

DELAWARE COUNTY HISTORIC
RESOURCES SURVEY

REPORT AND FINDINGS
FOR
MARCUS HOOK BOROUGH

Delaware County Planning Department
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BRIEF HISTORY OF MARCUS HOOK

The Marcus Hook area of the Delaware River waterfront has attracted settlement since the movement of the Lenni Lenape into this region. Reputedly, the town derives its name from a major Indian settlement, which became a Swedish trading outpost and colonization site in the 1640s. A report by the Swedish Commissary Hudde, dated 1645, speaks of two principal villages on the west bank of the Delaware: "Maarte" and "Wissenmenet." The word "Hook" meant a point of land and presumably refers to the natural harbor formed below Marcus Hook (then Chichester) Creek.

The area from the west bank of Chester Creek to Marcus Hook Creek was originally part of a large tract granted by Queen Christina of Sweden to Captain John Ammundsen Besk in 1653; the land west of the latter creek was given to a number of Swedish farmers in 1679. The Dutch called this area "Marrites Hoeck" after conquering the Delaware watershed 1655 to 1664. After the fall of New Amsterdam, these settlements were under the English crown but attracted little interest until Charles II granted William Penn vast acreage for colonization. Some English settlers had migrated to March Hook from Burlington and other West Jersey hamlets, but most arrived in 1682 and '83. Within six years, the English predominated enough to have the area's name changed to "Chichester" after the Sussex town from which the most influential citizens had emigrated. In common usage, however, March Hook remained the term for the waterfront settlement while "Chichester" became the designation for the hinterland.

The inhabitants petitioned Penn for the establishment of a local market, to be held in the long open area still visible today in Lower Market (then Broad) Street. The charter for the market was granted in 1701, one of only three such privileges issued by the Proprietor. Prior to 1800, a two-story market house was erected similar to Philadelphia's Head House. The second floor of the structure was demolished 1869-1870 and the weekly trade in food, goods and livestock gradually died out.

During colonial times Marcus Hook served as the first port of call for Philadelphia and rivalled Chester in size. It briefly became a notorious haven for pirates in the early 18th century, the most famous cutthroat being Edward Teach, "Blackbeard." The waterfront (now approximately 2 blocks inland) remained an infamous neighborhood as a result of the many taverns along Discord Lane (present Second Street). The ship-building industry here was started before 1750, and was well-known for coastal traders and herring sloops.

During the War of 1812, infantry troops were trained and quartered just north of the crossroads of Market Street and Post Road (U.S. 13) and continuing Northeast into Trainer. The encampment known as "Camp Gaines" and later "Fort Snyder," had between 5,000 and 10,000 men stationed there from early September 1814 into early 1815. The troops were mainly Pennsylvania militia with some Delaware units and a sprinkling of U.S. regulars. Following the sack of Washington D.C. in August 1814, extensive earthworks were hastily constructed along the Marcus Hook waterfront and tidal creeks and cannon were mounted. These entrenchments and the camp were abandoned when winter lessened the likelihood of a British offensive.

Although the growth of Marcus Hook was gradual, it was stimulated by repeated improvements to the “Queen’s Highway” (Route 13 from Chester to Darby) and the “King’s Highway” (Route 13 from Chester to New Castle). The construction of the Philadelphia-Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad brought increased commercial and residential development in the later 19th century. Stage inns, waterfront taverns, depots and similar services augmented income from shipping and fisheries. The shad and herring industries were especially lucrative until the early 20th century.

As a settlement which spans the three hundred and fifty years of European settlement, Marcus Hook has welcomed many races and religions. The first church was established in the 17th century, St. Martin’s Episcopal Church. The Baptist congregation organized in 1789 and have had numerous locations, the latest being Mt. Olive Baptist Church (1916). The Mount Hebron African Methodist Church was organized in 1893 and eventually moved to Lower Chichester. The growth of the river industries in the early 20th century provided employment for a new wave of Catholic immigrants. Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church began as a mission church for St. Anthony’s parish in Chester. In 1917, the congregation built the present stone church.

The first school in “Chichester” was organized in 1745 in the old frame church of St. Martin’s. It continued there until a brick schoolhouse was built which was demolished in 1860. The Marcus Hook Baptist Church was used by the School District from 1854-1890 (referred to as the Cedar Grove School). This was followed in 1895 by the 7th Street Grammar School at 7th and Green, which consisted of 6 rooms until World War II. The Central School which stood at 10th and Church Streets was razed in 1921.

Much of the economic development of Marcus Hook has been related to its location on the river. During the 18th and 19th century, it was a center for small ship construction or the fishing industry (particularly noted for shad). The U.S. Quarantine Station for the port of Philadelphia was based at Marcus Hook from 1887 to the late 1960’s. The growth resulting from these activities warranted the incorporation of Marcus Hook as an independent borough of 1.14 square miles in 1893. Marcus Hook was also noted as a resort and an amusement center prior to the turn of the century. A number of inns and elegant houses lined the waterfront and the area was noted for quail hunting and fishing. The Lindethorp Park with “novelty attractions” such as county fairs and balloon races, operating Marcus Hook from 1897 to 1901. The Chester Traction Company operated a trolley to the park on week-ends.

The excellent rail, road and deep water ship facilities in Marcus Hook attracted new industries dependent upon water for transport rather than for power. Oil refineries were built on the waterfront, starting with the Bear Creek Refining Company in 1892, giving the borough its primary industry.

A pipeline connected the plant to the oil producing regions in western Pennsylvania 300 miles away. In October 1901, eighty-two acres in Marcus Hook were bought by J.N. Pew for the Sun Company refinery. The plant was in operation four months later and

was immediately prosperous. The Hardwood Packaging Company was spun off in 1912 to produce wooden barrels for the shipping of oil. In 1900, the Union Petroleum Company, quickly to become a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Sinclair Refining Company, leased 17 acres in Marcus Hook. It added 242 acres in Trainer in 1921, expanding from a 10,000 to a 160,000 barrel a day production capacity. The business has had several subsequent owners, the current being BP Oil, Inc. The deep water harbor allows inexpensive delivery of crude oil from Texas and Venezuela by tanker and efficient export to overseas markets. Pennsylvania and Reading railroad lines provide access to continental markets.

Another significant industry was founded in Marcus Hook when Samuel Salvage first imported British technology to manufacture “artificial silk” in the United States. The American Viscose Company, initially a subsidiary of the English textile firm Samuel Courtauld and Company, built the largest synthetic fiber plant in the world here in 1910. Marcus Hook, therefore, is the American birthplace of rayon, the first mass-produced, manmade fiber in the country. In addition to the industrial complex, American Viscose also constructed an early planned community of employee housing in the popular Tudor Revival style.

Marcus Hook’s population peaked in the 1920’s, when the first pressure for residential subdivision were generated by burgeoning industry. Subsequent growth of the refineries and related businesses has reduced the residential core community to approximately 3,000 and nearly all the borough’s land is fully developed.