

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, March 16, 2015

South of the Canal: In 1845, the digging of the first Chesapeake and Delaware Canal through northern Delaware cut New Castle County almost in half. Although draw bridges crossed from the very beginning, the county's portion to the south developed a second culture and aligned itself more with Kent and Sussex Counties to the south. As were Kent and Sussex, this southern part of New Castle County was all coastal plain and maintained its agrarian character. Although there was a lot of farming north of the canal until the late 20th century, the northern half lent itself to early manufacturing, especially in the Piedmont areas north and west of Wilmington. In the south, farms were large, there were no cities, and this area had less than 20% of the county's people prior to the 21st century. Some claim the climate is different on opposite sides of the canal.

One of the coastal rivers in southern New Castle County was the Appoquinimink, which was navigable up to Cantwell's Bridge. Since this was an up-and-coming port for timber and getting farm produce to the markets of Wilmington and Philadelphia in the early 19th century, the name was changed to Odessa, copied from the busy Ukrainian port on the Black Sea. The prosperous merchants of Odessa, including Daniel Corbit and the Watkins family, built luxurious homes along Main Street, most of which are restored and form the nucleus for today's Historic Homes of Odessa. Like those who live in Old New Castle, residents of Odessa are very proud of their heritage. The Presbyterians had established an early church along Drawyers Creek, a tributary of the Appoquinimink, in 1711, and the Quakers had built a tiny meetinghouse in Odessa that was a station on the Underground Railroad. In 1859, however, the Delaware Railroad, which opened up the Delmarva Peninsula to the outside world, bypassed Odessa in favor of Middletown, less than four miles to the west, and subsequent growth was near this new north-south artery.

About 1908, an electric trolley line was built from the docks at Odessa four miles west to the railroad station at Middletown, but it was not successful and ceased operation within four years. Passing down the middle of Odessa's Main Street, as well as Middletown's by the same name, it should have been well patronized, but apparently the population was not there to support it, and a few people were starting to own automobiles. My guess is that Middletown had about 1,000 people and Odessa perhaps 300 in the early 20th century. Other towns in southern New Castle County were Port Penn, Townsend (pronounced Town's End), South St. Georges, and Blackbird. Some small "crossroad" communities included Augustine Beach, Bayview, Taylor's Bridge, Fleming's Landing, Fieldsboro, McDonough, Boyd's Corner, Armstrong, Mount Pleasant, and Summit Bridge.

This area was home to my mother's family of Shallcrosses. Sereck F. Shallcross (1816–1906), my great-grandfather, a Quaker from Byberry in northeast Philadelphia, bought a large farm northwest of Odessa that he named Oakland in 1842. By the time his son James T. Shallcross (1847–1911), my grandfather, was married in 1872, Sereck owned several farms, and the newlyweds were established on Belleview Farm, across Drawyers Creek to the north. Here at Belleview, my mother and her five siblings were born between 1876 and 1891. Her eldest sister, Mary, married Bassett Ferguson of Blackbird on the lawn at Belleview on June 6, 1906. In 1908 the family moved into a home in Middletown that they named "Flowerdale." For several years before their marriage, my father called on my mother at Flowerdale in one of his Stanley steamers.

Passenger car #852 on the miniature Auburn Valley Railroad, the "Mary E. Shallcross," is named for my maternal grandmother (1852–1944). She was the daughter of Wilson Vandegrift and his wife, whose first name I don't know, and she was born in a small house no longer standing southeast of Odessa. She grew up on a larger farm at the edge of the marsh along Delaware Bay near Bayview, and this house still stands. On December 18, 1872, she married James T. Shallcross in the new Drawyers Presbyterian Church in Odessa. This was the first wedding to be held there, but the church closed its doors early in the 20th century. It had replaced Old Drawyers, built in 1773, as a regular place of worship, as the historic church north of town had no heat (and people liked modern things, not historic properties). Interestingly, when my parents were married at Old Drawyers on June 4, 1921, this was the first wedding in the old church since it had closed as a place of weekly worship. Many weddings have been held there since 1921, including two of my mother's nieces. The Friends of

Old Drawyers is a historical organization that owns the church and the active adjoining cemetery. In the 21st century, the population of New Castle County south of the canal is growing “by leaps and bounds.” In 2013, Middletown’s population was estimated at 20,000.