

CHAPTER 4

HISTORY OF THE SITE

THE VILLAGE OF LEBANON stands on land which was part of a larger tract called Tidbury. This 400-acre holding was laid out by the Kent County Court in 1683 for Thomas Williams. Tidbury lay on the south side of Tidbury branch or creek and on the west side of the Dover (now Saint Jones) River, at their confluence. Across the branch lay the tract that eventually became today's Wildcat Manor, home of the Hunn family. On the Wildcat tract, near the mansion house, was an important shipping point called Forest Landing, which served the areas now known as Dover, Camden, and North Murderkill Hundred.

During the colonial period, the lower King's Road ran from the Dover area to the Frederica area skirting the meadows on one side and the unsettled forest on the other. It crossed Tidbury Branch near the present State Street bridge. The old crossing was a planked ford through the marsh and a footbridge for pedestrians. The upper road, through the present site of Camden, followed higher ground above the head of navigation, generally crossing streams at mill dams. The road westward from the mouth of Tidbury, called the Forest Landing Road connected at Camden with the Choptank Road to Maryland.

Lebanon was a commercial center during the age of sail. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, bulky and heavy goods were moved almost exclusively by water. Lebanon served as the landing for the St. Jones drainage, including Camden, Hazletville, Dover, Rising Sun, and, later, Wyoming. Businessmen in the inland towns ordinarily kept wharves and warehouses at their landings, and commonly invested in ships.

Forest Landing lay at the eastern end of the portage between the Choptank and the Delaware, now State Route 10, then known as the Choptank Road. This portage was a major overland route from the beginning of the eighteenth century, and probably earlier.

Transpeninsular portage was important to the commerce of Delaware, and to the prosperity of the entire Middle Atlantic region. North-south transportation consisted of water routes, such as the Delaware and Chesapeake bays, interrupted by portages across land barriers, including Delmarva and New Jersey. Delaware's first railroad was a portage from New Castle, Delaware to Frenchtown, Maryland. When the Delaware Railroad was begun, it was intended to connect Delaware Bay traffic at Dona's Landing, east of Dover, with the Nanticoke at Seaford. In preparation for the coming of a railroad, Kent County's first

scheduled steamboat traffic was established at Dona, rather than at Forest Landing, which had long been the traditional port for Dover. After the Delaware Railroad changed its orientation to an all-land route, Lebanon regained its position as the port for Dover and Dona became a ghost town.

Shipbuilding began at Lebanon in the eighteenth century. In 1888 Scharf (1131) commented, "The village has long been noted for its ship-building, having turned out in recent years a 3-masted schooner of 800 tons burden for the trade to the West Indies and the Gulf of Mexico. It is nothing unusual to see 3 or 4 schooners at anchor here at a time."

The typical schooner serving Lebanon through the middle of the nineteenth century made between eight and twenty-eight round trips per year to Philadelphia. The schooner *T. P. McColley* made eighteen trips in 1867 and carried goods for Camden merchants Graham and Lord; Wharton A. Gildersleeve; Robert Lord, Jr., J. C. Durborough, Thomas Pickering of Lebanon; John H. Jenkins, and Lebanon storekeeper William Dyer. Camden fruit canners Stetson and Ellison received 30 boxes of tin.

The ships not only linked Lebanon to Philadelphia, they tied central Kent County to the entire Mid-Atlantic region. The schooner *Stetson and Ellison*, owned by the Camden cannery and commanded by one of its partners, purchased ships' goods and repair work from businesses in Centerville, Maryland; Camden, Frederica, Bowers, and Philadelphia as well as Lebanon. (Richardson Collection, HSD, Freight Records book 1, MS 6217)

Thomas Pickering, a farmer who owned part of the Tidbury tract, owned interests in several of the Lebanon schooners. In 1883 he bought a half interest in the little two-masted schooner *Hattie Hall*, 29.18 tons, from Allabeda Kirkley of Leipsic for \$300. She was built at New Town, Maryland in 1871, 51.28 feet in length, 18.6 feet in breadth, 5 feet depth of hold (Pickering papers).

He also had a financial interest in the much larger three-masted schooner *Minnie A. Bonsall*, captain John L. Bonsall, which engaged in the coastal grain trade out of Lebanon. She measured 458.83 tons, 153.5 feet length, 37 feet breadth, and 11.5 feet depth of hold. Pickering held the mortgage on Captain Edward Stubbs' schooner *Jennie D. Blocksom* as well (Pickering papers).

The Farmer's Union

Although the area around the mouth of Tidbury Creek had been a landing since settlement, organized shipping companies developed only in the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1855, the legislature passed a bill allowing Alexander Jackson, William Slay, Henry Pratt, John Hunn, and William

Lewis, to sell stock in a company to be called the Farmers Union of Kent County. The corporation was authorized to "Purchase and receive ... not to exceed ... at any one time, fifty acres, and to build and construct wharves, granaries, store-houses and other needful buildings, and improvements for the storing of grain and other produce, at some suitable and convenient place as the said Company shall deem advisable, and to buy or build and own one or more vessels suitable for navigation, and to employ persons to sail or run the same in the shipment of grain and other produce. ..." These incorporators were largely businessmen from North Murderkill Hundred.

The original act must have been flawed, for two years later, it was amended and the Farmers Union was "declared to be a body politic and corporate under the name of the Farmers Union of Kent County and by that name shall have succession for twenty years and no longer...." The incorporators at this time included only William Lewis and John Hunn of the original five, and thirteen others (Enrolled Bills 1855, p. 289; 1857, p. 275, Delaware Archives)

Limited-duration corporations were the rule, rather than the exception, at that time. There was a deeply rooted American aversion to perpetual corporate entities. Even banks were chartered for a term, after which their business was to be "wound up" and the stockholders repaid their investments.

On July 1, 1859, Daniel Mifflin deeded a wharf lot, containing 65 square perches, to the Farmers Union of Kent County. Officers of the Union then were Henry Pratt, John Gooden, Jr., Thomas L. Madden, Andrew Calley, and Benjamin Stradley (Kent County Deed Book Q-4:193). In 1867, the property was taken up by a firm called Graham, Durborough, and Company, which apparently was a simple partnership consisting of John G. Graham, Captain John C. Durborough, James Grier, and Joseph L. Bonsall (Kent County Deed Book N-5:486), all of whom were involved in Lebanon shipping. This firm must not have had a separate existence, for when the Union's charter expired on March 2, 1877, the land reverted to Mifflin, whose heirs in 1890 conveyed the wharf to the Lebanon Navigation Company, which had some of the same participants (Kent County Deed Book I-7:268).

Collins, Geddes and Company

In 1869, Collins, Geddes and Company built a fruit cannery on the bluff above the St. Jones River at Lebanon, adjacent to the old Hunn mill seat. At that time, there were fewer than ten canneries in all of Delmarva, two of which were within a few miles of Lebanon (May 1937: 436).

The partners were John S. Collins, a nurseryman of Burlington County, New Jersey; Samuel Geddes of Union County, Pennsylvania; and Jacob Brown of Kent County, who managed the company's affairs locally.

Samuel Geddes, (1814-1896), had recently moved to Delaware from Lewisburg, Union County, Pennsylvania. By trade he was an iron manufacturer, although there is no evidence that he was also a tinsmith. In 1864, he sold his interest in Union Furnace for \$15,000, at a time when even the least efficient ironworks was fat with wartime profits.

John S. Collins (1837-1928) came to the cannery from a successful career in the nursery and fruit business in Moorestown, New Jersey. After 1890, he turned his northern interests over to younger members of his family and moved to Florida, where he grew tropical fruits to be shipped north on the new railroad lines then under construction. By 1909, he owned 4500 acres on the ocean side of Biscayne Bay, with four and a half miles of ocean front and a mile on the bay. On this ground he grew avocados and mangoes; to serve his fruit farm, he built a canal through the barrier beach, followed in 1913 by a bridge to the mainland. The fruit farm eventually was developed by the Miami Beach Improvement Company, of which Collins was the president (Blackman 1921). The tract is no longer agricultural.

Jacob Brown (1825-1897), the local manager of the company, later operated the highly successful cannery at Rising Sun, a short distance west of Lebanon. He was not a tinsmith by training.

The Lebanon plant site consisted of two acres purchased from the Dyer family in 1869. Under the "Star" brand, they began canning tomatoes, peaches, and other products, probably during the 1870 season. Can labels were printed at Geddes Sons, 724 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, and the wholesale agent was C. P. Knight and Brothers, Philadelphia.

The first Kent County Mutual policy on the cannery was issued at about the time it was built. There was a two-story frame building, 80 by 24 feet with frame wings on the east and west sides one-story 10 by 80 feet, used as a canning factory, and a frame boiler house at the north end of the main building measuring 18 by 19 feet (Kent County Mutual Declaration 3318, Delaware Archives).

The complex grew rapidly. A two and a half story lodging house west of the cannery, measuring 50 by 24 feet, was insured in 1870. The dormitory was divided into rooms, but was not plastered. A cook shed was attached to the rear (Kent County Mutual Declaration 3660). During that same second year, the two-story cannery was doubled to 166 feet long, with ten-foot shed wings east and west as before. The addition extended the building 86 feet northward, including the boiler house. A steam boiler located in the old boiler house, now the center of the building, was "well secured in brickwork." Upstairs, can-makers

used charcoal furnaces to heat their irons. There was a coal shed about three feet from the south end of the building (Kent County Mutual Declaration 3925).

In 1871 the company's premises were again described as expanded. A scalding house, 32 by 30 feet, a new boiler house measuring 18 by 24 feet with two bricked boilers, a coal shed, all joined to the west side of the main canning house. Some distance away was a wood shop for making crates (Kent County Mutual Declaration 3635).

More buildings were added in 1872, including a heated building 24 by 14 feet, about eight feet from the cannery, which was furnished with a bed, two desks, and a bookcase. About 30 feet from the building was a shed with racks for fruit, measuring 30 by 45 feet. Another building was added to the north of the cannery 50 by 24 feet, with ten-foot side wings (Kent County Mutual Declaration 3660).

Jacob Brown, the on-site manager, sold his share in the company to Collins and Geddes in 1872. Collins bought out Geddes in 1874, and changed the name of the firm to John S. Collins and Company. The new labels, copyrighted in 1874 and printed by Geddes Sons, bore the Collins name alone. He listed himself, at 260 South Front Street, Philadelphia, as the wholesale agent.. Like the old labels, the Collins labels proclaimed that the plant packed tomatoes, peaches, peas, blackberries, raspberries, and strawberries, but the new label listed asparagus as well.

By 1874, the main cannery measured 24 by 216 feet, plus wings ten feet wide on the east and west sides. A boiler house stood to the west of this structure. Tomato sauce and catsup were made in a building 18 by 40 feet added to the west of the boiler house. A fruit cooking room measuring 32 feet square adjoined the cannery and the boiler house. By now there were two boarding houses, each 20 by 32 feet (Kent County Mutual Declaration 4629). See Figure 2, page 6, for a conjectural reconstruction plan based upon these descriptions.

In its prime, the cannery was said to have been the largest in the United States. The following notice appeared in the Dover *Delawarean* in 1870:

"...A story and a half frame building, about 150 feet in length by 50 in depth, stands on the high bank facing the creek, with which communication is maintained by means of a long elevated platform or pier, where necessary supplies are received and from which goods are shipped on board of schooners for New York and other eastern ports. On approaching the building we found a number of wagons from which fruit was being unloaded and hundreds of baskets of peaches waiting their turn to be pared, scalded and sealed in air-tight cans. ... On the day of our visit about three hundred hands were engaged in the various branches of the business about the premises. ... Last week 56,000 cans were put up, and this week it is said the number will touch 65,000. A basket of peaches will fill about ten quart cans. The hands here work from early in the morning until 10 or 12 o'clock at night, and on the day of our visit closed 16,090 quart cans, containing over 1600

baskets of peaches. They expect to put up 400,000 cans of fruit this season, including tomatoes, we suppose."

A schooner, named the *Rachel A. Collins* in honor of the owner's wife, was built at Lebanon in 1873 to serve the cannery (Plate 10, page 32). Canning was in a boom period, and the Lebanon cannery was riding the boom. In July 1874, workers packed 8200 cans of peas in one ten-hour shift. Collins also operated an evaporator, in which he dried apple and peach peels and apple cores. According to the *Peninsula News and Advertiser* for September 18, 1874, he bought the U. S. patent on the Alden process to make jelly from such waste products.

In early December of 1874, the cannery was putting up apple jelly and making cans for the next year's production. Only about forty workers were employed, as compared to 300 in season. Suddenly, in the middle of the night of Thursday, December 3, fire was seen leaping through the cupola of the huge frame building. Soon the entire plant was involved, causing a loss estimated at \$48,000. Two dwellings and the receiving house, also owned by the company, were not damaged. The *Delawarean* for December 5 reported that the ground was littered with tomatoes, catsup, and jelly. It was a blow from which the Collins company would not recover.

The Milford *Peninsula News and Advertiser* for December 11 raised the possibility of arson, and suggested that Lebanon might not be the best place to rebuild the cannery:

The permanent loss of this establishment would be a great public calamity; and we are glad to know that the energetic proprietors intend to rebuild and resume operation as speedily as possible. We do not know what may be the special local inducements which attract them to the particular locality of Lebanon, but venture to suggest to the company that before rebuilding there they canvass the inducements which Milford offers for a great canning establishment like theirs. This is the very heart of one of the largest fruit growing sections of the Peninsula. The town is the second in size in the State; and labor could be had in abundance. We have navigation as good as at Lebanon, and railroad transportation with communication by steamers with New York via Lewes. It would seem to us that this is beyond comparison, a more eligible location for their great business than the petty and obscure village of Lebanon. Please consider it gentlemen.

Collins rebuilt the plant on a smaller scale. During the 1875 season, peach parings were being converted into jelly, according to the *Delaware Tribune* for October 7. By 1876, there were three tinsmiths and seven can makers listed in the Delaware Directory for Lebanon. But the second plant was not a success. Collins lost it in a sheriff's sale to William Paschall, an affiliate of the firm of H. K. and B. F. Thurber and Company, New York grocers, in 1878.

The Thurbers operated the fruit drying factory with six machines in 1878, but after the 1879 season they sold out to William Eastman Cotter. They were building a new plant at Moorestown, New

Jersey, which they would advertise as the world's largest. After the 1881 season, Cotter did not operate the Lebanon cannery. He bought the Little Creek cannery on July 9 of that year, just at the beginning of the season.

Fire on Saturday morning, May 17, 1884, again destroyed the cannery. According to the *Delawarean* for May 24, 1884, the fire could be plainly seen from the steeple of Dover's court house. The cannery, sheds, and the home of the widow Dyer were consumed with all their contents. Since there was no fire brigade in Lebanon, the citizens worked to save other nearby buildings. The newspaper account stated that the idle cannery, owned by William Cotter, was leased to a firm that would have taken over the following week. By then, Cotter was operating the Little Creek cannery with his father-in-law. That plant also burned, the next year, in October 1885. Cotter's frequent fire losses prompted sinister rumors about arson.

After the second fire, the cannery was not rebuilt; the sheriff again sold the property, which was bought by Cotter's wife, Charlotte. She, in turn, lost it at sheriff's sale in 1900. Thereafter the cannery site was cultivated as part of the adjacent field for about sixty years. When the duplex apartment building was erected on the south end of the old cannery property, the north end of the site was allowed to lie fallow and soon grew up in trees.

Steamboating

The natural channel of the St. Jones has never been suitable for large vessels. The lower 12 miles, from Lebanon to the mouth, was only four feet deep in 1880. The upper nine-mile stretch to Dover had a low-water depth of only two and a half feet. In the River and Harbor Act of March 3, 1881, Congress authorized a channel three feet deep and 100 feet wide at the mouth of the river, to be protected by a jetty. The project was modified in 1884 to include a depth of six feet at mean low water. Work began in 1885, and was nearly finished in 1888. A cutoff about a mile below Lebanon was completed in 1890. Thereafter the channel was maintained below Lebanon at a depth of six feet (Chief of Engineers 1908: 213).

An account in 1887 reported that there were fifteen fishing boats at Lebanon, manned by twenty fishermen who occupied five fish houses and harvested terrapin and clams, as well as fish (Herman and Siders 1986:198).

The Lebanon Steam Navigation Company was organized in 1887, when the Delaware General Assembly passed a bill declaring "Thomas Pickering, William Ridgeway, John C. Durborough, George H. Gildersleeve and such other persons ... a body corporate and politic ... by the name ... of Lebanon

Navigation Company." These were the Rising Sun cannery interests, and some of the same interests that had invested in the Farmers Union. Like the earlier firm, the new company was authorized to exist for twenty years. Its purpose was to "conduct and carry on the business of owning, controlling, using and employing vessels to be propelled by steam or sail or both for transportation between the village of Lebanon on St. Jones Creek in Kent County and the city of Philadelphia and such other ports or places as may be deemed necessary. ..." The corporation was further authorized to purchase wharves and other facilities at Lebanon, and whatever equipment the company needed to carry on its business. The first stockholders' meeting was scheduled for the first Saturday in April 1888.

The new company moved quickly; in 1887 it purchased a waterfront tract from the Lord family. Three years later, it purchased the old Farmers Union wharf, where some of its stockholders had been operating under the name of Graham, Durborough, and Company. Facilities included a wharf, a warehouse, a granary built over the water, an office, a ladies' waiting room, and a scale house. The company's two waterfront properties were separated by the old Hunn forge site, still owned by the Hunn heirs.

To carry out the trade, the company bought the four-year-old screw steamer *James F. Holt*, of Milford, which had been built on Indian River, Delaware. They had her lengthened from 71 feet to 106 feet at the Enoch Moore yard in Wilmington. Renamed the *Mary U. Githens*, she entered the Philadelphia-Lebanon trade under Captain John C. Durborough. The owners of the steamer were principals in the cannery at Rising Sun, and she was named for the ten-year-old daughter of the company's Philadelphia agent and backer. Mary U. Githens, the girl, was reportedly unhappy with *Mary U. Githens*, the ship, which she perceived as less elegant than a steamer named for one of her classmates.

Her career was not all routine, however. She was the first "large" steamer to ascend the St. Jones to Dover on July 8, 1887, when she brought coal for the dredge *Atlantic*, which was working to clear a six-foot channel to Draper's wharf at the foot of Water Street. Lebanon was the practical head of navigation, although some vessels occasionally ventured to Dover. Steamboats customarily turned around in the basin at the mouth of Tidbury. The *Wilmington Morning News* reported on July 9, 1887 that the "little steamer" from Lebanon had made the trip the day before and with some exaggeration proclaimed that "...the capital of the state is a seaport this morning."

The steamer did not always follow her route. On June 5, 1888, off Billingsport, New Jersey, she was involved in a minor accident. Ordinarily she called at Barker's Landing and Bowers on the St. Jones; Port Mahon near the mouth of Little Creek; and Wilmington. She boasted private staterooms, ladies' and gentlemen's saloons, a dining room, electric lights, and steam heat. Roundtrip fare between Philadelphia

and Lebanon was \$1.50 and meals were 25¢ in 1900. Cargo manifests for the *Githens* and other Lebanon ships are housed at the Historical Society of Delaware. A typical round trip took three days.

Her agent was Githens, Rexsamer, and Company, produce merchants on Front Street in Philadelphia. Benjamin Githens had interests in several canneries on the Peninsula, which he helped start (Letter of Marion C. Winn to E.D. Bryan, n.d.).

The *Githens* caught fire at the Lebanon wharf on the night of March 3-4, 1904 and burned to the waterline. William Carter and Frank Butler were staying on board as watchmen, for the boat was laid up for painting. The fire began in the engine room and quickly spread up to the upper decks. Flames leaped to the warehouse, but were extinguished, while the steamer drifted downstream and sank.

She was to become the best remembered of the Lebanon boats. A series of reminiscences on the last years of the *Mary U. Githens* appeared in the *Wilmington Every Evening* in August and September 1960. Respondents to an inquiry in the paper about the fate of the *Githens* remembered that the ship also had carried sturgeon and peaches in season to Philadelphia, and streetcar horses to Kent County, destined to end their days as farm horses.

According to the respondents quoted in the newspaper, she was replaced by a vessel called the *Vigilant*, which sank some years later at Barkers Landing. Also on the line were the steamers *John P. Wilson* and *City of Dover*, which never inspired the folklore that surrounds the *Mary U. Githens*.

The *Wilson* was built by Neafie and Levy of Philadelphia, and entered service in September 1904. She had a steel hull, three decks, was 131 feet long in the keel and 27 feet beam. She could make the twice-weekly dash to Philadelphia in eight and a half hours under the command of Captain Durborough and a crew composed mostly of his family (*Delawarean* November 4, 1905). A new corporation, the Dover and Philadelphia Navigation Company, took over the Lebanon steamboat property in 1907, finally deeding its inactive assets to Samuel Harrington in 1923.

As Lebanon's steamboat era began to close, the River and Harbor Act of June 25, 1910 authorized a major improvement of the river. At the mouth, a mile-long jetty was to project the channel into Delaware Bay. Another sixteen cutoffs were to be dug, reducing the length of the river from the Bay to Dover to eighteen miles. During the next decade, local parties worked to obtain title to the proposed cutoffs at no expense to the government, as the law provided. The cutoffs finally were built, but too late to serve steamboats. Trade on the river dropped from 120,291 short tons in 1913 to 6,384 tons in 1916 (Chief of Engineers 1918: 417-419).

The government acquired the right-of-way for the last cut in 1925, after scheduled steamboats no longer ran. There is speculation that the motive was not to improve navigation, but to improve the river's ability to flush effluent from the Dover wastewater plant, which had been built at the old Draper's wharf. The last steamboat called for a load of freight at Lebanon around 1938.

Decline

Establishment of the Lebanon Steam Navigation Company probably marked the peak of the village's prosperity. The waterfront along the river was lined with granaries, docks, stores, and offices. Lebanon had its own post office since the cannery opened in 1870. Coal, lumber, and store goods entered central Kent County through Lebanon, and grain and agricultural products left for Philadelphia through here. Although folklore states that competition from the railroads killed waterborne traffic on the Delaware, the coastwise trade reached its peak of prosperity a generation or two *after* the Delaware Railroad opened in 1856.

Widespread automobile transportation and paved roads finally spelled the death of waterfront commercial towns up and down the Delaware drainage. Lebanon was no exception. The Dover and Philadelphia Navigation Company sold its facilities in 1923. The steamboat company's buildings crumbled. An old man living in a float house on the marsh sold turtles to Philadelphia caterers whose buyers arrived in cars, and the new highway department dug away the hillside to build the roads that had made the steamers obsolete.

Plate 29

Steamer *John P. Wilson*
at Lebanon, with the
company warehouse at
right. The warehouse still
survives as a frame with a
roof only. Albert Taylor
looks on. Photo courtesy
W. Thomas Pickering

