



# Historical Society News

Autumn 2020

## The Rise and Fall of Agriculture in the Hightstown Region Over the Last 100 Years

Part 2

By Ken Pickering

As noted in a previous article, businesses in Hightstown and East Windsor that supported agriculture have largely disappeared over the last 60 years. Such businesses saw a significant increase in activity following the Great Depression, but then sharply declined after 1960, as more and more land was converted from farming to residential and commercial use. The U. S. Department of Agriculture conducts a Census of Agriculture roughly every 5 years. The data from this census are on a county basis. Hightstown and East Windsor are located in the southeastern corner of Mercer County and adjacent to both Middlesex and Monmouth Counties. Therefore, statistics are given here for all three of these counties.

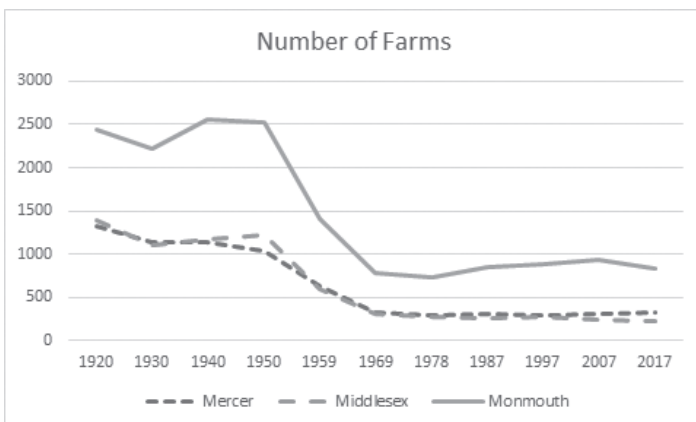
The number of farms in the three counties in 1920 was over 5,000, with total acreage in farms at approximately 375,000 acres. The number of farms declined by 1930 (see Graph 1, where the data from approximately every 10 years are displayed), but saw a rise to 1940 and 1950. The increase was possibly due to several factors: 1) recovery from the Great Depression, 2) the onset of World War II, which led to an

increased need for food production and storage, and 3) the replacement of horses with tractors, making farming less labor-intensive. However, after 1950 the decline in the number of farms was quite dramatic,

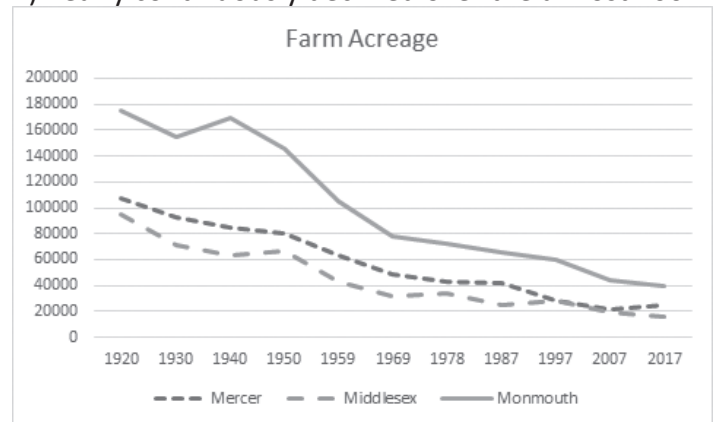


*Pickering Family Farm circa 1920*

such that by 1969 the number of farms was less than one third the number in 1950. But, these numbers show only small rises and falls over the years since the 1969 census. Despite the rise in the number of farms in 1940 and 1950 and the nearly stable numbers since 1969, the total acreage in farms (see Graph 2) nearly continuously declined over the almost 100



Graph 1



Graph 2

# President's Message

Dear Members and Friends,

Although all of our lives have been significantly changed, if you are like me it is hard to believe that the year is over half gone. Whether little projects, big projects or previously unknown projects, we all seem to have been keeping busy and hopefully mentally and spiritually fulfilled. Easter, Passover, Mother's Day, Memorial Day, Father's Day and Independence Day have all been celebrated totally different than in the past but I hope you were able to make new memories in spite of the restrictions and fears.

During these months the roof was completed and looks great and secure. Unfortunately all other public activities of the Society have been cancelled but some plumbing repairs have been done, Bev Mann continues her magic by laboring in the yard and Greg Ciano and yours truly are working on a "virtual house tour" to replace our usual biennial house tour. The lack of revenue from our cancelled annual meeting and the significant revenue loss from the house tour will be difficult to make up. We hope that we can raise some revenue from the virtual tour which will include some houses but also some other buildings and locations around our towns.

I wish to thank the members, both annual members and life members, who have sent in an extra donation for the roof and to help replace our other lost revenue. I realize these can be difficult financial times for some of us but whatever you are able to do would be greatly appreciated.

I had a surprise visitor recently. 94 years young Lillian Weiner Deutsch, HHS class of 1942. Her father Joseph owned a little store here on North Main Street until 1962 and she lived on Mercer next to the old school, Masonic Lodge/YMCA. She was so excited to see someone who remember her father and his store.

Unfortunately I can not tell you of any future dates at this point in time. When we can, you will be emailed. This might be a good time to email me your current email address. I believe we are quite current but always good to check. Email [estults@allenstults.com](mailto:estults@allenstults.com) and [estultsiii@gmail.com](mailto:estultsiii@gmail.com). You can also keep up with the Society by visiting our Facebook page which Greg Ciano and Cookie Cummings keep exciting.

Be safe and well. Hope to see everyone soon.

Cappy Stults, President  
[estults@allenstults.com](mailto:estults@allenstults.com)

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by Cappy Stults



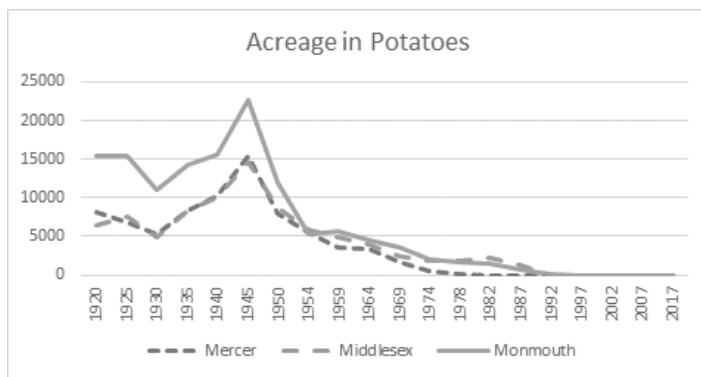
### Support Downtown!

Be sure to support our restaurants and businesses downtown while you're staying-at-home. Many of our restaurants can be found on the apps DoorDash, GrubHub, and Uber Eats who will leave the food on your porch or doorstep.

## Rise and Fall - Continued

years of record. The acreage had fallen to less than half of the 1920 total by 1969, and by the time of the most recent census in 2017 had fallen to approximately 80,000 acres, which is just over 20% of the 1920 total. Census of Agriculture trends in acreage for major field crops were upward for wheat between 1930 and 1950, but downward for corn during this time period. Wheat acreage fell dramatically between 1950 and 1959 (58% of the 1950 amount), but then more slowly all the way to 2017 (2% of the 1950 peak). The major decline in corn acreage came between 1959 and 1969, followed by relative stability between 1969 and 1997. However, acres in corn fell to 43% of the 1997 amount by 2017.

Historically, the three-county region surrounding Hightstown was a significant potato growing area. The generally loamy soil was very suitable for potatoes. According to the Census of Agriculture data, potato acreage in the three counties peaked in 1945 (see Graph 3). This peak may have been driven by federal govern-

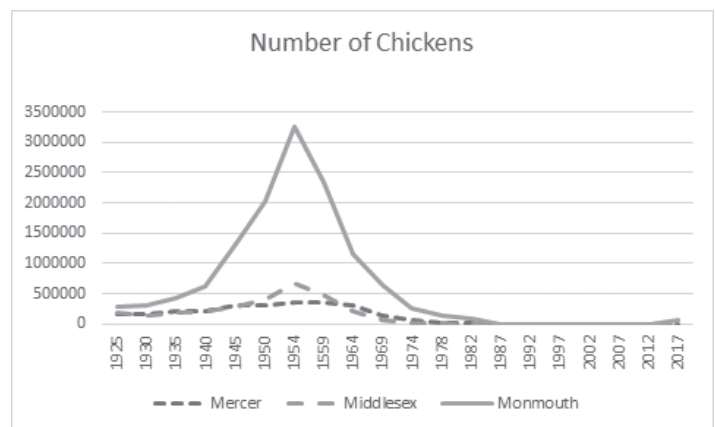


Graph 3

ment price supports that promoted potato cultivation during World War II. In the late 1940s, potato production was greatly aided by the implementation of irrigation systems. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was a surplus of potatoes on the market, and the NJ State Department of Agriculture encouraged farmers to plant other crops. During this period there was such a surplus that farmers piled the potatoes on the ground, had an inspector visit,

who estimated their weight and authorized federal payments to the farmers. These potatoes were sprayed with dye, such that they could not be marketed. In 1954 the federal government was buying surplus potatoes to support the school lunch programs, welfare programs, and for processing into potato fiber. In 1955 the price to farmers for potatoes reached less than one cent per pound! The potato acreage decreased sharply during the 1950s, dropping by over 70% between 1945 and 1959, and reaching approximately 15% of the 1945 acreage by 1969. In the early 1960s, the federal government announced a program of supporting the price for potatoes sold for livestock feed. Commercial potato acreage fell to near zero by 1997. The crop that was substituted for potatoes was primarily soybeans. Soybean acreage was negligible prior to 1950, but grew rapidly during the 1950s, and reached a peak in 1978 in the three-county region. By 2007 the soybean acreage had fallen to only 25% of the 1978 peak.

Livestock on farms is also enumerated in the Census of Agriculture. Dairy cows were for many years a significant factor in the agriculture of the Hightstown – East Windsor area. The number of dairy cows in the three-county region remained relatively stable from 1920 through 1950. However, dairying began to become unprofitable in the 1950s except for large operations. By 1969 the number of dairy cows in the three-county area had fallen to only 30% of the 1920 number. The dairy industry in the region continued to decline thereafter, with the number of dairy cows



Graph 4

reaching near-zero by 2007. The historical pattern of poultry farming in the region was significantly different than for dairies. The number of chickens in the region grew dramatically from 1925 to 1954 (see Graph 4), with increases over this period of more than a factor of two in Mercer County and of more than a factor of 10 in Monmouth County, which in the early 1950s had approximately 14 chickens for every human being! Although some chickens were sold for meat, most flocks in this region were raised for egg production. The large expansion of poultry farming, especially in Monmouth County, was driven by the arrival of European immigrant farmers during and following



World War II. However, the price of eggs plummeted, and many family-owned chicken farms were nearly bankrupted, and larger industrial-scale egg production operations took over in other parts of the country. The number of chickens in the three-county area declined rapidly during the remainder of the 1950s, the 1960s and 1970s to about 4% of the 1954 peak by 1978. The decline continued through 1987, but the chicken population has remained approximately the same since then at a very small number.


Keeping with New Jersey's reputation as the "Garden State", vegetable crops were traditionally a significant part of farm income in the three-county region surrounding Hightstown. Many Hightstown area farmers delivered fresh vegetables and fruits to small grocery stores in Hightstown, Windsor, Hamilton Square, and Trenton. This practice largely ended with the advent of chain supermarkets. Therefore, the acreage devoted to vegetables in 1969 had decreased to one-third of the amount in 1930. But,



Pickering Family Farm circa 1920

the vegetable acreage remained relatively stable through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, as some farmers began pick-your-own marketing. Declines were again the case from 1997 to 2017, but in 2017 there remained over 3000 acres in vegetables in the three-county area, enough to sustain business at the Tri-County Auction Market.

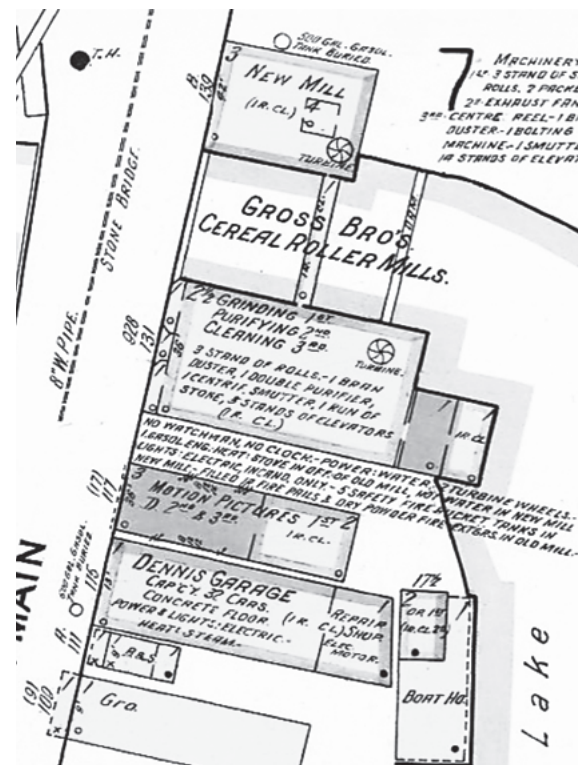
By 1960 there were very few advertisements in the *Gazette* for businesses supporting agriculture. The only ads remaining in the 1960s were for the FCA and the Central Jersey Farmers' Co-op grain operations. However, during this period were many ads for farm equipment auctions, especially for potato equipment, as farmers in the area were abandoning this mode of farming. Given the dramatic decreases in the number of farms, total farm acreage, field crop acreage, and livestock numbers particularly over the last 70 years in the region surrounding Hightstown, it is not surprising that the businesses supporting agriculture in Hightstown and East Windsor have largely disappeared.

Many thanks to Richard Lee and Ray Pickering for providing many details for this article. 

## Gross Brothers Cereal Mill Fire

By Cappy Stults

Hightstown's appearance has been shaped by many hands. After the Native Americans came John and Mary Hight who built their mill on the ever-flowing stream we now know as Rocky Brook. Then there were the many farmers who grew the grains that were processed by the local mills. Ken Pickering's second article in this issue retraces the history of agriculture in the area. The hands of the Camden and Amboy railroad builders in the early 1830s gave shape to Hightstown's main street



Sandborn map showing Gross Bros. Cereal Mill

buildings that were erected adjacent to the tracks and the mill. A few decades later the Pemberton to Hightstown Railroad buoyed the commercial center even higher as reflected in Part II of the P&H history (which is also the next story in this issue).

But probably for those of us who were brought up in the area, the town's appearance would not be what we remember if it had not been for a tragic fire 100 years ago this year. Although there were many fires in Hightstown in the 19th and 20th centuries, many of which were to the mills in town, the Gross Bros Cereal Mill fire of

May 29, 1920, changed the downtown and lakefront for the next 100 years. But first some background.

The Gross Bros mill straddled Rocky Brook to the north and south (see Sanborn map). It was located on the site of the original mill that was built by the Hights over 170 years prior. Capt William Smith purchased the mill property from the Hight family in 1783, building a new mill on the same site. Over the next many decades the mill was owned by Redford Job (who planned a large development in the 1820s-1830s), John H. Silvers, William R. Norton, George Washington Norton, and his widow Eva. (*Reflections of the Shrine* – John Orr, Jr. 1998). Most of this area was owned by Job when the Camden & Amboy purchased the ground for the railroad in 1831. When owned by John H. Silvers in 1872, the mill was totally destroyed by fire including the Silvers' residence adjacent to the mill. Fires in mills were not unusual due to the amount of dust in the air, static electricity, sparks from various sources, and even spontaneous combustion from heat and moisture. After the 1872 fire, William Norton bought the land from Silvers and immediately rebuilt the grist mill. In 1887, William's son George Norton removed the sawmill in order to expand the successful grist mill, becoming known as the Cereal Roller Mills.

George W. Norton's brother, Albert, was quite the traveler, entrepreneur, and renaissance man. Although his father bought and set him up to manage nearby Bergen's Mill (Etra), Albert was always interested in more. He opened a cigar and plug manufacturing business and store in the mill on Main Street as well as a paper box manufacturing business. It was quite crowded in that mill so Albert renovated a building across the street for his enterprises. This building burned down in 1892. (In 1899 Albert built the Swiss-style house on Ward Street next to the bridge).

With the two railroads through the farm

belt and to Hightstown's commercial center, the supply of grain was seemingly unlimited as access to Norton's mill was much easier than to other mills that did not have railroad access, a factor that kept Hightstown's mills profitable longer. Around

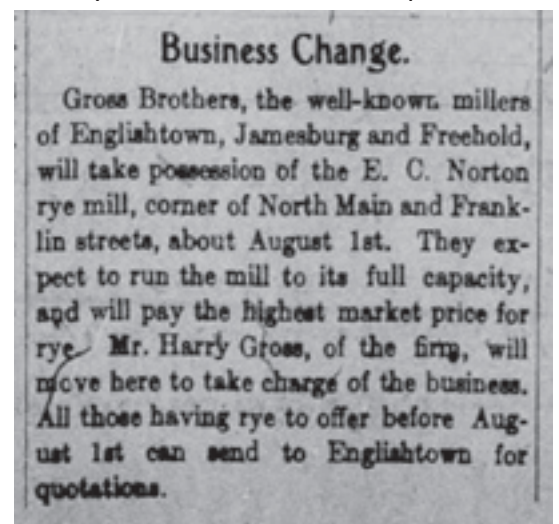


*Gross Bros. Cereal Mill, The three story buildings with peak roofs*

1910 the mill was expanded again with new buildings on the north side of the spillway of Rocky Brook to Franklin Street. Norton connected the north and south sides of the mill with an enclosed bridge roughly above the spillway race. George died in 1902 at only 53 years of age, leaving the mill to his widow Eva. His father William who had been of poor health for years died 2 years later in 1904. George and Eva's oldest son William R. (age 23) then assisted Eva in running the business. He built a 3 story mill on the corner of Franklin and Main in 1906.

### **The Gross Family**

In 2018, I was contacted by a Billy Rosenthal, Fort Worth, Texas, whose mother Roslyn Gross Rosenthal, age 94 at the time, was interested in some pictures of the mill that her father and uncle had purchased in 1913 from Norton's widow, Eva. I called "Roz" a couple of times and she spoke very highly of her memories of Hightstown and particularly how much her father spoke of the "great friendly business people" of Hightstown, especially my grandfather C. Stanley Stults, Mr. Thompson, and J.V. and C. Herbert Davison. Roz's father David and her uncle Harry had immigrated to the United States in 1898. Their brother Samuel followed later. They were born of a farm family on



*Hightstown Gazette - July 22, 1909*



the Russia-German border and she advised they were worried about war in Europe and were seeking a better future for their families. After a brief stay in the NYC area, they located to a farm in Englishtown, before Roz was born. They were successful and soon bought and leased other local mills in the area. These mills were in Englishtown, Jamesburg, Manalapan (Millhurst), and of course Hightstown in late 1909. They also opened an office in New York. David and his wife Sadie lived on Monmouth Street while Harry lived next to the mill on Franklin Street. David later moved to Trenton where they had started another mill. That is where Roz was born. David and brother Harry were instrumental in the growth of Hightstown's Beth El Synagogue. For a number of years, they held services in the Opera House owned by the Gross family which was on Church Street, across from the current Methodist Church (the Opera House had been the Methodist Church and burned down in 1929). Roz told me she came to Hightstown often with her father and would go swimming at the Hightstown Swim Club on Mercer Street, just north of what is now Michael's Plaza and the laundromat. I sent her some pictures including one of the current parking lot and dam where the mill once stood. The Gross family also help start a conservative Jewish Synagogue in Trenton, which is now in Lawrenceville. Roz moved to Texas from Trenton having met her future husband, a Texan when he was stationed at Fort Dix.

Roz's son Billy has advised me of a recent hobby of looking into his ancestors. He has found that the family name in the old country was actually Kozlowski which they changed to Gross when they arrived in America.

The exact year of Gross Bros ownership of the mill is blurred by possible lease/operating agreements and because Norton continued to operate the wheat mill while the Grosses operated the rye mill. Brands produced were known as "Anchor", "Victor" and "Crescent." In August 1911 the Gross Bros took over the entire mill converting types of grains into "cereal foods for man and beast." In June 1912, the Gross Bros mill in Englishtown was totally destroyed by fire. They immediately rebuilt it. And then finally in November 1913, Gross Bros bought the entire mill property on Main Street and Franklin Streets from Mrs. E. C. Norton. Thus the confusion by some on when Gross Bros actually came to Hightstown. They promptly updated the mill for greater capacity and Harry and family moved from North Main Street to the house on Franklin (where the library is now). They repainted the entire mill in April 1914, white with green trim. The next week their horse team ran away while milled feed was being unloaded at the freight station. They were caught on Stockton Street.



Contrary to some people's opinions of attitudes of Hightstown natives of the times, here is a "Card of Thanks" printed in the October 9, 1913 issue of the *Gazette*, a paid notice:

*To Rev. Dr. Tyack and Congregation of the Presbyterian Church, Hightstown, NJ*

*Dear Friends: The Gross Brothers and all the Hebrew People at Hightstown, New Jersey and vicinity, do hereby extend to you their heartiest thanks and Best Wishes for allowing us to celebrate our New Year and Yom Kippur at your beautiful Chapel.*

*Yours respectfully, The Gross Bros and all the Hebrew People of Hightstown and Vicinity*

The Gross family "news" was reported often in the *Gazette*. In the June 24, 1915, issue revealed that "Mr. and Mrs. David Gross have returned from their honeymoon trip to Atlantic City and Philadelphia and will reside in the Polhemus house on South Main Street." On August 12, 1916,

*Gazette* announced the birth of a daughter. The baby weighed nine and one-half pounds (Madelyn). Another card of thanks appeared on February 3, 1916, from Mrs. D & H Gross for the people of Hightstown's contributions to the Jewish War Sufferers Relief Fund. Younger brother Samuel had been a partner but his interest was bought out and he went to California and became close friends with two guys named Gold-



wyn and Mayer. Samuel never married.

Gross Bros bought the Risdon Milling Company in Trenton in November 1917, which was then managed by David Gross. They also bought the Dennis Garage from the receiver in March 1918 (adjacent to the mill in Hightstown). A railroad siding was added in May 1919. They printed an apology in the *Gazette* on May 29, 1919, for having to run the mill on Decoration Day (Memorial Day) in order to fill an order from the US Food Administration Grain Corporation.

On May 29, 1920, before Roz was born, at approximately 12:15 p.m., a fire broke out on the second floor of the north mill. Fire companies came from Princeton, Freehold, Cranbury, Jamesburg, Slackwood, West Hamilton, Mercerville, Lawrenceville, White Horse, Allentown, Bordentown, Trenton, and even the chief came from New Brunswick. The *Gazette* reported in the June 3rd issue, "When the alarm was turned in the flames were pouring out the upper windows." It goes on to report, "At that time of day the employees were at dinner." (We of course now call that lunch). The fire spread from the north mill to the south mill via the wood bridge over the dam. It further reported that the fire spread "in all directions" including the Gross residence east of the mill, outbuildings, sheds, the railroad siding, and piers. A three-story brick building occupied as Edward Ralph's barbershop and poolroom, and the upper floor living quarters of the Emmons family. R.D. Norton's garage was

also destroyed. (See Sanborn map).

The *Gazette* reported that over 200 firemen fought the fire for over 3 hours. The Leland House (previously called the Lantz Hotel), was bought by Peddie for a dorm in 1919. It was where the firehouse now stands. It caught fire as well but was saved. Many Peddie boys assisted in the fire fighting.

The downtown section of Hightstown north of Stockton Street was totally destroyed on the east side of North Main Street. All poles, electric and phone, were destroyed and the buildings on the west side all had broken glass and/or façade damage.

Over the next few weeks, the *Gazette* reported a movement to both buy a new pumper and build a new water tower. The lack of a good pumper and the inadequate water pressure clearly contributed to the size of the fire. At the following week's council meeting, \$15,000 for a new pumper was proposed and later approved and bonded. Bids were opened and awarded on July 6. The 750 gallons per minute American LaFrance pumper served the town well for many years. The town engineer also advised that an 80 feet tall, 150,000 gallon water tower was needed to replace the current one which was smaller and 28 years old. It was built in 1921.

So within weeks the town played catch up with their fire equipment, water storage capacity, and water pressure to be able to fight downtown fires

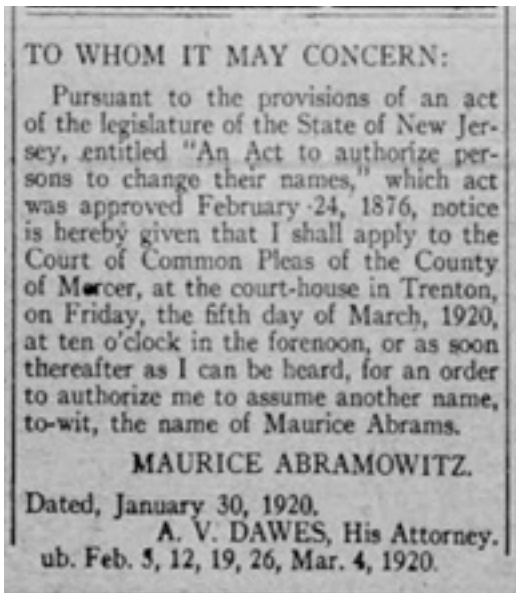
better. In the meantime, on August 5, 1920, a Maurice Abrams was charged with arson and released on \$5,000 bail. One week later it was reported that a Grand Jury would be convened but Abrams' bail was reduced to \$3,000. A David Roshashansky was the principal witness against Abrams. Abrams attorney (Martin Devlin) was able to get the bail further reduced to \$2,000 as he pleaded to the judge that the arson charge was not made until





Abrams, a five percent stockholder in Gross Bros., had filed a suit against Gross Bros for not sharing accounting records with him. All of the records were lost in the fire. Abrams' attorney pleaded to the judge that the arson proceedings were to "ruin Abrams."

I was able to find some other interesting information but none of which revealed to me whatever happened to this case. In the February 12, 1920, issue of the *Gazette* (and 4 additional issues), a Maurice Abramowitz published a paid notice that he was changing his name to "Abrams." On July 15, 1920, it was



reported that Abrams purchased a mill in Yardville from a Charles Comp. This was only 6 weeks after the fire and 3 weeks before arson charges were filed. Abrams had also filed a \$300,000 lawsuit against Gross Bros alleging that he was owed a greater portion of the profits and Gross Bros kept investing in new equipment against their agreement with him.

Tensions mounted regarding the decreased revenues and the PRR threatened to abandon the line. After years of negotiation, it was agreed that a local company would lease the line from PRR. Most of the impetus of this continued to be the farmers, especially the dairy farmers and US postal service mail delivery. This gave birth to a new company called the Union Transportation Company, the UT, under a 50-year lease. For many decades expenses exceeded receipts but the owners of the UT were able to convince the PRR to allow it to continue if they were able to delay and reduce the rental payments. PRR still was benefiting from feeder traffic into the C&A.

1895 was the last year of major deficits and the P&H had paid off many of its earlier obligations. Plus there was something new giving revenue to the P&H – resort tourist traffic. Much like Perrineville, Etra, and Evergreen Farm (Meadow Lakes), New Egypt's Oakford Lake became a vacation spot. The male breadwinner could take his family to one of these lakes in early July, commute to NY or Phila on Monday morning and return to the lake resort on Friday evening. Trips being about 2:30 hours including the ferry. The return from Phila to New Egypt, about 1:30 hours. Those using the P&H to Hightstown from NY and Phila had a shorter trip, but those going to Perrineville had to rely on a 40 minute or so carriage ride.

I have searched 3 years of *Gazettes* and nothing appears about either the criminal or civil case or Abrams for that matter. His name only appears on a March 23, 1922, notice for delinquent taxes on his house on Stockton Street: \$17.76 (the highest amount in the list).

I seem to be at a dead end.

Next Issue: **FROM THE ASHES** 

## Pemberton-Hightstown Railroad aka U.T.

Part 2

By Cappy Stults

Unfortunately, the great relationship between the P&H and C&A came to an end after the C&A founders had died (the Stevens) and their successors grew tired of the venture. The C&A/United Companies were taken over by lease to the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1871. The original C&A became known as the Amboy division, a weak sister to the younger line to the west.

New railroads to the east and northeast became strong competition to the Pennsylvania RR lines, and the P&H. 1875 seems to have been the pinnacle of P&H passenger traffic. Marl traffic also decreased but milk began to become an important commodity for the P&H, transporting the morning milk to the C&A for metropolitan markets.

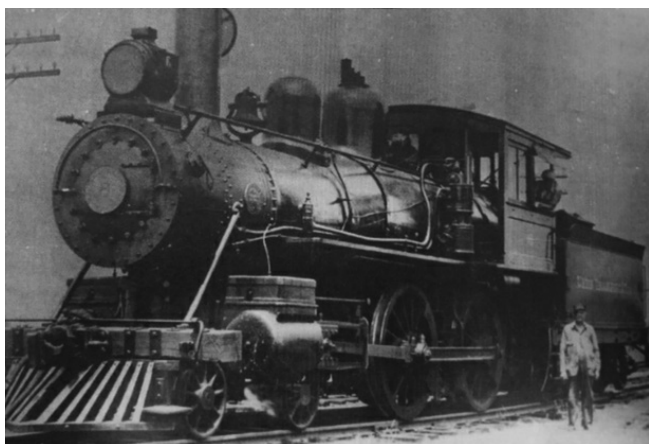
By 1900, 5 coach cars were used during the summer season. In 1901 the UT reported the best earnings ever. Steam heaters were installed in passenger cars hoping to extend the season. These replaced the old wood stoves that were prone to causing onboard fires.

Additionally, older cars were being converted to refrigerator cars due to the increasing demand for milk haulage. Icehouses were built in towns along the line. There was also an increasing demand for gravel due to road construction throughout the state. A large gravel pit had been built in Sharon for this purpose. By 1905, the UT had a surplus of \$35,000. Passenger traffic had once again become the principal revenue, although milk



was being tallied as passenger traffic. UT stockholders were being paid dividends. For 43 years good management balanced the rail usage between passengers, milk, gravel, and later potato and tomato hauling (the latter for Campbell Soup). There still was only one track and few sidings so managing the traffic to maximize revenue was extremely important.

Coal delivery from the C&A to towns along the P&H line increased, while hay, straw, and cranberries were filling the return trips. But by 1910 revenues were dropping and expenses were increasing partly due to state and local taxes on the line. After 3 years of this trend, a couple of board members resigned and were replaced. One replacement was Dr. William L. Wilbur of Hightstown. In 1913



1938 – *Engineman Joseph R. Dubell standing.*

the annual mileage on this 23-mile line was 81,115. This included 49,510 miles carrying passengers, and 23,100 mixed. Passenger total was 85,971 and 44,865 tons of freight was hauled. Uniquely in 1915, the P&H contracted as a tomato grower as well as a shipper for Campbell Soup in Camden to increase revenue.

The Pennsylvania Railroad consolidated its subsidiaries in 1915 calling it "Pennsylvania & Atlantic Railroad south of Hightstown, NJ to Pemberton, NJ inclusive, Union Transportation Co., Lessee" (a mouthful). The telegraph lease with Western Union was terminated and a new agreement was made with Postal Telegraph, but they returned to Western Union during the war. Contracts continued with the US Postal Service providing additional income. This postal line was called Hight-

stown & Philadelphia RPO and existed from 1882 through 1926.

In 1917 the government purchased 6,000 acres south of Wrightstown that would become Ft Dix. A line was built and joined up to the UT in Pemberton for the anticipated large amount of traffic for the war effort. The UT carried nearly all of the supplies and men for the construction of the new tracks and stations. 80,000 troops would eventually come through Dix. P&H's first six-figure revenue year was in 1917. The UT was almost seized under the United States Railroad Administration but was given an option. The UT elected to remain independent in 1918.

In 1920, after the war, the growing for and delivering to Campbell Soup returned to pre-war levels, but the New Egypt resort traffic waned but potato shipping more than took its place. Most of the loading was at Imlaystown, Sharon, Davis, and Cream Ridge stations. Because of the troubles, many railroads were having, the Transportation Act of 1920 allowed for a federal insurance policy of types for an annual share of the profits. The UT turned that government offer down as well.

Although things appeared to be healthy, by now autos and trucks were eating away at the railroad business. This was mostly attributable to the much improved roads. The UT continued to transport students to high schools along the route but other passenger traffic nearly disappeared. With the building of the Allentown High School in 1923, even the school traffic disappeared.

The milk business was still good but something strange happened in 1922. Local option Daylight Saving Time was embraced by city and suburbanites who loved the extra leisure hours in daylight, but farmers hung on to Standard Time. Otherwise milking would require a dairyman to arise at 3:00 am versus 4:00 am in order to make the delivery to the train on time. With trucks now picking up the milk right at the farm, this commodity long transported by the UT was now doomed and ended in October 1926. They probably could have competed with trucks if the train did not require so many additional men (versus a one-man truck).

In March 1925, after 37 years, the Board of the UT approved the cancellation of the lease of the line from the P&H, part of the Penna & Atlantic RR, Penna RR, and ceased operations. This protected the assets of the UT as they were just the lessee of the line. Concurrently many other PRR short line railroads were floundering due to, per Brinkman, "motor vehicle competition on good roads, high taxes, and other burdens."

Ironically, PRR officials did not want the line to be abandoned so essentially they guaranteed to cover any losses as long as the UT operated the line with certain conditions and modifications recommended by the PRR, including a reduction in staff, pay reductions and the closing of many of the passenger stations. The UT board agreed to the conditions. The Junction in Hightstown continued to be a busy

place. The Tri-County Auction Market still operates today and was started in 1933. The Central Jersey Farmers Coop Association with its tall silos is long gone. The UT turntable was adjacent to these silos and is now hidden by overgrowth. Also located here was Farm Fresh Packing company which converted to canning water during WWII and later became Minute Maid, a division of Coca-Cola.

The junction was located on the old historic Bordentown & South Amboy Turnpike which later became the original NJ Route 1. After WWI it was improved as a poured concrete road, (1919) the first such in New Jersey. Its designation was later changed to the current Route 33.

There was an uptick in passenger traffic with the advent of the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1934, but the government was lax in paying their bills. This was 3 years after regularly scheduled daily runs had been cancelled in May of 1931. The center of operations shifted from Hightstown to New Egypt at this time. The remaining Hightstown employees, Joseph Dubell and Oscar Hopkins continued to operate a converted model T sedan to deliver mail along the line.

A now familiar refrain of business was stated by UT Director Fred Johnson. "There has arisen a need for buses and trucks and that need is being supplied but a grave injustice is being done the railroads in that the competition is not subject to such regulation as the railroads and they are in desperate straits as a result of this state of affairs. The UT is on its last legs."

The PRR kept subsidizing the UT but would not allow for expenditures for maintenance and upgrades. The speed limit was reduced to 25 mph in 1933 for safety reasons. By 1937 passenger service was gone. Only the New Egypt passenger station remained and nearly all sidings were overgrown from lack of use.

Soon thereafter the clouds of war appeared again. But in 1939 the PRR officials stated that even with that, the cost of rehabilitating the UT line would be too expensive. The 1940 lease renewal initially called for abandoning all of the UT east of New Egypt. This was subject to BPUC and the ICC approval. Suddenly business picked up and abandonment was forgotten and the lease was renewed again without abandonment. This was to be the last attempt at abandonment. The Hightstown interchange between the P&H and C&A/PRR was turned off in 1940 but was soon reactivated and used until 1943. Johnson and others again were able to convince the PRR to keep the line open during this period with PRR funding any annual deficit but the agreement had called for the total cessation of passenger traffic in 1939.


Hightstown traffic continued for many years until the building of the New Jersey Turnpike. The UT crossed what would be its path just south of the current Old York Road overpass. During the construction in 1950, it was determined that 4.5 miles from Shrewsbury Road (Rt 524) and Hightstown Jct be abandoned. Although other reasons were given, the main one was that it would have cost the Turnpike

Authority \$450,000 to build over or under the railroad.

The following year UT stockholders were granted an extra 5% dividend and the following year a payout of \$100 per share (original per share cost was \$50 in the 1860s). So now the P&H did not come into Hightstown but parts of the line still existed although not very active. This changed once again in 1969 during the construction of 195 as the UT transported much of the interstate's bridge steel. Stockholders received another \$25 dividend. Ironically in 1970, the UT enjoyed prosperity while Penn Central declared bankruptcy. UT dividend payments continued until 1973, after 67 consecutive years of paying dividends. In its final year, 1976, it hauled much of the equipment for the building of Great Adventure, but the Railroad Reorganization Act of 1973 terminated all service to the UT in 1976.

But certain users along the line continued to use it for short hauls. Ironically mostly for hauling fertilizer into the farm areas that had sent marl out over 100 years earlier. So in 1977, after 109 years of operation, the UT line was done forever. UT stockholders received an additional \$112.76 per share from surplus and a final payment from Penn Central.

The tracks were removed and salvaged. Some of these tracks were moved to Allaire State Park for its historic train. JCP&L purchased the right of way from Penn Central in 1978 and their power lines continue to mark the railroad's prior course.

Now the United Transportation company, like the Phoenix, has again risen from the ashes. Currently, there is a walking and biking trail along most of its bed in Monmouth County, ending at 539 at the southernmost border of East Windsor. It was announced just this year that a \$450,000 grant has been awarded to East Windsor to complete the UT trail from its current end at 539, into Mercer County, crossing Old York Road at the Assunpink and continuing passed Working Dog Winery, over the turnpike and eventually into Hightstown Junction on Route 33. The UT lives! 



## Hightstown East Windsor Historical Society

Founded 1971 to educate while preserving for future generations, our people and our community's history.



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