

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, January 29, 2007

There has not been a real store in Yorklyn since the closing of Gregg's in 1976. In the 150 years before that, however, a small bustling town could not exist without some sort of general store, and there were a lot of them here. In the 18th century, the center of the village was around the only mill located on the present Benge Road and known for the past 115 years as Marshall Brothers. At that time it was known as Auburn Mills, or simply Auburn. The public road ran from here to Old Wilmington Road near the Hockessin Meeting House, which was then the center of Hockessin.

By the 1890s, Ed Dennison operated a general store in one of the mill houses directly across from the paper mill on Benge Road. Shortly after 1900, however, he moved his store operation to a larger house near the Yorklyn railroad station, and as the first fibre mills were being built across the tracks starting in 1904, the center of activity of the village shifted to the new location. Although I can't verify this before World I days, I believe there must have been another store operating for the benefit of the snuff mill workers on the other side of Red Clay Creek. The local post office was almost always in one of the stores, which made sense. Since postmasters were presidential appointments in those days, it was convenient to have both a Republican storekeeper and a Democratic storekeeper in town.

Grover Cleveland Gregg and his new wife came to Yorklyn from Newark and Downingtown, respectively, about 1913, and as President Wilson ousted the Republicans that year, young Grover replaced Dennison as postmaster and moved the post office to Gregg's new store, the same building where the Yorklyn P.O. is located today. The Dennison store closed, and in 1922 the house where it was located was moved by mules and block-and-fall up the hill toward the Gun Club, where it still stands today. The Greggs had four sons, Raymond, S. Cooper, Horace, and Grover Jr., who all grew up working in the store. During World War I, Charles J. Gormley, later a well-known Hockessin storekeeper and postmaster there, operated a store at the snuff mills. In the 1920s and early 1930s, Edward J. McGovern operated a smaller store near the bridge in Yorklyn, built on a platform where the entrance to the NVF treatment plant is today. There was also a barbershop and a small candy store in the Club House building near the snuff mills. And as late as the 1950s, Cicero Hamm built a small store, restaurant and garage in the building recently renovated by Charles S. Webb near the bridge. But Gregg's was *the store* of Yorklyn for nearly 60 years.

When the Republicans regained control of the White House in 1921, Samuel S. Dennison, a nephew of Ed Dennison, became postmaster, and since he was paymaster for National Vulcanized Fibre Company, the Post Office opened in a corner of Number One Mill across from the railroad station. In 1933, FDR appointed Philip E. Touhey, a manager for the George W. Helme Company (the snuff mills), postmaster and the post office was moved to the old snuff mill paymaster's shack, a tiny ornate brick building just west of the mills and between the mill race and Route 82. Three postmasters, Touhey, his cousin Ned Touhey, and Grover Gregg Jr., functioned from this tiny post office for nearly 20 years. "June" Gregg moved it back to Gregg's store in the early 1950s.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Gregg's store was a vibrant place. In addition to Grover and his wife, four sons worked there, and at least four more employees. They handled not only canned goods but fresh produce, a limited meat and poultry supply, and utility clothing, thread and dry goods. A section of the front porch was enclosed to house an ice cream freezer from which they hand-dipped Aristocrat Ice Cream for 10 cents per half-pint (40 cents per quart). In front were three gasoline pumps, two for Atlantic gasoline and one for American. Kerosene was sold from a hand pump on the porch, until one of the gasoline pumps was converted in the 1940s. After my father died in 1969, Mr. Gregg asked me if it was okay to eliminate kerosene, as I was his only customer. It was 25 cents per gallon. Stores did not have self-service in those days, and the clerks were kept busy. Most locals bought their necessities there, and nearly all had charge accounts. Store hours were from 7 am to 6 pm, Monday through Wednesday, and closing time was extended to 8 pm. Thursday through Saturday. On Sunday the store was open from 8 or 9 am until noon, so locals could pick up their Sunday newspapers and have pleasant chats

with their neighbors. On payday, Mrs. Gregg cashed most of the millworkers' checks, so the Greggs were running a local bank branch as well. Grover Sr., died in June 1976, and the store with its full line of merchandise was officially closed on August 31 that year.