

THE STONE SCHOOL

A VITAL PIECE
OF CLAYMONT HISTORY



Illustration by Jerry Becker

Doug Gelbert

The Stone School
A Vital Piece of Claymont History

by

DOUG GELBERT

The Friends of the
Claymont Stone School, Inc.

This book is dedicated in memory of:

*Harvey E. Stahl, Superintendent of the Claymont Special
School District, 1922-1955*

*Dr. Sager Tryon, Member and President of the Claymont
Special School District Board, 1950-1962*

*Edward J. Dunn, Claymont resident; Friends of the Claymont
Stone School supporter, 1920-1995*

and all who passed through the hallowed Stone School doors

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The Friends of the Claymont Stone School, Inc. Board

Carolyn Wolfe Burlew

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Evelyn Tryon

Walter Stein

Peggy Vavala - accountant

Leo John Ramunno - attorney

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Artists:

Jerry Becker, Paul Scarborough, Jack Parkinson and Nancy Churchman Sawin, whose great-grandfather George Churchman operated the mill that powered industry in 19th century Claymont

Active Friends:

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FOREWARD

How fitting is this ode to a schoolhouse! Having harbored the education of many generations of children, the Claymont Stone School embodies the roots of the community. From rural lumber mills to industrial steel mills, this historic schoolhouse has witnessed the development of the surrounding area.

Although its significance is apparent with its placement on the National Register of Historic Places, the importance of the schoolhouse goes far beyond that. Preserving the bricks and mortar of an old building is not the sole purpose of a preservation initiative. When threatened with demolition, more than just the building materials and design features of a building are at stake. Stabilizing and revitalizing a threatened structure such as the Claymont Stone School is really about people - past, present and future.

It was a place where the imagination of kindergartners was captured, a child's first book was read, where toiling over your letters earned a summer break, lifelong friendships were cemented, perhaps a first kiss took place, or was the prelude to a distinguished career. It has a purer meaning in its heartfelt importance to the people who attended school there or gathered there while it served as a library, and who continue to drive past it each day. In the grassroots preservation effort to save the Stone School one senses a refreshing, old-fashioned sense of community. Three cheers to Carolyn Burlew, Donna Lewis and Ruth Stein for their diehard enthusiasm to preserve and reuse the school. Neighbors in the Darley House, Ray and Judith Hester, among many others, are also passionate propo-

Chapter One

The Land

In the summer of 1864, Hilborne Cresson was walking in what is today Holly Oak enjoying the cool breezes wafting off the Delaware River. Like many well-to-do Philadelphians, Cresson, a Germantown native, and his family had built a summer home in the pleasing hills along the Delaware, just below the Pennsylvania-Delaware state line. Cresson fancied himself an amateur archaeologist and naturalist and he took a particular interest in the work of some post-diggers he encountered as he walked.

Sure enough the laborers were unearthing arrowheads and stone relics as they dug deep into the dirt and peat. As Cresson poked around, he uncovered a muddy whelk shell pierced with a tiny hole, surely a piece of ancient Indian jewelry. Cresson looked closer and could clearly discern the outline of an animal incised on the shell - and the creature

he had found in Naamans Creek. When he returned to America, he quickly headed back to northern Delaware, seeking evidence to prove the theory that paleolithic man lived in eastern America.

By 1887, Cresson had collected more than 600 stone relics. He published his conclusions in the *American Antiquarian* that he had found the remains of a weir, or fish trap, of pre-Indian man. The scientific community took notice. Distinguished anthropologists from around the country were rushing on trains to Naamans Creek. Claymont was suddenly the "Cradle of Man" in North America.

Immediately debate arose over Cresson's discoveries. Was this clear evidence of paleolithic man or was Hilborne Cresson guilty of overzealousness, or even outright fraud, in his lust to establish himself as a scientist? The "Holly Oak Pendant," as the original piece of shell jewelry came to be known, was sent to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. It is still there today, but its age has never been determined. Naamans Creek will never yield its secrets - the pilings were destroyed in 1889 when Richmond's Brickyard dredged the channel.

Claymont may be the birthplace of man in North America, but it is more widely assumed that the first Indians did not settle east of the Mississippi River until 5,000 years ago. The people who settled along the Delaware River were the Lenni Lenape, and the villages along the Naamans Creek were in the Algonkian territory. The Swedes

The first road in Brandywine Hundred was an Indian path that ran along the Delaware River from New Castle to Tinicum. Given the ease of travel on the river itself, the trail was not heavily used. When the English consolidated Colonial power in the area in 1664, they needed a reliable road to connect the expanding territory. The King's Highway evolved along the same route, but a mile or so inland from the Lenni Lenape path, along higher ground. In 1682, the first bridge was built over Naamans Creek.

The road from Wilmington became the main thoroughfare from the south to Philadelphia, Colonial America's largest city. When Philadelphia became the United States capital during the War for Independence, there began a steady parade of notables past Naaman's Creek.

The old wooden bridge was replaced with an arched stone bridge in 1802. It was made a toll bridge by New Castle County. Tollgates and a house were erected and a toll keeper appointed. The fees to cross the bridge at Naaman's Creek were as follows:

Coach and four horses	25¢
Coach and two horses	12 1/2¢
Stage wagon	18¢
Horse and chair, sulkey or sleigh	6¢
Man and horse	3¢

One person who was certainly familiar with the King's Highway and its toll bridge was John Dickinson, the most

that if hereafter any difficulty shall arise concerning the application of the hereby granted premises to the purpose aforesaid, the Legislature of this State shall have full power and authority by law to make such provision for ensuring the benefit of the trust aforesaid to the purpose above mentioned, as may by them be judged most expedient, and further it is covenanted by and between the said parties by these presents that the said John Dickinson and his heirs at the said Lot of Land and premises hereby granted or mentioned or intended sets in the appearance against him the said John Dickinson and his heirs and against all and every other person and persons whomsoever having or claiming or that shall or may at any time hereafter lawfully claim the same or any part thereof by form or under him, the said John Dickinson or his heirs or any of them, unto the said Thomas Robinson, Amer Grubb, James Grubb, Thomas Gray, and William Cloud, their heirs and assigns, in trust for the purpose above mentioned, shall the Will Warrant and power Defend by these presents. In Witness whereof the said John Dickinson has hereunto set his hand at the city and year first above written.

Signed, Sealed & Delivered
 in the presence of John Dickinson
 James L. Hallant, Isaac Stinson

Newcastle County Pa. The Execution of the above was proved by Isaac Stinson one of the subscribing Witnesses thereto, in open Court of Common Pleas held at Newcastle for the County of Newcastle of the December Term A.D. 1805 - In Testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and affixed the seal of said Court.

Hugh W. Kitchin Clerk

Received 26th May A.D. 1807 -

Courtesy of the Delaware State Archives

Part of the original 1805 deed of the land for the Claymont Stone School, signed by John Dickinson. School Superintendent Harvey Stahl discovered the document more than 100 years later - buried in a clutter of old papers stored in the school.

Chapter Two

The School

John Dickinson sold his small plot of land in Naaman's Creek to Thomas Robinson, Amer Grubb, James Grubb, Thomas Gray and William Cloud for the consideration of five cents - with the provision that the five men serve as trustees of a school to be erected on the site.

It was no surprise that a learned man like John Dickinson would provide for the schooling of Delawareans. The state had a long tradition in providing for education, stretching back to the 17-year sovereignty of the Swedes, whose clergy taught the children. When James Adams, Delaware's first printer, arrived in Wilmington in 1761, one of the first books he produced was *The Child's New Spelling Book*. He sold it for one shilling.

In 1796, the Delaware Legislature created a "school fund" from taxes on marriage and tavern licenses and authorized the state treasury to accept gifts, donations and

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The Claymont Stone School as it appeared throughout the 19th century. This is the only existing photograph of the original one-room school building.

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The Claymont Stone School was integrated as early as the late 1800s as this class photograph from 1893 or 1894 indicates. Student, Willie Wilson, is pictured, standing in the middle of the back row.

Chapter Three

The Town

In 1654, where three branches of the Naamans Creek cascaded into the Delaware River, Johan Rising built a grist mill. Two centuries later, in 1853, when the region's name changed from Naaman's Creek to Claymont, presumably for the rich clay deposits in the undulating hills, the town was still little more than a hamlet and a stop on the railroad line.

The mill community began in earnest in 1675 with the patent granted by Edmund Andres of 1,000 acres to a consortium of six Swedish and Dutch men. Their land grant stretched from Naaman's Creek to present-day Marcus Hook. Soon a cluster of 16 log huts sprung up around the mill. Jasper Yeates was operating the mill in 1701 and throughout the 18th century grain was brought from great distances to the Naaman's Creek mill.

In 1832, 21-year old George Churchman, the son of a

Pennsylvania farmer and cattle dealer, launched his business career by buying the Naaman's Creek mill. Churchman was the 6th generation in a direct line of descent from John Churchman, a native of Sussex, England. John Churchman emigrated to America in 1692.

Young Churchman took the grist mill and converted it into a saw mill, building up the largest lumber business in Delaware. By 1838, he had made a fortune harvesting the great timber stands of central Pennsylvania. The logs were floated down the Susquehanna River and hauled to the mill on Naamans Creek where Churchman converted the wood into lumber for the thriving shipbuilding businesses on the Delaware River.

Then he lost it all. An unexpected freshet on the Susquehanna washed an entire year's production down the river and out to sea. Undaunted, Churchman began again. He continued to accumulate pine and hemlock forests in the Pennsylvania mountains, which became the "Lumber Capital of the World." The timber built America and the bark tanned its leather. So much pine and hemlock was harvested that the mountainsides were stripped bare.

George Churchman prospered. He moved to Wilmington in 1867 and organized the Mechanics' Bank of Wilmington. As wealthy men do, he gravitated to politics. A prominent Whig, Churchman founded the Know-Nothing Party of Brandywine Hundred. Later, he became a Republican and was elected to the Delaware Legislature where he was a leader in abolishing the state's profitable

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The Brick Works was established to take advantage of the natural clay deposits found in the area. It was one of the last vestiges of industry in Claymont when it was abandoned in the late 1800s.

Chapter Four

The Expansion

For one hundred years, one teacher in a single room of the Stone School served the education needs of Claymont's children. By 1900, enrollment had risen to 65 and compulsory school attendance, which would pass in 1907, was on the horizon. With an increasing community population, school voters began to consider building a new schoolhouse in 1903. It was finally decided to renovate the existing Naaman's Creek School instead. On May 31, 1905, the school district dispersed \$1,980.00 to add a second room to the school, over those "who did not want the walls disturbed."

William Bird, a local contractor, was hired to complete the expansion. The rear wall and the southwest wall were removed and a second gabled room added. The stonework of mixed grey and brown was laid randomly, rather than in the semi-course manner of the original Brandywine gran-

ite. When the expansion was finished, the original Stone School had doubled in size. In 1907 Bird added a double inside closet.

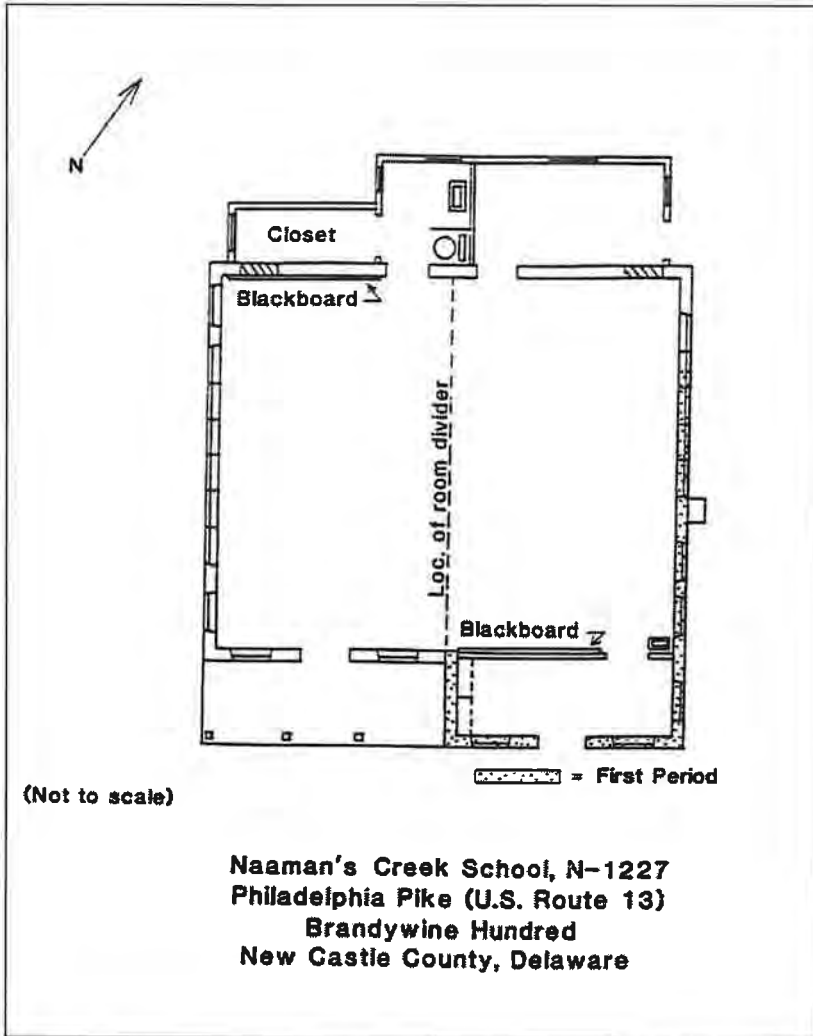
Despite the rebuilding of the school, Naaman's Creek School continued to operate as a one-room, one-teacher school. A movable wall separated the classes, but the age of the one room rural school was coming to an end.

In 1911, Claymont ushered in an era of unprecedented industrial expansion. The Texas Company initiated the influx of modern industry by building a factory that year in the northern section. The next year, General Chemical started a plant at the state line on the east side of the turnpike. In 1914, National Aniline Chemical Company developed the western side. Finally, in 1916, the Worth Steel Company, having sold a steel mill in Coatesville, Pennsylvania and agreeing to a non-competition clause in the state, moved across the Delaware line to Claymont.

The school population exploded with the new families. Portable school buildings were erected to house additional school children. Church buildings were used as schools. The new industries built their own small villages and schools for their workers. In 1917 alone, the school population of Claymont rose by 250.

The overburdened Naaman's Creek School added a second teacher during the school year 1914-15. Mabel Donovan and Zeita Davis taught that year and in the fall of 1915, Bertha Jones was hired to teach grades one through

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The interior of the Claymont Stone School after the expansion of the building in 1905. The one-room schoolhouse was now separated by a room divider.

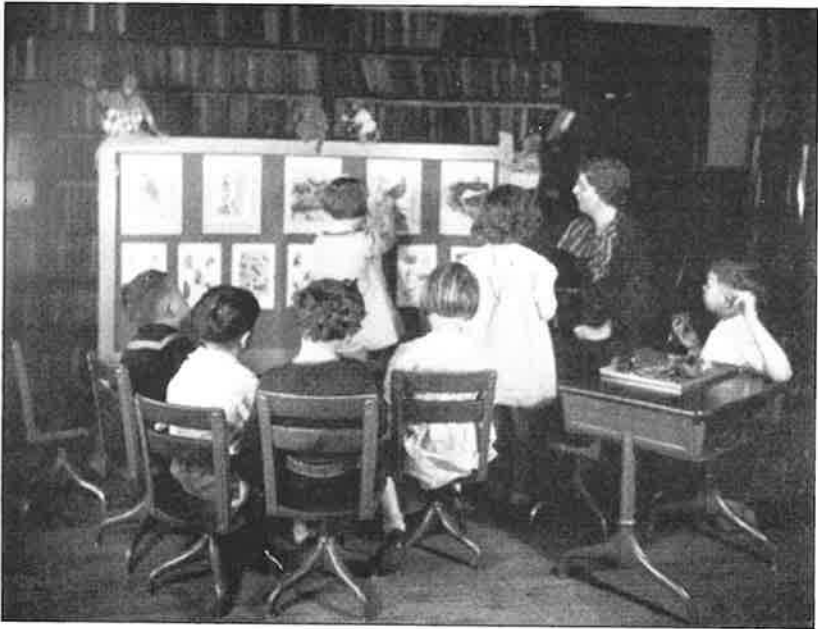
Chapter Five

The Library

The Claymont Stone School did not remain vacant long. In 1928, the Women's Club of Claymont adopted the building as a meeting place. The next year the volunteers opened a private lending library with 600 donated books. It was a fitting transformation for the property founded on the ideals of public education handed down from John Dickinson.

And indeed the library grew rapidly. Mrs. Thomas Mowbray donated a collection of 200 books and Claymont novelist Ann Parrish contributed much of her private library. In 1929, the library started with limited hours from 7-9 P.M. on Monday evenings. Patronage was so brisk that by 1945 the flourishing institution was receiving matching funds from the State of Delaware through the Public Library Commission. And everything - the acquisitions, the maintenance of the stacks, the record keeping - was done on

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An interior scene from the Stone School when it was utilized as a children's classroom and the community library.

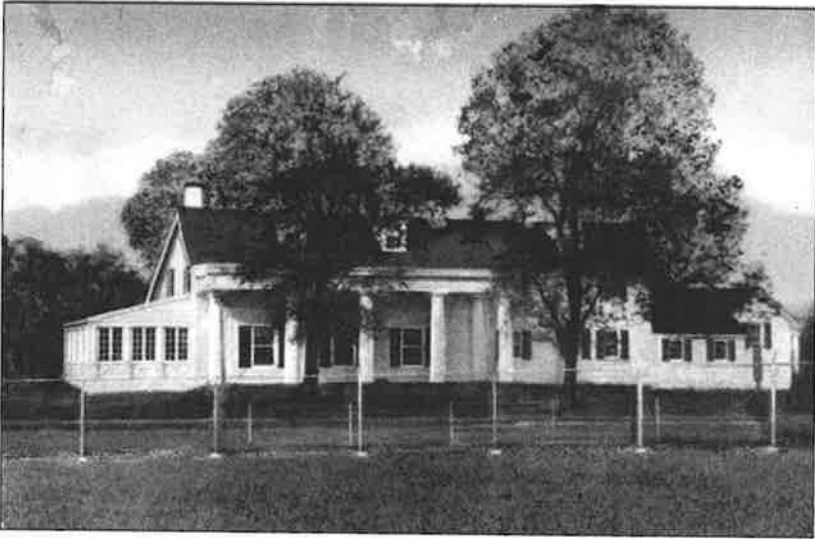
Chapter Six

The Neighbors

The Robinson House. The two-story-and-attic house at the corner of Naamans Road and Philadelphia Pike was built in 1723, making it one of Delaware's oldest buildings. But it isn't even the oldest building on the property. The stone blockhouse just to the east and north of the Robinson House was used by Swedish colonists eight decades before Alexander Robinson constructed his mansion. The buildings are so historically attractive that Henry Ford tried to purchase them when he was assembling his famous village of American heritage at Dearborn, Michigan.

General Thomas Robinson bought the house and mill in 1749. He had little time to enjoy his new property, however, as he was killed fighting Indians on the frontier. Thereafter, his family operated the building as an inn. By the time of the Revolutionary War there were additions of brick and heavy shipboard planks. Located directly on the King's Highway,

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The Robinson House was a favorite stopping place along the King's Highway in Colonial times and was witness to much intrigue during the War for Independence. This scene was featured on a postcard from the 20th century.

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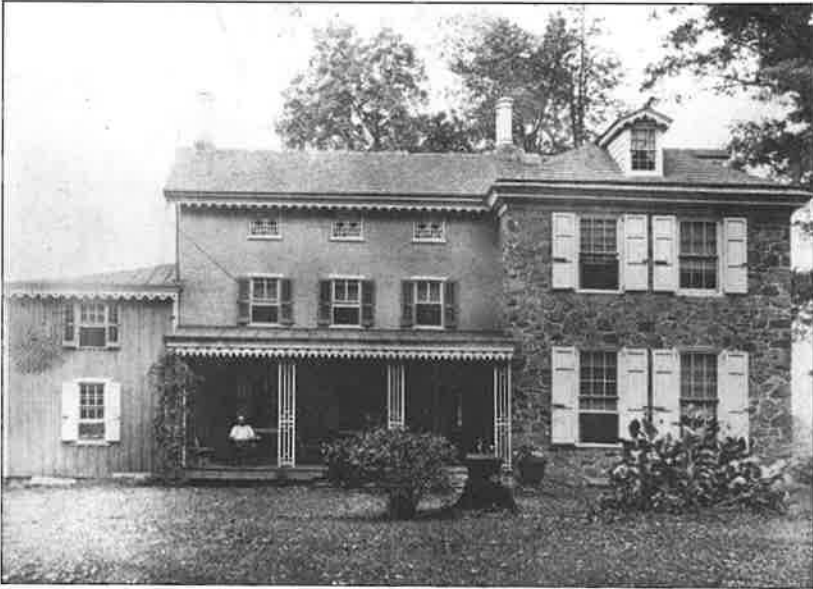


Famed illustrator Felix Darley made this sketch of his Claymont home, Wren's Nest, in 1859. Darley entertained some of the most illustrious literary visitors ever to come to Delaware at Wren's Nest, across the road from the Claymont Stone School.



The Troutman House, across the King's Highway from the Claymont Stone School, as it appeared in 1910 when George Troutman sold his estate to financier John Raskob. Today the grounds of the estate comprise the campus of Archmere Academy.

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Near the Claymont Stone School the Clyde Mansion still stands off the Philadelphia Pike, unfazed by the modern steel mills which enveloped it in the early 20th century. As the mills were built around the old house it remained a link to times gone by in Claymont.

Chapter Seven

The Preservation

In many communities a condemned building, wedged between a busy intersection on one corner and a gas station and shopping center on the other, would certainly be facing a wrecking ball. But not in Claymont.

Residents immediately rallied around the Claymont Stone School, and within a month of its closing in January 1988, the Brandywine School District announced the building would not be destroyed. Cables were installed to stabilize the weakened roof. Efforts then began to have the Stone School listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The United States National Park Service concluded in its evaluation that, "Naaman's Creek School is significant architecturally at two points in time: circa 1805, when it was built; and 1905, when it was enlarged. Overall, it is a well-preserved building exhibiting design features characteristic of their period."

The Naaman's Creek School won another reprieve when United States Senator Joseph Biden, Jr. appealed to both the school board and Governor Thomas Carper. The plight of the school was brought to Biden's attention by Carolyn Wolfe Burlew, a member of the Stoney Run Chapter of the International Questers, an organization which has a dual purpose: to educate by research and study of antiques and to lend support to historic preservation by awarding grants and scholarships. Burlew and two other Claymont High School graduates, Donna Carter Lewis and Ruth Govatos Stein, then formed the Friends of the Claymont Stone School Inc., an organization devoted solely to the preservation of the site.

The Friends of the Claymont Stone School Inc. work actively to raise funds to restore the history-laden building. It would then house a hands-on museum with exhibits on Claymont history, a history which has been intricately woven through the Naaman's Creek School since 1805.

Appendix

The Deed

Transcription of the Deed of John Dickinson made August 9, 1805. New Castle County Recorder of Deed; Book E, Volume 3, Page 317 (*Delaware Public Archives*)

This indenture made the ninth day of the Eight month in the year of our Lord one thousand Eight hundred and five. Between John Dickinson Esquire of the Borough of Wilmington and County of New Castle in the State of Delaware of the one part. and Thomas Robinson, Amer Grubb and James Grubb Esquires and Thomas Gray and William Cloud, Farmers, all of Brandywine Hundred and county and State aforesaid, Trustees of and for a school as herein after is mentioned, of the other part, Whereas the said John Dickinson by virtue of an Indenture of bargain and Sale duly executed under the hand and Seal of Frederick Craig administrator of all and Singular the goods and

follows: (?) to wit. Beginning at a corner stone standing at the northwest side of the aforesaid Road, and at the South west side of the aforesaid William Cloud's private road, thence with his private road and along the line of the said John Dickinson's land North twenty seven degrees west, eight perches to another corner stone, thence by two lines dividing this lot from the remainder of the tract, to wit. South sixty degrees and a quarter west and parallel with the aforesaid public road five perches to another corner stone, and thence South twenty Seven degrees East, and parallel with the private road aforesaid of William Cloud, eight perches to another Corner Stone at the Side of the said public road, and thence with the Same North Sixty degrees and a quarter East five perches to the place of Beginning containing forty perches of land be the same more or less with the appurtenances and all the estate, right, title, interest, property, Claim and demand of the Said John Dickinson and his heirs of in and to the same and every part thereof, To have and to hold the said hereby granted lot or piece of land with the appurtenances unto the Said Thomas Robinson, Amer Grubb, James Grubb, Thomas Gray, and William Cloud their heirs and assigns, to the use and Behoof of the Said Thomas Robinson, Amer Grubb, James Grubb, Thomas Gray, and William Cloud their heirs and assigns forever. In trust nevertheless for the purpose of having a schoolhouse erected thereon and such other buildings and improvements as shall be found necessary for the benefit and accomodation of a school and of the families now

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About the Author

Native Delawarean Doug Gelbert has written eight books, including *The Great Delaware Sports Book*. He lived the first nine years of his life in Claymont and attended the Green Street Elementary School through the third grade.

About the Artist

Jerry Becker grew up in Claymont and graduated from Archmere Academy. He went on to study at the Philadelphia College of Art and earned a Masters from Wilmington College. Mr. Becker teaches art at Concord High School.

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