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FROM: Deirdre

SUBJECT: Bennett-Downes Estate

NOTES: _____

Adjoining Properties

There are two houses, one to the north and one to the south of Buena Vista, that are of interest. The house to the south of Buena Vista, currently occupied by Dr. Elligood, was built in 1858 by William B. McCrone.*

The following article appeared in the "Delaware Republican" on June 28, 1858:

"Another Improvement. Wm. B. McCrone, Esq. is just finishing a very large and fine brick house, having a front of 40 feet, and is 32 feet deep, with ample back buildings, on his farm in New Castle Hundred. It is two stories high and commands a splendid view of the majestic Delaware, and the Jersey shore in the distance. Washington Mason, carpenter. Allen and Hizer, brick work. D. Curlett, plasterer"

It is interesting that in the same issue there is a note about James C. Douglass having a house built for his overseer at Buena Vista. It was a frame building and Washington Mason was the carpenter and Daniel Curlett the plasterer.

The house to the north of Buena Vista is on land that was originally a part of the Buena Vista farm. It can be traced to a deed dated June 24, 1858 when James C. Douglass sells to John Johns an 8 acre plot with a house. The deed notes that it was a "...part of the land..." that Douglass bought from Clayton.

John M. Clayton bought the property from Abraham P. Shannan in 1845. A house appears in the right hand corner in the 1851 survey of Clayton's land which corresponds to the location of the existing house.

Abraham Shannon had purchased the property at an auction ordered by the Orphans Court on November 11, 1843. This was part of the effort to settle the estate of Bennett Downes who died circa 1820.

An 1839 survey of the Downes estate also shows a house in the lower right hand corner. The houses drawn in the 1839 and 1851 surveys are identical except the 1851 survey has what appears to be a gambrel roof wing on the northside of the house. This might be the "...kitchen of modern construction ..." mentioned in the advertisement for the 1843 auction.

The exact date of construction of this house has not been determined. Bennett Downes purchased four parcels of land (1808, 1813, 1814, 1818) several of which may have had houses on them.

His business papers ended up being included in his estate papers and are now in the State Archives. Several of his account books are also part of the collections at the State Archives.

* William B. McCrone appears as an adjoiner to Buena Vista in the 1846 and 1851 surveys.

These papers show him building or rebuilding a house circa 1816-1818. It is interesting that the 1816 assessment lists Bennett Downes as having a "Brick and Frame House" and the 1822 assessment lists "brick buildings." The 1828 assessment lists a "Brick House." The business papers also reflect the ordering of an extraordinary number of bricks. This may be explained by the brick barn that appears in the assessments after 1816. In 1837 it disappears and a frame barn is listed.

Additional research will be needed to determine the exact date of construction of this house. The research should be done in the following manner:

- A. Check newspapers after June 24, 1858 for references to John Johns renovating or building a house in New Castle Hundred. The house as it now exists with its mansard roof has either been extensively redone or is the second house on the site.
- B. Research the deeds of all of Bennett Downes land transactions. Determine and plot all metes and bounds. Check for wills, Orphans Court records and assessments for all of the people he is buying land from.
- C. Research trip to the Historical Society of Delaware to determine if they have anything on Bennett Downes or John Johns.

Bennett Downes Estate

Orphans Court Books - New Castle County

"S" 219 - Explains that Abraham P. Shannon is assignee of Henry E. Downes & Wm. B. Downes (children of Bennett Downes)

Heirs at Law of Bennett Downes entitled to real estate:

- James Gilpin & Sally Ann (wife)
- James M. Downes
- Richard C. Downes
- Wm. B. Downes
- Wm. H. Foster (son of Mary E. Foster, dec., daughter of intestate)
- Henry E. Downes

Wm. B. Downes by deed conveyed his individual 1/6th part to John Fogwell who in turn conveyed same to petitioner (Shannon) as well as 1/6th part of Henry E. Downes by Sheriff W. E. Moore to Shannon.
Downes property laid off and appraised by Orphans Court

#1 209 acres 1 rod & 38 perches

(\$9, 426.92 3/4 - value)

#2 134 acres & 31 perches (4,428.39 1/4 - value)

public vendue notice to appear in the Del. State Journal for 6 successive weeks.

Note: June 20, 1843 copies of the Orphan Court Regulations were sent to the Delaware State Journal.

"S" p. 289 - Orphans Court ordered sale of Downes property Sept. 15, 1843 (since decision to sell land was not disputed by heirs at Law) Andrew C. Gray - authorized to sell land at public auction. 20 days before sale an advertisement is to be published in the Wilm. newspapers and in the Phila newspaper 2 weeks before.

"S" 307 - entry summarizes activities:

Return of Sale

1843, Sept. 15 - Court ordered that lands and tenements and Hereditaments ... of Bennett Downes dec. who died Intestate as surveyed, divided into two parts..." and which none of the parties entitled had accepted should be sold at public vendue..."

1844, Feb. 21 - Andrew C. Gray, Esq. made return of sale

Tract #1 - purchased by Abraham P. Shannon - \$8,600

Tract #2 - A. P. Shannon - \$3,900

Tract #3 - to A. P. Shannon \$60.00

1843, Nov. 11 (Saturday) - Property sold at the house of Caleb T. Swayne
in the town of New Castle.

Court ordered Shannon "... to pay the parties entitled severally, their
Executors, Administrators or Assigns respectively their just and pro-
portionable shares..."

Costs for proceedings, division, valuation + \$282.37 (court costs) deducted
from the \$12,560 - bal. \$12,277.63 to be divided among parties.

(Capt.) Bennett Downes Papers

In the collections of the Delaware State Archives are the papers of (Capt.) Bennett Downes. They cover the 1790's to the early 1820's. He apparently was a merchant or trader. There are receipts and letters concerning grain shipments to Baltimore. A Thomas Marsh Foreman appears to have been a business partner. The Foreman account is by far the largest in the Downes account books and he is listed as the guardian of Downes' children in some legal documents.

Bennett Downes was originally from Maryland and moved to New Castle Hundred in the early 1800's. Through several purchases he compiled approximately 340 acres which later became known as "Buena Vista" during John M. Clayton's tenure. He died, intestate, circa 1820 and his estate was not finally settled until 1844.

Documents concerning Bennett Downes can be found in two areas:

- A. New Castle County Probate Records - 3 Folders
- B. Private Accounts Collection

- 1. Bennett Downes Account Books

- a. 1807 - 1814 (Ref. No. 22.1)
- b. 1811 - 1821 (Ref. No. 22.2)

The first book contains accounts concerning the estate of James Downes. Is this Bennett Downes father?

- 2. Sarah Downes Account Book (widow of Bennett)

- a. 1821 - 1822 (Ref. No. 23)

The first two folders in the probate records contain several hundred receipts for building supplies, school supplies, clothing, labor contracts, etc. They are a beautiful record of everyday life from 1818 - to the early 1820's. The receipts are supported by entries in the account books to give us a complete record of what Bennett Downes was doing. The inventory of his personal estate is in the third folder and it allows a researcher to compare purchase price to assessed value of some items.

Some of the more interesting items have been listed:

Bennett Downes - New Castle County Probate Records - First Folder

- 1. Contract with a man to build his house
- 2. Contract with a man to make and burn bricks
- 3. Articles of partnership in a tanyard
- 4. Receipt for furniture from George Whitelock
- 5. Good receipt for a print of George Washington - lists merchants, name and address
- 6. Building specifications for a house

2nd Folder

1. Receipt from Jared (James) Chesnut for making chairs (12 for \$20)
2. Receipt for work done on jewelry by George Jones
3. Bills for harvesting; work and well digging

3rd Folder

1. Superb conditions for public vendue with nail holes in the corners.
2. A printed receipt from a hatmaker in Philadelphia
3. Several accounts and documents concerning the estate of Bennett Downes

Buena Vista

STATE CONFERENCE CENTER

THE HOUSE

Built in 1845 - 47 for U.S. Senator John M. Clayton, Buena Vista was named in honor of General Zachary Taylor's great victory during the Mexican war. The original Greek Revival house was expanded in 1930 - 1932 by Alice Hounsfield duPont Buck to accommodate the large south library wing. It was designed by Colonial Revival architect, Brognard Oakie.

THE OWNERS

John M. Clayton (1796 - 1856) was born in Dagsboro, grew up in the Parson Thorne mansion in Milford, and had his office on the Green in Dover. He attended Yale College and became a lawyer. His career in politics included Clerk of The State House of Representatives 1816 - 1819, Clerk of the State Senate in 1820, Delaware's Secretary of State and U.S. Representative during the 1820's, U.S. Senator 1830 - 1836, Chief Justice of the Delaware Superior Court 1836 - 1839, nominated as candidate for Vice President to run with Henry Clay in the 1844 Whig Convention but declined the honor, U.S. Senator 1845 - 1849, U.S. Secretary of State 1849 - 1850 for President Zachary Taylor and U.S. Senator 1851 - 1856.

While Clayton's political career was a success, his personal life was marred by tragedy. Sally Ann Fisher, his wife, died in 1825 shortly after the birth of their second son. They had only been married three years. He mourned her loss for the rest of his life and never remarried. His sons did not reach maturity, leaving Clayton only collateral descendents. He is buried in the Presbyterian Church Yard in Dover, Delaware.

John Clayton sold Buena Vista to his nephew, James Douglass in 1853. Mr. Douglass' wife died in 1854, with his son following in 1872. When James Douglass died in 1875, a room by room inventory was made of the mansion. The furniture in the original house is antique, most of which has Clayton/Douglas/Buck family connections. The interior arrangement of furniture was dictated by the inventory.

James Douglass' daughter, Margaret Douglass, married Francis Nixon Buck and the couple moved into Buena Vista.

In 1914, the house passed to T. Coleman duPont. In 1921, Alice Hounsfield duPont, daughter of T. Coleman duPont, married Clayton Douglas Buck, the son of Francis and Margaret Buck. She added the wing on the southside of Buena Vista now known as the Buck library. Mr. Buck served as Governor of Delaware from 1929 - 1937.



Buena Vista **STATE CONFERENCE CENTER**

Buena Vista may be used for official State functions, training seminars, educational programs and conferences. Reservations may be made by State agencies, local government agencies, elected officials and non-profit organizations whose purpose is to improve the quality of life in Delaware through educational, charitable, social, or cultural activities. Priority is given to official State functions and the conduct of official State business.

For information, please call 323-4430.



Department of State
Division of Historical & Cultural Affairs

Buena Vista

Built in 1845 by John M. Clayton, Buena Vista became the finest example of the Greek revival style in Delaware. Clayton also made Buena Vista one of the finest farms in the state before he died in 1856.

Clayton's nephew, James Douglass, inherited Buena Vista who in turn gave it to his daughter, Constance, who married Francis Buck. Clayton's great-grandnephew, C. Douglass Buck, was born at Buena Vista in 1890.

By 1914, Buena Vista was sold to T. Coleman duPont who willed it to his daughter, Mrs. Alice duPont Wilson Buck, wife of Governor C. Douglass Buck.

Governor C. Douglass Buck (1929 - 1937) was the first governor in Delaware history to serve two consecutive terms.

Under Mrs. Buck's direction, the house was completely renovated and enlarged between 1930 and 1932. Numerous additions and interior changes made Buena Vista into a magnificent mansion of historical significance. Thirty-five years later in 1965, Governor Buck sold the estate to the State of Delaware for the sum of one dollar.



Delaware Day

**Celebrating the
150th anniversary of
Buena Vista**

December 7, 1995

Menu

Crab and Corn Chowder

Tenderloin of Beef with Stuffing of Swiss Chard

Madeira Sauce

Chive Duchess Potatoes

Haricots Vert

Julienne of Carrots

Baby Greens and Roquefort with an Apple Cider Vinaigrette

White Chocolate Mousse in Tulip Cups with Fresh Berries

Cafes

Chocolates

Silverado Chardonnay '93

*Lambert Bridge
Cabernet Sauvignon '92*

Program

Welcome

Secretary of State Edward J. Freel

*Pledge of
Allegiance*

Michael E. Harkins

Invocation

Lieutenant Governor Ruth Ann Minner

Dinner

Remarks

Dr. Carol Hoffecker

Comments

Governor Thomas R. Carper

Response

Karen McCoy

Benediction

Judge William T. Quillen