land as the "Greco Estate" after the man who purchased in 1907-08 the various farms which today comprise the 3950 acre tract. The "Greco Estate" is located along both sides of Kent county road 124, known as the Big Stone Beach road to locals. The huge tract follows 3.3 miles of beach front along the Delaware Bay beginning north of the Mispillion Light house at the Conch Bar landing site and extending a mile north of Big Stone Beach. The village of Big Stone Beach lies entirely within the Greco estate boundaries.

Mrs. Muller was the only direct heir to the vast land holdings left to her following the accidental poisoning death of her parents, Frank and Emilia Mespero Greco, September 26-27, 1923. The history of "Ellerslie" and the Greco Estate is closely intertwined

with the history of Milford Neck, the Mispillion River and Milford itself.

The story of "Ellerslie" began in 1816 with Charles Polk, later to become 28th and 31st Governor of Delaware. Polk was born and raised near Bridgeville the son of Charles and Mary Polk. He was one of fifteen children surviving his father's unexpected death in 1795. Polk's father had served as an officer in Col. David Hall's Revolutionary War regiment in 1777.

in 1816 near Big Stone Beach in Kent County, built a two story mansion and began farming the land. Polk named the plantation "Ellerslie" after the family's ancestral home in Scotland. He then ran again for the State House from Kent County and won. His political career continued until 1840 when, at age 52 he returned to his farm in Milford Neck. Polk held other posts in Public life but managed to raise a family on his Big Stone Beach plantation. He and his wife, Mary



**"Ellerslie" built 1816-20 by Charles Polk, later Governor of Delaware. Mansion burned in 1929, today site of Tall Pine Hunting Lodge near Big Stone Beach, DE.**

In 1813, when only 25, Polk was elected to the State House from Sussex County. After two terms as the Sussex representative, Polk purchased 1100 acres (later surveyed as 1027 ac.)

Elizabeth, produced three sons; William A., Theodore L. and Charles. Governor Polk died Oct. 27, 1857 and

*Continued on Page 2*



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Newsletter Editor  
Mr. David W. Kenton

## NEW TRUSTEES

Two new members have been elected to the Board of Trustees; namely, Charles H. Donovan and Michael Sophos. Both of these men are comparatively new to Milford and, fortunately for us, have taken an interest in the town and in the society.

Charles Donovan and his wife Helen came to Milford on March 19, 1980, from Wilmington where he taught at Goldey Beacom College. He now teaches in their southern campus in Milford.

Mr. Donovan received his Bachelor's degree from Villanova and his Master of Business Administration from the University of Delaware. He is a retired C.P.A. He is a communicant of Christ Episcopal Church where he serves as a Lay Reader. He and his wife Helen reside in Eastman Heights.

Michael Sophos and his wife

Dorothy moved to Milford in 1985 upon his retirement from a career in the United States Marine Corps. In 1966 he retired from the Marine Corps with the rank of Major. For fifteen years he worked in a civilian capacity as Personnel Director Marine Corps Exchange System.

Upon coming to Milford Mr. Sophos has been active in volunteer community work. He is a member of Avenue United Methodist Church where he serves as Financial Secretary. Other responsibilities are President of the Board of Directors of Peoples Place, Treasurer of the Milford Lions Club, and he helps at Milford Memorial Hospital.

The Board of Trustees welcomed these new members at the regular meeting held in June at the Parson Thorne Mansion.

which Greco called the "Home farm." In 1907 the original Charles Polk Mansion home was still in fine repair and Greco moved into the old homeplace built in 1816-20 by Governor Charles Polk. Before the end of 1908 Greco added thirteen additional tracts to his holdings giving him nearly all the bay front land from Bennett Pier Road to the Mispillion Light House.

Frank Greco wasted little time starting in the farming and canning business. He built a water tower on the mansion property, numerous barns, stables and equipment sheds. The site of the original mansion is today occupied by the Tall Pine Hunting Club lodge under lease from Delaware Wildlands, Inc., a conservation group that purchased the property in July 1991.

Greco brought with him many Italian immigrants who lived on the plantation and did much of the manual labor required in those days before tractors and machinery. Many early residents of Milford Neck can remember the immigrants working in Frank Greco's fields and cannery. Some of the immigrants are buried 75 yards east of the mansion site in an old graveyard maintained by Greco. Frank Morrone and Luigi Colella both lived on the farm with Greco.

Greco was one of the first farmers to make extensive use of locally mixed concrete. Nearly all foundations and pillars prior to 1900 were made from brick and laid manually. Greco mixed cement, lime and beach sand using hand labor to pour concrete foundations for his barns, wine cellar and cannery. The foundations to these buildings which surrounded the old Polk-Greco Mansion are still visible today although the wooden frameworks and buildings have long since rotted away. This process was considered revolutionary for the era and Greco was viewed as an engineering genius by the locals.

Greco built his vegetable cannery in 1915 and was operating through 1918 selling under "Big Stone Brand" label. To transport the can goods to market in the era prior to paved roads required another monumental engineering feat. Greco purchased a steam engine in 1910 and constructed a dredge which operated with a mechanical shovel. With his steam dredge Greco began digging a canal from the Mispillion Light House north

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was buried in Dover. (1)

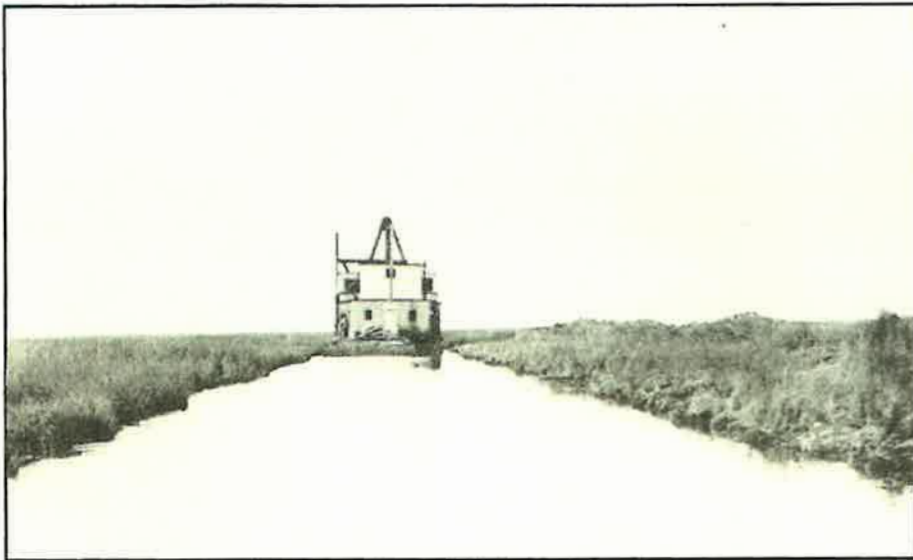
Although Polk's last will directed the sale of the plantation, his son, William A. Polk, continued farming the 1100 acres until his death March 23, 1900. Delaware Chancery Court directed the sale of the property at the request of Theodore A., Albert F. Polk and Mary L. Pyle, children and trustees for William A. Polk deceased. The farm was laid off in three tracts. The largest, 977 acres, was sold to William I. Simpson, May 29, 1902 for \$3,107 and was known locally as "The Polk Farm."

The Polk Farm did not remain with W.I. Simpson long for on September 30, 1907 he sold, for

\$7,000 the entire 977 acre farm to a railroad contractor from Galeton, PA named Frank Greco. Greco, a native of Italy, moved to Delaware from Pennsylvania where he had extensive experience with railroading, steam engines and heavy machinery. Why Greco migrated to Delaware is not known with great certainty, but his daughter, Filomena, stated that her father felt that land was cheap in Delaware and great potential existed for selling produce and crops in the Philadelphia market.

Frank and Emilia Greco paid the unheard of sum of \$22,600 in 1907-08 for 3,937 acres including fourteen separate tracts in Milford Neck. The first purchase was the Polk Farm





**Steam Dredge used by Greco to dig canal from Mispillion Light to Big Stone Beach in 1910-11.**

*Continued from Page 2*

and parallel to the Beach front, extending to Big Stone Beach. The distance of nearly three miles through some of the worst mosquito infested marsh known to Delawareans represented an enormous engineering achievement. Greco's Canal still stands in 1991 as a monument to Frank Greco's ingenuity and determination.

A combination of poor prices and political interference halted Greco's cannery after the 1918 season. After reaching the Big Stone Beach Road with his innovative canal, Greco was prevented from crossing the road which led to his home mansion and cannery. The State legislature refused to build a draw bridge at Road 124 leading to Big Stone Beach and Greco

was unable to cross the road with his boats. He abandoned the steam dredge near the crossing point where it rotted in the marsh clearly visible until the 1960's.

Frank and Emilia Greco gave up the farming and canning business by 1920 and bought a home on Cedar Beach Road east of Milford near the former Humphrey's Landing site. By this time Greco was a broken man and was seen riding in Milford "staring off in space" as his wife drove the car.

In 1921 Greco purchased the Parson Thorne Mansion and 19 acres from George H. Draper, Jr. There is no evidence that Greco lived in the Mansion but he apparently was trying to continue a farming operation that had been conducted on the "Draper



**Frank Greco, construction engineer and cannery owner with his daughter, Filomena age 1, in 1912. Photo taken on porch of mansion home named "Ellerslie" near big Stone Beach, DE.**

Farm" for many years. Greco failed again and the property reverted to Geo. H. Draper, Jr. in 1923 after a default.

The sad end to Frank and Emilia Greco came September 27, 1923 in his home on Cedar Beach Road. The family was ardent believers in the faith of God to heal all ills. They shunned modern medicine and hospital procedures. The family ate toad stools, mistaking them for mushrooms, and became deathly ill. A doctor was summoned who recommended vomiting to eliminate the poisonous food ingested. The family refused treatment and died. Their only daughter, Filomena, remained alive, but critical. A local resident, Mrs. Ellener Uhler, claims her brother, Harry Bowen, saved the daughter by forcing her to drink salt water. The Bowens lived directly across the Mispillion from the Grecos at Bowen Landing and were friends. Other reports claim the Doctor induced vomiting. Regardless, the only surviving heir to the Greco estate was saved. She was 12 at the time.

Filomena Greco was sent to New York City where she was raised by her mother's sister and assisted by an officer of the Equitable Trust. She later graduated from Hunter College in New York City and returned to the home farm. The Mansion house had burned partially during a marsh fire in 1929 and the fields were in a state of disrepair. Filomena married William Muller a teacher and professor and later lived in Dover. Mr. Muller made some feeble attempts in the 1940's to reinvigorate the farming operation on the home farm near Big Stone Beach. Poor soil, drought, lack of fertilizer, and sparse working capital doomed Muller to failure.

By 1955 Muller and Filomena had separated and he returned to Dover to pursue his own life. Filomena Greco Muller retired to a reclusive life on her property at Big Stone Beach with only numerous cats to keep her company. Despite her poor condition and inability to pay taxes on her 3950 acres, Filomena was able to ward off the tax collector by leasing hunting rights on her vast holdings. Many efforts to induce Mrs. Muller to sell a portion of her holdings were all fruitless. She was convinced that a "trust was imposed on her lands prior to her birth" preventing her from selling or altering the property. Her

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Continued from page 3

desire was that her lands remain undeveloped and in their natural state.

During her last year of life she was confined to the Courtland Manor Nursing home in Dover where she was protected by a State of Delaware Guardian. The Court of Chancery approved a petition in July 1991 to sell the "Polk Farm" to assist with Mrs. Muller's debts. The Polk Farm was sold to Delaware Wildlands, Inc by a deed transfer granted in July 1991. An executor was appointed by the State following Mrs. Muller's death April 10, 1991 to determine the final distribution of the remaining 3,000 acres. The estate has not been finally settled as of this date, however attempts are being made to honor Filomena Greco Muller's desire that the land remain in its pristine and undeveloped state.

Plans currently are underway by Delaware Wildlands, Inc. to maintain the Polk Farm and the remains of "Ellerslie" in its original and unchanged state.

David W. Kenton  
September 18, 1991

1 - A History of Delaware Through Its Governors - 1776-1984  
Roger A. Martin - 1984 McCaffery Printing

2 - Runks Biographical Encyclopedia - 1899

3 - Kent County Recorder of Deeds - R-1-270 (1817), F-3-181 (1832)

## MANSION RESTORATION/REPAIRS

During the spring and summer major repairs have been made to the Parson Thorne Mansion. The building is the victim of the ravages of time (250 years), of heavy traffic on both road and rail, and of the demands of modern living.

The first work of a restoration nature was the construction of a guttering system on the rear of the building to stop water leakage in walls and cellar. Next came replacement of the shingles on the roofs of the two wings and repairs to the dormer.

Time, weather, and use had worn windows and frames in the attic and one on the second floor of the main section. On the ground floor, door

frames and sills of the rear wing have been repaired.

After such major repairs, the others appear to be slight but equally necessary. They include repairs to the floor of the front stoop; putting the rest room in service; re-setting the oil tanks and surrounding fence; and other jobs familiar to owners of historic properties and also of properties not so historic.

Neither grant money nor a major benefactor was available. Contributions in response to our appeal by mail are of great assistance but more is needed to pay the whole bill. A contribution in any amount is most welcome.

## BELL CONCERT

On Sunday, June 9th, the Society sponsored the second Bell Concert at the Parson Thorne Mansion. The bell choirs of Avenue United Methodist Church and Reformation Lutheran Church of Milford, and of St. Andrews Lutheran Church of Dover presented a concert on the front lawn. At the conclusion, refreshments were served on the side lawn.

The Society appreciates the generosity of these three choirs in sharing their music with our members and friends

## APPRECIATION

Mrs. S. P. Isaacs, Chairman of Docents, wishes to express her gratitude to those members who have served as Docents at the Parson Thorne Mansion during the 1991 season. Their welcoming presence adds to both enjoyment and understanding of our visitors to this historic property.

## IN MEMORIAM

The death of Alphonso E. Humes on April 2, 1991, has left memories of devoted service to the Society over several decades. When the Milford Historical Society was developing from a dream to reality, Al Humes was a member of the Pilot Committee which in January, 1962, planned its organization.

As Mayor of the City of Milford, he served as chairman of the observance of the 175th anniversary of the founding of the town. This celebration included compilation and publication of the book, "A History of Milford, Delaware", and a house tour, the profits of which events went to the new Milford Historical Society. An

additional feature was the dedication of the Vale-Williams City Hall at a ceremony attended by Mrs. Grace Vale Ashe.

After completing his term as mayor, he was elected to the Society's Board of Trustees in 1965 and continued in that position until 1989. From 1965 to 1983 he served as Treasurer.

All of these contributions are specific and can be tabulated, even computerized, but his gifts of thoughtfulness, ideas, and caring cannot be enumerated, but live in the accomplishments of the Society and in the memories of his colleagues.

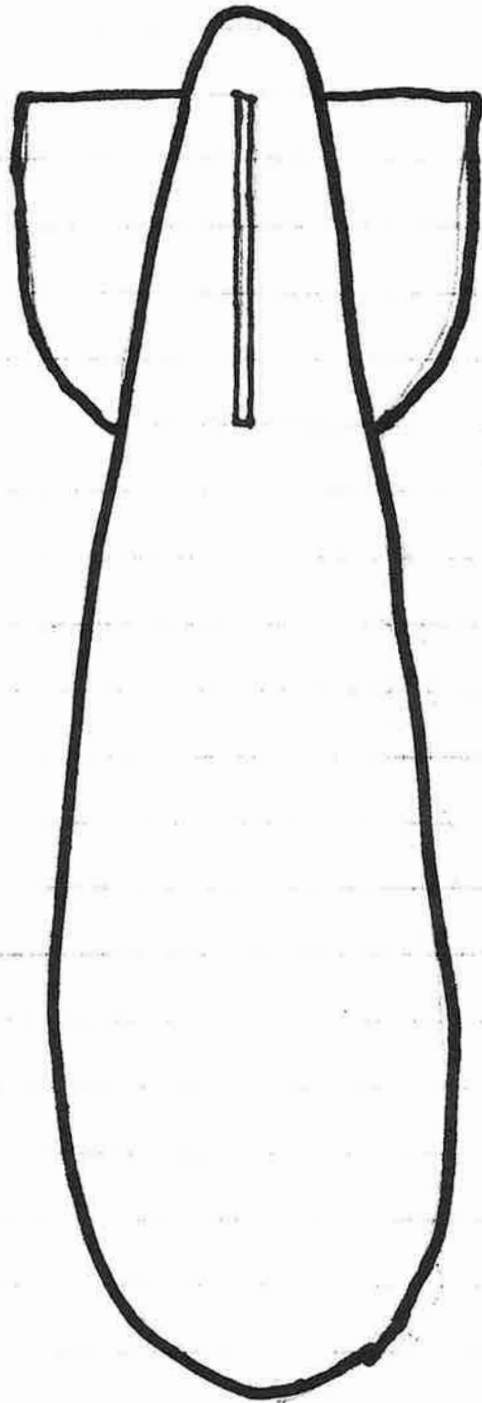
## PARSON THORNE MANSION SIGN

A beautiful new sign graces the front edge of the Parson Thorne Mansion lawn, giving the name and date of the building of the Mansion. This sign, beautifully and appropriately designed, executed and erected was the gift of Mr. Booker T. Bell of Greenwood.

This was not the first such contribution by Mr. Bell. He had painted and lettered the previous sign which had become no longer usable. On other occasions he has given generously of his talents and time to help the Society in times of need. We are very grateful to him



Estimated outline of bomb or bomblet used for practice at Big Stone Beach during WWII by US Army Air Corp. Size about 7 inch long x maximum 2.25 inch wide with 4 vanes.





Big Stone Beach  
Historical Marker  
ROW - 12/2014  
1/2





Big Stone Beach  
Historical Marker  
ROW - 12/2014  
2/2





Big Stone Beach Civic Association

Invites you to

**A DEDICATION CEREMONY**

for the Historic Sign at the Metal Observation Defense  
Tower located at Big Stone Beach.

*Join us in celebrating Big Stone Beach's role in our country's defense during World Wars I & II by being an integral part of Ft. Saulbury's support by observing and identifying enemy targets and relaying the information to specific guns at Ft. Sausbury near Slaughter Beach, DE.*

**Saturday, September 5, 2015 at 11am**

**With lunch reception to follow at**

**77 S. Big Stone Beach Drive**

**RSVP by Tuesday, September 1 to Mary Betts, BSBCA Secretary  
@cmlabs1@msn.com or 422-0369**



**Thank you to our legislators, Senator Bonini and  
Representative Peterman, for their kind donations making this  
historic sign marker possible !!**





## DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Townsend Building  
401 Federal Street Suite 2  
Dover, Delaware 19901-3639  
DOE WEBSITE: <http://www.doe.k12.de.us>

Mark T. Murphy  
Secretary of Education  
Voice: (302) 735-4000  
FAX: (302) 739-4654

October 11, 2014

Representative Harold J. Peterman  
411 Legislative Hall Office  
Dover, Delaware 19901

Dear Representative Peterman:

As the chairman of the Big Stone Beach Civic Association, I have been asked by the membership to approach you about the process for obtaining a formal state sign to designate the importance of the old military gun tower at the entrance to Big Stone Beach. Many visitors to the beach area are curious and have approached residents for information in respect to the tower.

Is there anything your office can do to help erect a commemorative sign that would honor those individuals who may have served during the time the tower was an active part of our military history?

Thank you my friend. I look forward to hearing from you at your leisure.

Sincerely,

M. Dean "Buddy" Betts  
Chairman, BSBCA