IMAGES
of America

CLAYMONT

Martha Schiek and Ray Hester

The North Branch of Naaman's Creek is shown here before it reaches the Delaware River.

INTRODUCTION

The community now known as Claymont started on the banks of the Naaman's Creek where it empties into the Delaware River. This once rich ecosystem has been occupied steadily since before 1200 A.D. and has undergone numerous cultural and economic changes, most of which are still evident in the architecture and living patterns.

The first residents were aboriginal Indians of the Middle Woodland period (1100–1600 B.C.). Evidence of these early dwellers has been found along both sides of Naaman's Creek from its mouth on the Delaware to its sources on both branches.

The Dutch, who were the first Europeans to arrive, named the creek and the settlement Naamans, after the chief of the Lenape Indians residing along the creek. This little settlement grew rapidly and continuously from the 17th century through the 20th century, first with gristmills, farms, and related ancillary industries, and later with lumber mills, a steel mill, a chemical plant, and an ice cream plant.

As the nation grew, so grew Naamans from a little village into a small town, mirroring our country's development from the 1600s to the 1960s. The town sits strategically along the Delaware River, The Kings Highway, and the railroad. Claymont has been a two-way funnel for travel to and from Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., since colonial days. Philadelphia, the cradle of democracy, is 20 miles to the north and Washington, D.C., is 100 miles to the south. From the founding fathers to the molders of modern-day America, many have lived in Claymont and many more traversed its boundaries as America was carved out of the "new world."

Claymont's geographical position has been its strongest asset since its founding. The town's location forced it to see and experience America's development. Yet even today, after the dawning of a new millennium, Claymont somehow remains a small, proud, unincorporated "town," letting most of the hustle go by on the two interstate highways that literally cut the town into three slices.

Claymont became Claymont in 1856 after Reverend Clemson, the pastor of the Episcopal church, and his wife settled here. Mrs. Clemson had come from the family plantation, Claymont Court, in Charles Town, WV, and was a descendant of Bushrod Washington, greatnephew of George Washington. It was Mrs. Clemson who got the name changed in remembrance of her family home.

Claymont has been home and host to an impressive list of notable people. Among the earliest of these was a Swedish artist, Adolph-Ulrich Wertmüller, who had been appointed artist to the King of Sweden. His house still stands in the yard of the CitiSteel, USA Company. George Washington, "Mad" Anthony Wayne, and "Lighthorse" Harry Lee were frequent

visitors of the Robinson House, one of several inns and taverns in Claymont along The King's Highway.

In 1859, renowned artist F.O.C. Darley, America's first illustrator of note, moved to Claymont. It was here that Darley finished the last two-thirds of his career and entertained Charles Dickens while he was on his 1867 American tour. It is also probable that he received Edgar Allen Poe, as well as some of the other authors for whom he illustrated, such as Longfellow, Irving, and Cooper.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Claymont attracted influential businessmen, such as J.J. Raskob and John Addicks, to settle permanently. The town became a summer residence for many Philadelphia businessmen. Raskob was the primary financier of the Empire State Building and founder of General Motors. From his Claymont residence, he and Joseph Kennedy Sr. planned Al Smith's presidential nomination and campaign.

Author Anne Parish was born in Claymont and wrote her 1925 Harper's Prize winning novel *The Perennial Bachelor* here. Her 1928 novel *All Kneeling* was made into the movie *Born to be Bad* starring Joan Fontaine.

Join us as we show you some of Claymont's 18th-century inns and farmhouses, 19th-century mansions, 20th-century industrial housing, and an Italianate palace. Discover the building that was hit with cannon balls from the British ship *Leopard* in 1812.

We will show you Claymont's fishing clubs, a lightkeeper's house, speak-easies, and the location of the last "legal" gun duel in the United States. Share some of the "Americanism" and patriotism of Claymont, its war memorials, and the seaplane training facility of World War I. Learn of the businesses along "the Pike" in Claymont Center. Visit the A&P meat counter and general store, Richardson Variety Store, and The American Store. Stop by the Claymont Trust Company, Buffington's News, and the cleaners. Have a soda at The Pantry. See the Claymont Fire Company's 1928 ambulance, Claymont's early churches, a camp meeting, and Church of the Ascension before it was moved across the Pike. Claymont's churches have always been, and continue to be, a vital thread in the community. Enjoy Claymont High School's sports teams, graduating classes, dances, and May Queen court. See where the students "hung out" and glance over the Worthland ball team. Learn about Claymont's 1923 Community Civic League, the Youth Council and its events, and Worthland and Overlook Colony's Community Centers. Being an unincorporated "town," Claymont has always had civic organizations to see that community needs were being met.

Yes, this is America, as it was from the 1630s through the 1950s. Take a little time, reminisce, and return again and again to find something new in each photograph. Even if you never lived in Claymont, you will experience *your* small-town America by viewing ours, and we proudly share it with you.

—Martha Schiek and Ray Hester
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*All photos are courtesy of *The Elizabeth and Allen Schiek Claymont Collection* unless otherwise noted.