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# HISTORY OF AQUASHICOLA AND LOWER TOWAMENSING AREA

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# ORIGIN OF TOWNSHIP

Lower Towamensing Township was originally a part of Towamensing Township, being organized separately in 1841. It is bounded on the north by Franklin and Towamensing Townships, on the east by Monroe County and on the west by the Lehigh River and East Penn Township, and on the south by the Blue Mountain and Northampton County. Within its boundaries lies the Aquashicola Creek, which begins in Monroe County and empties into the Lehigh River.

Today, Lower Towamensing Township is a second class township, making important contributions to the economies of Carbon County, Pennsylvania and the United States through several factories located within its limits. Many citizens have helped the township gain its present status. The Strohrs, Merkhams, Ziegenfus's and many others have made contributions through the years. This is a presentation of the history of the township, so everyone can share in the history and re-live it again through the written word.

## VARIOUS EARLY INDUSTRIES

### *AQUASHICOLA SLATE QUARRY*

One of the early industries of the area was the Aquashicola Slate Quarry. Slate was discovered in 1864 by Stephen Lentz while probing ten feet below the surface near Aquashicola, then known as Millport. The slate was called "Black Diamond" due to its almost jet-black color. Following this discovery, he founded the Millport Slate Company.

The Millport Slate Company was later dissolved and the quarry was worked by G. W. Davis, until 1896 when William Lewis and Walter Bray of Palmerton greatly expanded its capacity and installed a steam power plant. This made it easier to hoist blocks of slate from the quarry than with the original horse-drawn method.

To remove chunks of slate from the quarry, blasting was used. A worker put small charges of powder in the drill holes and these were detonated with just enough force to release the chunks, but not to shatter the slate. When chunks reached the quarry's surface, teams of three men each worked on them. They had constantly to play water on the chunks to maintain "freshness and life" of the slate. These were cut by the second man of the team

using thin chisels. The third man or “dresser” cut the pieces to size, which ranged from one or two feet wide to smaller sizes suitable for roofing purposes.

Many slates were purchased by local builders and can be seen on roofs in the Palmerton area today. The remainder of the slate was shipped by box car from the railroad siding at Lehigh Gap. Charles Helmuth of Aquashicola was in charge of the horse teams that hauled the slate from the quarry.

Operations slowed down in 1908 when the elder Bray became Palmerton’s Postmaster. The quarry was closed in 1912-13 due to rising costs and streaks of limestone that appeared in the slate. Today, only a deep depression partly filled with water remains of this industry. The names “Slate Quarry Hill” and “Slate Quarry Road” reminds us of this once thriving industry.

### *OLD GRIST MILL*

Another industry in the area was a grist mill built along a small creek flowing into the Aquashicola by George Ziegenfuss.

This mill was being run by his son John when fire destroyed it. Later, another son, George, Jr. rebuilt the mill and operated for nine years until it was purchased by Jacob Bowman, one of the best known members of the prominent Carbon County family.

In ensuing years, the mill changed hands several times until shortly after World War I, it was shut down by its last owner, Charles Van Horn.

### *TANNERY*

In addition to the mill, many other type of industries kept Aquashicola residents employed. One of these was a tannery which lasted approximately forty-five years until a fire destroyed the entire building. When it burned to the ground, the depletion of the Hemlock trees in the locale did not warrant the reconstruction of this building.

This industry used the abundant supply of Hemlock trees in the area to process leather goods. It was started on the north bank of the Aquashicola Creek by a man named Mecke. The successive owners of this prosperous industry were George Ziegenfuss, who was the miller, Thomas Snyder, Peter Kester and Reuben Miller.



## *LIME KILN*

One of the early industries important to the area was illustrated by various lime kilns located in the area. In many locations, limestone was plentiful and a kiln could be found nearby.

One such kiln was operated by Judge Charles Mendsen, one of Palmerton's early landowners and an associate judge of the county's courts. The kiln was located near Fireline Road, not far from the Mauch Chunk Road, traveled heavily by local farmers.

The process of burning the lime was as follows:

From a small quarry to the rear of the kiln, the limestone was hand-drilled and blasted loose by black powder. It was then loaded on to a small single horse-drawn cart, pulled a short distance to the mountain and dumped into the kiln. Hardwood was first used to fuel the kiln, but in kilns located near the hard coal fields anthracite coal was used as it burned longer and cleaner and with a higher temperature.

The local kilns were fired by laying a heavy bed of stick and heavier wood at the bottom. Following this, alternate layers of coal and limestone were laid on top. After the limestone burned, it was dropped to the kiln bottom and shoveled into bushel baskets by hand, being the most unpleasant job for the men involved. At the end of the day, looking more like ghosts, the men coughed and sneezed as the limestone dust entered their throats and lungs.

The lime kilns operated constantly for a week or more and many trips were made with horse and cart down the mountainside where the West Plant is now located by or to farmers who used many bushels during the fall. Judge Mendsen stockpiled one extra boatload or so of lime each spring. The lime produced during off-seasons was stored in sheds. The lime was sold for five or ten cents a bushel and on the farm was mixed in the middle of the fields and spread evenly on the field to sweeten the soil.

A little before the turn of the century this kiln shut down when a 125 acre tract was bought for the New Jersey Zinc Company. On this tract and many others that the Zinc Company bought, the world's largest zinc producing plant was built. Today, only the bottom of this kiln can be seen to the rear of the home at 747-49 Edgemont Avenue.

Among other kilns operating in the area were kilns between Little Gap and Smith Gap. These are believed to be the last to shut down in the area. One of the oldest was located west of the Blue Ridge Country Club. This was later converted to roast paint ore, but shut down as it was not suitable for this purpose. Today, if one goes where limestone is abundant, it is still possible to find the crumbling remains of kilns.

### *LITTLE GAP BARREL STAVE MILL*

Another of the prosperous early industries of the area was the Little Gap Barrel Stave Mill. During this era, barrels were used for cracker barrels and as shipping containers for most foods. The Little Gap Mill was located near the home of Lloyd Green of Little Gap and near the base of the mountain where the sand quarry is presently located. No trace now remains of the site of the old mill.

The mill was one of many in Pennsylvania that manufactured barrel staves. It was built in 1904 by the Trexler Stave and Lumber Company, its only owner. This was one of the busiest industries in Little Gap, wood being taken from a nearby tract of Chestnut and Oak trees which fed the mill's battery of saws and machinery.

After the large trees were felled, the trunks were cut into lengths a few inches longer than the required size of the staves, then transported to the mill. At the mill, they were cut into rough staves by cross cut saws and seasoned in the sun for several days. When seasoned, they were planed to a smooth finish and sent to a series of equalizing, pointing and jointing machines. There, wood-cutting power tools cut the staves to uniform size and properly shaped each end to fit the barrel ends. Skilled labor was required on all processes in the mill.

The power for the mill was provided by a large steam plant. The staves built at the mill were shipped in bundles of 50 to customers who assembled them into barrels for the consumers to package their products.

Under the management of Milton Latshaw and Granville Ruch, former Little Gap residents, the mill prospered for more than a dozen years until 1915 when fire destroyed the mill. It was rebuilt and operated until 1917 when the demand for barrel staves dropped to a new low for this industry.

Not long after this, operations idled at the mill and the building and steam plant were torn down.

### *IRON FORGE*

In the year 1819, David Heimbach, an ironmaster from Lehigh County, with son David, built an iron forge on the Aquashicola a little north of Little Gap. The pig iron for this forge was brought in from Berks County. His son David built a furnace near this forge, in 1827, naming it "Clarissa" in honor of his wife. Ores were brought here on the Lehigh Canal from Whitehall, being transported the remaining six miles to the furnace teams.

In 1834, the owners of these iron works died, and the property was obtained by Jacob Albright and others. He named it "Ashland Iron Works" after the birthplace of Henry Clay, as Albright was one of Clay's great admirers.

The floods of 1841 washed away the works and the furnace was never rebuilt. A forge of greater capacity was built and partially destroyed by fire soon after. In the year 1851 the plant passed into other hands and was abandoned in 1860.

### *LITTLE GAP ICE DAM*

Before the electric refrigerator, and deep freezer, earlier generations depended on ice to supply their refrigeration needs. The old "ice box" was the forerunner of the present refrigerator. The ice was cut during the winter, stored and delivered in the summer to prevent spoilage of perishable foods.

On the farm there was usually an ice house or shed to store the ice from nearby ponds and creeks. But the cities relied on large ice producing centers, like the one in Little Gap, to deliver the thousands of tons of ice needed by them. This business in Little Gap flourished for 23 years.

The ice cutting operation began as soon as the ice was at least 10 inches thick. The men of the company started on a section of the dam, using drawn cutting plows to remove the ice. The cut cakes of ice were floated down a water channel cut in the ice to the storage house. Leaving the channel, the ice chunks moved on a huge chain conveyer belt to a moving platform know as a gallery to the company's employees. On this the ice cakes were planed down to the size of 30 inches long by 2 feet wide with a thickness of at least 10 inches.

The gallery and conveyer belt, powered by a large steam engine, could be raised or lowered to adjust it to the amount of ice stored in the room. There were six rooms: each was 36 feet high, 36 feet wide, and 100 feet long with an entrance running from the floor to the top of the room.

When the first ice of the season was cut, the conveyer belt running on the gallery moved the ice along the doors of each of the six rooms. At each entrance a man was stationed to push the ice off the belt into the room. Two men, known as spotters, put the ice in proper position for storage. Two other men, known as switchers, moved the ice with large hooks to the section of the room to be filled. The number of men in each room depended on the quantity of ice being moved to that room.

The ice was stored in each building ready for shipment in the warm months of the year. Some former employees of the ice house recall that from spring to fall a daily average of three to five railroad cars were filled at the storage house and sent to New York, Philadelphia, and several large New Jersey cities. The cars were loaded on a siding of the Chestnut Ridge Railroad near the ice house. The cars were taken to Palmerton and switched to the main line of the Central Railroad of New Jersey for delivery to the cities.

The company flourished at Little Gap for several years. The original company was later taken over by the Home Ice and Product Company and the last owners were the Brady Brothers Ice Company. At the beginning of the 1920's because of electric refrigerators the natural ice business rapidly declined until the business at Little Gap closed in 1923.

Seven years later, the ice house was torn down for scrap lumber by the late Frank Costenbader of Little Gap, a former superintendent of the ice company.

## ETHNIC HISTORY OF THE AREA

Lower Towamensing and Aquashicola area is a "melting pot" of nationalities. Many settled here, the first being Germans or Pennsylvania Dutch. Now it is a home for many people of different nationalities, being among them Irish, Welsh, Vietnamese, and their descendents.

Many more have settled here in between then and now. So over the years, many have settled here and their descendants carry on many traditions of their ancestors who arrived many years ago.

## ORIGIN OF THE NAME AND VILLAGE OF AQUASHICOLA

The original name of the village was Millport until 1900 when it was changed to Aquashicola. This name is derived from the Native American name of the creek running through it and emptying into the Lehigh River at the Lehigh Water Gap.

The meaning of the name of "Aquashicola" is "Where we fish with bush nets." The change of name from Millport to Aquashicola was instigated by Post Office officials to avoid confusion with another Millport in Potter County.

Aquashicola began as a farming community with few houses until a grist mill was built in 1806 by George Ziegenfus. In 1830 a tannery was built in the area. It burned in 1875 and was later rebuilt. In 1856 Robert Prince just north of Stoney Ridge, a rock outcropping which is north of Aquashicola, found an iron ore. He analyzed this ore and found that it could be used as a source for metallic paint. Thus a paint industry in Aquashicola started with the mining of this ore.

These mines have been shut down, and today only traces of them remain. This is in the form of cave-ins in the areas where they were. In 1864, slate was discovered and became the basis of the opening of four slate quarries in the area.

Today, Aquashicola is part of Lower Towamensing Township, but still has the flavor of the small village. Many of the older residents still refer to the village as the original "Millport", even though the official name is "Aquashicola".

## RELIGIOUS HISTORY

Many people of different religious backgrounds settled in Lower Towamensing through the years.

Two churches are located within the bounds of the township. One is St. John's Union Church, the oldest in the area, being organized in 1798, with the purchase of six acres of land from Michael Strohl.

Following this, the Evangelical Lutheran Congregation, Towamensing Township, Northampton county, (now Carbon).

On February 6, 1799, agreed to build a Union church and schoolhouse. On June 12 of the same year, the cornerstone of the Union Church was laid, with appropriate services.

# HISTORY OF THE UPPER AQUASHICOLA AREA

By Jim Vogt



The Aquashicola watershed began forming in the Silurian and Devonian periods, approximately 440 to 360 million years ago (mya). The Taconic and Acadian mountain building events occurred during this time, shaping Blue Mountain. The entire Lehigh watershed was flat and swampy.

About 300-290 mya, North America and Africa collided, creating another mountain building event. This caused the Allegheny Mountains to be uplifted over two miles. Over the next 50 million years (Mesozoic Era), erosion from the Allegheny uplift had transformed the region. Many of the features seen today were formed during this period.

Erosion continued through the Cenozoic Era (65 mya). The watershed was lowered by hundreds of feet, the more resistant rock becoming ridge tops and the softer rock forming valleys.

Two episodes of glaciation occurred in the region. These were the Illinoian (receded about 150,000 years ago), and the Wisconsinian (receded about 13,000 years ago). During this period, large amounts of water were locked into ice, lowering sea levels. It is believed that a land bridge was exposed, allowing caribou, bison, and woolly mammoths to come onto North America. Groups of hunters followed, living off the meat and using the hides for shelter and clothing. These are the Paleo- Indians (ancestors of the Lenni-Lenape ), and became the first human inhabitants in the Aquashicola watershed.

The Paleo- Indians survived on wild game as the climate was too cold for agriculture. Around 10,000 years ago, the climate began to warm, and the Wisconsinian glacier began to melt and recede. Rivers and streams appeared. New land was exposed. The large mammals began to die off or were hunted to extinction. The Paleo- Indians had to find a way to survive these changes. They learned to fish and harvest native grains and nuts. Tool making became more important and sophisticated. This led to a less nomadic way of life and was the emergence of the Lenni-Lenapes. Around 1,000 BC, an important new food crop was introduced from the southern Indians. This was maize (corn), and marked the real beginning of an agricultural society. Other crops were soon added, among them beans, squashes, and sunflowers.

The Lenni-Lenapes evolved into a well developed society. Chiefs ruled more by consensus than edict, a rudimentary form of representative government. There were also procedures for diplomacy, peace and war making and addressing misconduct. There was no organized religion, but they believed in a creator and an expected judgment in the afterlife. A network of roads and water trails eventually occurred. Many of the Lenni-Lenape names are still used, among these the Aquashicola Creek. The Indians living in the area were the Wolf clan branch, and were peaceful.

Their only enemies were the aggressive Iroquois to the north.

The name Aquashicola means "fishing with baskets". It was said that the creek was so full of fish that they could easily be scooped out with willow baskets. Dense thickets of willow like alders grow along the banks, nearly covering the stream in places. Native brook trout are still common (The Aquashicola is a Class A Wild Trout Stream).

The Lenni-Lenape village of Meniolagomeka was near present day Smith Gap and Smith Gap village, on the banks of the Aquashicola.

Meniolagomeka translates to "the fat lands in the midst of the barriers". It was tillable land, with good fishing, and a perfect place for a village.

Meniolagomeka was a thriving village until 1755. Count Zinzendorf, a Moravian missionary was the first white man to visit the village in July of 1742. A mission was started there in 1749.

Europeans began to appear in the area in the early 1700s. As more settlers came to the New World, they began to move further up the Delaware and Lehigh Rivers. The Indians believed in being stewards of the land, but had no concept of land ownership. One group would sell land, only to discover they could no longer hunt, fish, or farm it. The Walking Purchase of 1737 changed the life of the Lenapes forever. This treaty was made between William Penn and three Lenape chiefs. The Lenape agreed to sell land up to Blue Mountain or the distance a man could travel in one and a half days. At the end of the walk, a line would be drawn eastward to the Delaware River and down river to the starting point. William's son Thomas insisted on seeing this done and on September 19, 1737 walkers set out from Wrightstown in Bucks County. Edward Marshall was able to walk 65 miles from the start, making it nearly to Mauch Chunk ( Jim Thorpe ). This was 35 miles further than the Lenapes had expected. The Colonials also drew the line at a right angle, not to the closest point of the river. By this fraud, they were able to steal thousands of acres. This was the end of friendship and trust between the Lenapes and the colonists.

In 1754, a land agent for Penn sold 171 acres of land that Meniolagomeka was on. The purchaser insisted on removing the Lenape and in 1755 they were moved to Gnadehutzen, a Moravian mission. The French- Indian war erupted around this time, and the mission was burned. A peace treaty was signed in 1778.

The location of Meniolagomeka was nearly forgotten. The Moravians were seeking the location and were aided by Benjamin Smith. His grandfather, John Schmidt, had showed him the site. There is a monument now on the site, near the banks of the Aquashicola.

There are seven historic buildings in Eldred Township that have the Smith



name attached and are on the Aquashicola. They are listed in the Chestnuthill, Jackson, Eldred and Ross townships Regional Comprehensive plan and are as follows;

John Smith House	circa 1800	Historic Building
Smith- Heinbach House	ca. 1800	“ “
Smith Gap School	n/a	“ “
Smith Gap Village	19 <sup>th</sup> Century	“ “
Smith House	ca 1800	“ “
Smith Log House	ca 1800	“ “
Smith Log House	ca 1800	“ “

This group of buildings may be a potential Historic District.

In the 1700s, the economy of the area was primarily agricultural. The main crops were oats, rye, corn, and wheat. The livestock raised was considered the finest in the country. Most of the settlers were of German descent.

The next century began to see more industries moving in. Grist mills and saw mills were built. Tanneries operated, using the bark from hemlock trees to provide the tannin. Lime kilns were located throughout the valley. There were also several quarries, producing clay, gravel, and slate. An iron forge was in operation near Little Gap.

Tourism was also developing. A popular resort was in operation in Ross Township in the headwaters of the Aquashicola. It was built in 1834 and named Ross Common. It was regarded as one of the best resorts in the state, due to the climate and scenery. The magnificent stone building still stands, and is kept in very good shape. It is on the National Register of Historic Places. Other historic sites in Ross Township located in the watershed are as follows;

Ross House	1834	Historic Building
Mt. Eaton Church	1884	“ “
Ramel Homestead	1830	“ “
Samuel Lessig Home	1790	“ “

These are listed in the Townships Regional Comprehensive Plan.

The water from the Aquashicola was the source of Ross Common Spring water, a company that was in business until the late 1980s. The headwaters still retain a rural character. There has been very little development.

The upper section of the Aquashicola is still rural and has not been under intense pressure to be developed and built up. It is important to seek protection for unique areas such as this. The Historic Sites found in the watershed would benefit from the added designation of Exceptional Value.