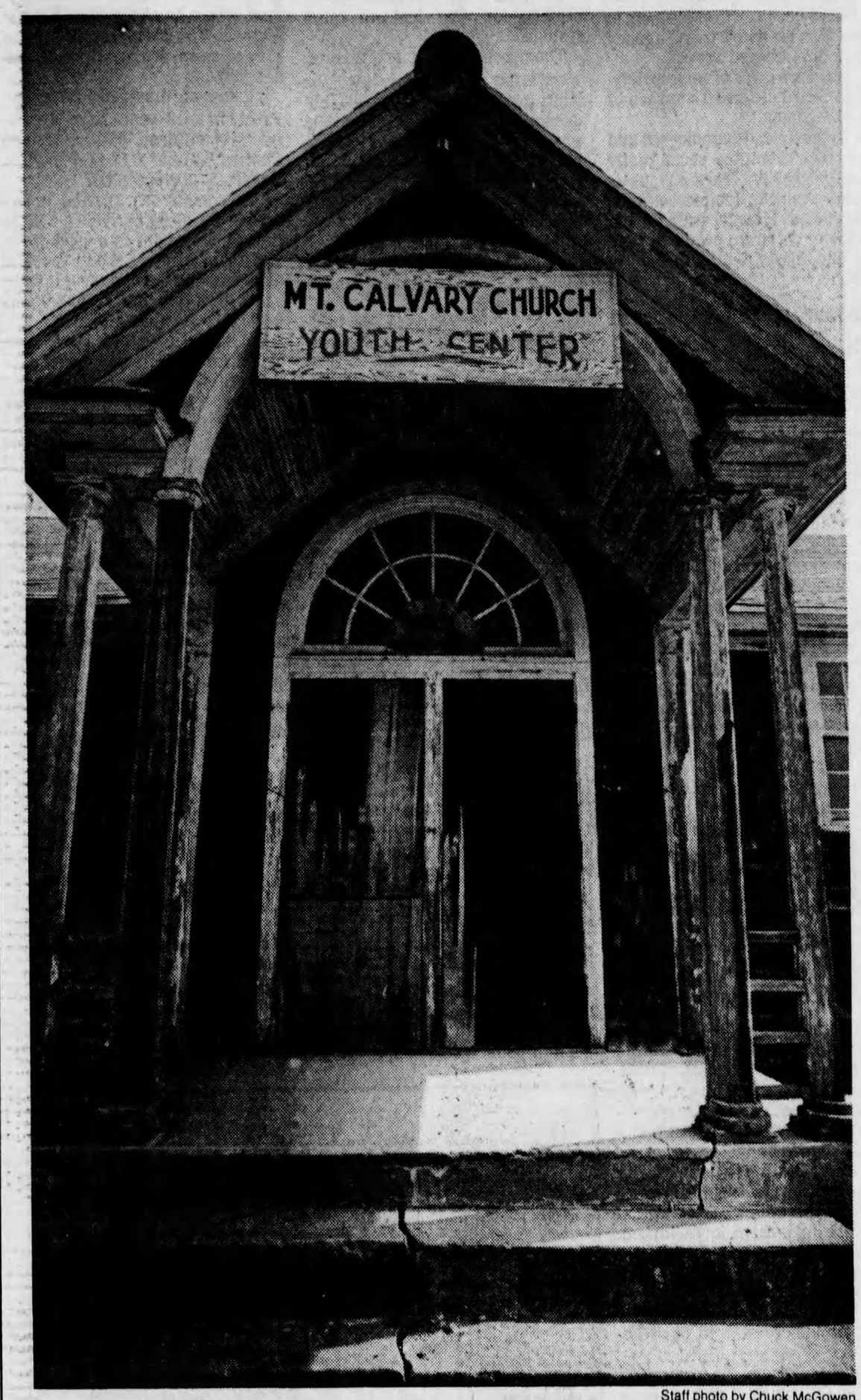
School boards, desegregation plaintiffs meet. B8



Staff photo by Chuck McGowen

The steps are cracked at the entrance to the former school in the tiny town of Concord.

Staff photo by Chuck McGowen

Concord's main road will never be confused with New York City's 42nd Street.

Sleepy town, lively past

Concord's glory days are history now

By CAROLYN LEWIS
Sussex Bureau reporter

CONCORD — Concord is a sleepy little hamlet about which local resident Luanne Fleetwood says, "You sneeze and you've gone through it. We're kind of hard to find."

So little known is the settlement that two employees in a small supermarket on Delaware 20, the main highway a quarter mile from the town, said they'd never even heard of it.

It is as though the Cabomba weed that is swallowing the Concord Pond has swallowed up the town as well.

Concord has a rich and lively history, reaching back to before the Revolutionary War. Once, in the glory days of the 1830s, the town had grist mills, an iron forge, five or six stores, a tavern, two blacksmith shops, a tanyard, a stagecoach stop and inn, a wheelwright shop and several dry goods shops.

Today, there are no stores in Concord; just two churches and a handful of houses along Deep Creek and Concord Pond, three miles east of Seaford. But Concord still lives.

"There's a strong feeling of fellowship here," said Patricia Fleetwood. "You know your neighbors, and they know you — but they never bother you. Only, you know you can call on them if you need them."

See CONCORD — B7

Weeds wage war on pond

By CAROLYN LEWIS
Sussex Bureau reporter

CONCORD — Mary Hill stood at the edge of the small pier below her house and stared into the waters of Concord Pond.

"It's green and mucky," she said. "It looks poisonous — like a drowned lawn."

Hill, 77, grew up in the town of Concord, which straddles Deep Creek and Concord Pond, three miles east of Seaford. She remembers when the 73-acre pond was "so clear you could see clean through it.

"We'd go up and down the pond in a paddle boat," she said. "We'd catch perch, pike, catfish, bass."

But now, she said, "You can hardly paddle a boat in there. Those weeds will just tie you up."

Like Mary Hill, Arlene Hendrickson, 64, lives in a house by the pond. To Hendrickson, formerly of Pennsauken, N.J., Concord Pond is more than a heap of memories gone sour. It is a headache of substantial proportions.

"My husband, John, bought the pond in 1973 or ['7]4 " she said. "He died two years ago, and I'm stuck with it."

The problem is that growing along the bottom of the pond are vast networks of the Fanwort weed, of the Cabomba family, and Hydrilla. Both plants are native to South America.

They first appeared in Sussex County 15 years ago. At that time, Robert Beck, supervisor of state fisheries and technical services, theorized that the plant took root when someone dumped an aquarium into a local waterway. From that one point, the plant spread by attaching itself to the undersides of vessels that were moved from one body of water to another.

Hendrickson estimates that it would cost about $15,000 every year to keep the weeds under control. She thinks the state of Delaware should do the job.

"I own the land at the bottom of the pond," she said, "but they own the water on top."

Not so, says Charles A. Lesser, manager of the fisheries division at the state Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control. "What we own is the water-control structure at the pond."

The state would spend the money to control the weeds if there was a health hazard, Lesser said. Otherwise, Delaware would require Hendrickson either to deed the land to the state or offer a long-term lease.

'Seventy-five percent of our funding for these projects comes from the federal government," Lesser said. "And they require unrestricted public access to the waters, including a parking area next to the ramp."

While Hendrickson allows the public to use the pond — and there is a small access ramp near the bridge — Lesser said the state has no guarantee that the next owner would offer the same privileges.

"We can't spend public funds there without that kind of full assurance," he said.

"I can't afford to deed the pond to them because I need to have farm status," Hendrickson said. "I'd also lose on real estate taxes."

Hendrickson owns a 40-acre farm in addition to the nearly five acres where her house is. By adding the 73 acres at the bottom of Concord Pond to the land she already owns, she brings her total acreage to more than 100.

"My husband wanted to enhance our income when he bought the pond," she said. "We needed to own over 100 acres to belong to the Farm Bureau and qualify for their [group] Blue Cross health insurance. We also got a break on our real estate taxes."

Hendrickson said she enjoys watching "the action on weekends" on the pond. "A lot of people have a good time out there fishing," she said.

The pond has other visitors too.

"Last year, there were 200 swans at the bend there. And a white duck. And at night, you can hear the geese talking, singing, hassling and howling."

One day, she saw a deer swimming across the pond.

Hendrickson and Lesser insist that Concord Pond is not in danger of dying, as are some other ponds in Sussex County. Numerous natural springs underneath the pond feed in fresh water and keep it replenished.

But as the weeds continue to grow and spread, Hendrickson continues to worry.

"I guess I'll just have to make the best of it because I'm happy here," she said. "I wouldn't want to be living any place else."

Staff photo by Chuck McGowen

Mary Hill, 77, remembers when Concord Pond was "so clear you could see clean through it."

Concord: Quiet town with a lively history

• Continued from B1

Hannah Davis, 67, said Concord is a "nice little town," but a quiet one. Not much excitement over the years, she said.

She did recall that about 40 years ago, some young people broke into the town's liquor store. The proprietor took a shot at them. Police tracked down the violators to an old shack on an island in the middle of Concord Pond.

"Those boys came from Washington," Davis said, as though that explained it all.

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Small as it is today, Concord is not one town, but two. The road that crosses Concord Pond and Deep Creek separates the white community from the black community.

The black section is called Pilot Town, because it was first settled by black pilots who guided vessels along the creek into the Nanticoke River. Unlike most blacks in Sussex County, these were free men.

Free or not, in the early 19th century, Concord blacks were required to worship in the slaves' gallery, above the main floor of the town's Methodist church. A history compiled by Mt. Calvary AME Church in Pilot Town says even this shared experience was of short duration:

"Around the time the Civil War started, a change came to the inhabitants of Pilot Town. The white members of the Methodist Church decided that since the Negro wanted his freedom, he must also be responsible for his own welfare.

"Early one Sunday morning — when the colored ladies in their long Mother Hubbard dresses, starched white aprons and stiff bonnets, along with the men in their severe black suits with stock ties or clean overalls, made their way to the village church — they found the doors closed and locked against them.

"Sorrowfully, these people trod back to Pilot Town, the women weeping and the men with heads bowed in grief."

One of the congregation, Noah Boyce, vowed on the spot that the black community would have a place of worship of its own.

Working through the night, he cleaned out an old log cabin, built benches inside, and "by sun up on Monday morning, the doors of the log cabin were opened for the praise of God."

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Mary Hill, whose ancestors were among the first blacks to settle in Concord, says that separation has long been a part of life there.

Hill, 77, recalls that when she was a girl, "We had our church and they had their church."

Of the white residents, she said, "There were a few nice ones — the kind that didn't show their hatred too much. But my family didn't have any trouble. We were reared to mind our own business and leave other people alone."

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Hill was one of nine children living with their parents on a 49-acre farm at the edge of town. Her father worked in the grist mill in Concord, while the family grew its food on the farm.

Her Uncle George Laws "used to tell us about driving his boat up and down the water," she recalled. And she remembered Daniel Brown, whose ox pulled a cart filled with lightwood stumps through the center of town. The stumps were used to light the camp meetings. "But we kids were really scared of that ox," Hill said.

The town character was Hill's grandfather, James Denard. "He would go to the store at the top of the hill, not too far from the mill. He'd sit by the big stove and tell lots of jokes," she said.

In the early mornings, before she walked to the one-room schoolhouse, Hill said she worked with her grandfather in the fields. "I was always thirsty, but he never seemed to want a drink," she recalled. "He used to say he was a sheep. He only drank dew."

Denard died when he was 92.

Like a lot of other residents of Concord, Hill has a lot of memories wrapped up in the small community.

"Once Concord was bigger than Seaford; now, it's the other way around. A whole lot of people have never heard of it. And that's a shame, because this here's a very interesting place."