



FREEMANSBURG: NOW AND THEN



Small canal borough has big family appeal

By Angel R. Ackerman
Managing editor

Freemansburg traces its roots to a seven-house farming community incorporated from land belonging to Bethlehem Township. It boomed when the Lehigh Canal opened in 1829, bringing the population to more than 700 by 1856.

When the canal died, Freemansburg became a steel town (70 percent of residents worked there) and when steel died... well, officials there hesitate to call Freemansburg a bedroom community. In the last 50 years, Freemansburg has ballooned from about 1,500 residents to nearly 3,000.

A large portion of that influx came in the last couple years when the borough found itself faced with 550 new homes.

All in one square mile.

With the sesquicentennial celebration starting tomorrow, Freemansburg officials and long-time residents hope that newcomers will use the festivities to learn about their adopted hometown.

"Hopefully the new residents can find out where they live and what their community is all about," said Charles Derr, a lifelong Freemansburg resident who still lives in the house where he was born.

It's the type of small town where Derr teases 25-year borough mayor Gerald Yob about being a transplant. Yob moved here more than 50 years ago looking for an affordable home. When he moved in, there were seven homes and an old ball field in his neighborhood.



Then: (above) the Willow Grove hotel during a community event. Now: (above, left) fire equipment at the station and (below) taking a walk in the borough's canal park. The mule barn, reconstructed about a decade ago, is on the right and the lock tender's houses stands on the left. The lock lies between them.

He spent 12 years on council before taking the borough's top spot. Yob said he'll retire from municipal politics after this term. But Derr and Mike Micolochick, of the local fire department, don't know if they believe him. Yob then pointed out he'll be 80-years-old at the end of his term.

Age doesn't stop Mike Micolochick's father, affectionately known as "Pop." Pop Micolochick changes light bulbs in the municipal building, does light repairs, loads the soda machine and even grills on Friday nights for volunteers

with the fire department. Pop also serves as a sergeant in the fire police.

That's the type of small town spirit found in Freemansburg. It's the home of nostalgia, said Andrew Guidon. It's a "close-knit" town where residents get involved and "make things happen," he said.

For Lyndell Boger of the borough's parks and recreation board, Freemansburg offers old-fashioned camaraderie for her family.

"It's a nice place for kids," said Boger. "Everyone watches out for each other's kids. We talk to our neighbors. We'll discuss a recipe over the backyard fence."

The borough has three parks (Main Street-Canal, Main Street-Gateway and Municipal) and an increasing recreation budget thanks to contributions from the development activity. The recreation committee hosts events for residents from school-aged children to single adults. Senior citizens in the borough will enjoy a free spaghetti dinner in September. The Halloween parade kicks off at 2 p.m. Oct. 7. Trick or treat in the borough concludes with a bonfire in Municipal Park. November brings skate night at Skateaway in Bethlehem Township. December brings the annual Christmas Party and tree lighting.

The committee also helps local students complete community service projects required by the Bethlehem Area School District.

Some recreation venues in the borough haven't survived the course of time.

Derr remembered fondly the hoopla around the annual May Day celebration at Freemansburg School when he was growing up. The children would dance around the May pole and the town would elect the May Queen crowned when he was in eighth grade.

About 200 would show up at the crowning, said Guidon.

Some of that atmosphere has changed, officials said, in part because people don't have the time to volunteer and get involved.

"I blame two things, television and the economy," Derr said. "You need two working adults to make it."

By the time you get home, most people just want to vegetate in front of the television, especially those who commute to New York or New Jersey, Derr and Guidon said.

The economy has also changed downtown Freemansburg, Derr said.

"Almost 100 percent of our business community is gone," Derr said. He would know. His family has lived in town for a century.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Freemansburg had 76 businesses on Main Street, Derr said. He listed three candy stores, four bars, a pool hall, an A & P grocer and three barbers among them.

Now there are a couple of used car dealers, three bars and a new deli (Thanhauser's on Main Street, in one of the former barber shops).

Derr will host a history walk on the canal during the weekend's events. At the time the borough incorporated, Easton was the only city outside of Philadelphia, Allentown was the summer estate of William Allen and Bethlehem was a closed community, open only to Moravians, he said.

The 1819 map shows 11 buildings in town, said Derr, most connected to farming including a gristmill, lime kiln and saw mill. That remained the core of Freemansburg for 50 years. The canal boom led to a 30-year growth period, with about 20 houses added to the town's Main Street by the time of incorporation in 1856. The first 50

years of official Freemansburg relied "entirely" on the canal, said Derr, with some farming co-existing.

According to the 1860 and 1870 census records, studied by Derr, 30 to 40 percent of residents worked on the canal, including three local boat yards that not only repaired canal boats but also built them. At that time, the layout of the town was the Chestnut, Green, New and Main streets area.

When the railroads came in, during the late 1800s, the Lehigh Canal Company had its own rail line (1864) that pre-



served the livelihood of many residents while the canal died. By the 1880s, Derr said, the economy of Freemansburg "basically stagnated" and entered a depression.

Many residents then started to work for Northampton Iron and Bethlehem Iron. But, "by the turn of the century, the town basically made another switch," Derr said. As steel came into modern construction, Bethlehem Iron became Bethlehem Steel (the giant on the other side of the Lehigh River) and emerged as the "only survivor" of the change to steel.

Bethlehem Steel built housing for workers in town, the whole Juniata to Clearfield streets neighborhood. During World War I, Freemansburg depended on The Steel.

Now, an estimated one-quarter of buildings within town limits are new residences. The population has jumped 60 to 70 percent over numbers from a decade ago.

Angel R. Ackerman serves as managing editor for The Lehigh Valley News Group and editor of The Bethlehem News. Email her at aackerman@lehighvalleynewsgroup.com.

See 150th events on community calendar inside, page 2.

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If You Go: Events for residents

Sponsored by Freemansburg Parks and Recreation, free for borough residents

■ **FAMILY FUN FESTIVAL:** 3 p.m. Aug. 12, part of the anniversary celebration, Freemansburg Elementary

■ **SENIOR'S SPAGHETTI DINNER:** 4 to 6 p.m., Sept. 9, register at borough hall before Aug. 21

■ **HALLOWEEN PARADE:** 2 p.m., Oct. 7 (rain date Oct. 8)

■ **TRICK OR TREAT & BONFIRE:** trick or treat is 6 to 8 p.m., bonfire follows at Municipal Park.

■ **SKATE NIGHT:** 6 to 8:30 p.m., Nov. 2, register between Oct. 1 and Oct. 23 at borough hall. Free, including skate rental.

■ **CHILDREN'S CHRISTMAS PARTY:** 2 p.m., Dec. 2, borough hall, register between Oct. 15 and Nov. 13.

■ **TREE LIGHTING:** 6 p.m., Dec. 2, Main Street Gateway Park.



A fallen marker in the Monroe Street cemetery points toward Freemansburg's downtown. Below, Christ Lutheran Church stands at the corner of Monroe and Main streets.



"Hopefully, the new residents can find out what their community is all about."

— Charles Derr



In preparation for the upcoming sesquicentennial, Freemansburg Mayor Gerald Yob (left) talks with Andrew Guidon and Charles Derr as they look at Derr's old photos of town.

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