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Contact:

Special Collections, University of Delaware Library
181 South College Avenue
Newark, DE 19717-5267
302.831.2229 / 302.831.1046 (fax)
<http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec>
askspecref@winsor.lib.udel.edu

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An Interview With Mr. George Cable
A Resident Of New Castle, Delaware
Interviewed By Jonathan Andress
August 15, 1977

Transcribed By Jonathan Andress
Typed By Patricia Leventry
August 20, 1977

Q. This tape is part of the Oral History Project of the University of Delaware. My name is Jonathan Andress and I am speaking with Mr. George Cable, a long time resident of New Castle, Delaware. Mr. Cable, when and where were you born and how long have you lived in New Castle?

A. I was born in Wilmington, Delaware in 1900, March 27, in Wilmington. I came to New Castle after being in Jersey for a long time. I came over here on September 1, 1921.

Q. How long has your family lived in New Castle and just how did they come to New Castle?

A. Since '21, my father was a newspaper reporter and came over here and got the job writing the New Castle column and so he had to live here to do it so we moved here.

Q. What paper was that?

A. That was the Evening Journal. Then after the Evening Journal and Every Evening went together he wrote the column for each of them. But when he was just writing for the Journal he used to have a job over in Wilmington where he went to the different lodges, different boards and different organizations over there and got their news. But then after the papers went together then all he did was write the news here but we still lived here.

Q. So he wrote columns about different places in New Castle and around town?

A. Personal items and everything, news of all the organizations the Board of Water and Light, City Council and all that. He wrote these columns, that's how we came over here, in 1921 is when he started. He died in 1937, January 9.

Q. Could you describe a little bit of what you did for a living?

A. Well I worked at Duponts for forty years. I was in the chemical work, I was a chemist. I worked in various places over there, in the Napthalene Area, in the Jackson Lab. The White Products Area first before I went to Jackson Lab. Three areas over there I worked in for a total of forty years.

Q. You mentioned working at the powder works. Do you remember anything about that?

A. That was when I was going to high school. I was just down there for a month each summer. I was a mail boy delivering mail the first year. I'd ride a bicycle around delivering mail. Then the second year I worked in the Powder Mine office as an office boy in there gathering up documents, charts, log sheets and stuff like that. I was only there about a month each time. Then when I graduated from high school in 1918 I went to work for the government in the Ordinance Department Laboratory Plant 3. We analyzed powder and tested powder and things. I was there for about ten months and then got ~~laid~~ off when the war was over. Later I got a job at Tech Lab and I worked there in the paper lab. Then I decided to go to school so I quit and went to Penn. I went up there and then I came back and worked in the Napthalene Area for a time and then I went back to school. I missed a year of school between my freshman and sophomore year, I missed a year. And then the next year I missed a year another the last two years I took together. I worked mostly in the Napthalene Area and in the lab, testing, laboratory work and stuff. Then after I graduated I was supervisor of the Reducer House, for eight and a half years, that's the Napthalene Area. Then I was transferred over to the White Products Area where they made textile chemicals for water-proofing, different wetting agents and things for textiles. I was there for twelve years, I guess, then I went to Tech Lab. I went to Jackson Lab in the patents making patent searches, abstracting patents and writing and making patent searches.

Q. Did many people that lived in New Castle work over in Jersey in the plants?

A. Oh yes, there were a lot of people that went over on the boat. That was when the ferry was running, it started in 1925 and we always went over there together on the boat. We talked and had a half hour or twenty minute trip over there. Everybody got together and were talking, friendly and all that then after the bridge started we missed that.

I retired from the Chambers Works in 1963, the last of September 1963, after forty years service.

Q. Could you describe a little bit about the Powder Works?

A. Well there was a tremendous powder works over there during the First World War when we came from North Jersey. I remember my father was a school teacher. We came down to Carneys Point and he got a job at the powder works. Then there was a big expansion of the powder works. There were three plants over there that made a tremendous amount of powder. They had people come in from all over the country to work there. There was the biggest expansion from the small town of Penns Grove until they built the Carneys Point plant. They built the buildings, the homes there for the people, they had Carneys Point Village. The factory extended from where

Plant One is now clear down almost to the Chambers Works. There were three powder plants, each one making smokeless powder for use of the government. The Navy and Army used all kinds of powder. Thousands of people, they had barracks over there for the people to sleep in. Then people got rooms up in Carneys Point and Penns Grove. People would use the beds twice a day. One would sleep in the daytime, one would sleep at night. When one man would go to work another man would crawl in to go to sleep. The place was just overrun with people. Most of them didn't have their families right at first but then they brought their families later and they built these houses. They had these village houses that they rented to the employees. There were different types of places. Where we lived there was a two story, apartments they called them, two story houses six in a row, six two story houses fastened together. We lived in one of them. They had the same thing with one story houses for cheaper rent. They had all kinds of stuff. They had a movie down there where Plant Three was. A big Y.M.C.A. and everything. Later they hired women down there to work in the powder and they had barracks just for the women, women's dormitories. These girls had their special bloomer uniforms, bloomer girls. They worked there to make powder, worked in the cutting house and different places around the powder plant. It was a tremendous place. They had several fires there where some of the buildings blew up. It was very dangerous of course but they were quite fortunate. They didn't have it as bad as you might think. There were only just a few real bad accidents, not too many people killed. They had safety chutes on the top of the buildings where the people could jump when they saw the fire coming. It was quite a place.

They had one explosion down there, I think it was a blending tower. Three blending towers, I think, went up in succession. I was sitting on my grandfather's front porch on Main Street in Penns Grove and the whole street lit up when the flames shot sky high. Then immediately three more went off. It was blending towers that caught fire. I don't know how many were killed but I don't think it was very many if any, probably some but I don't know. I know one horse was killed in one of those because I saw the dead horse out there. It got burned in the fire. They had several of those things but not too many considering the tremendous amount of powder they made. I think they made a million pounds a day or something like that, no more than that I guess, I don't know how much they made. That's on record somewhere. But the powder they made was a tremendous amount, smokeless powder.

Q. Mr. Cable do you remember the house that you first came to when you first came to New Castle?

A. We came to 26 the Strand. We lived there for fifteen years, but when we first went there was no electric in the

house and my father had an outlet put to the door with a meter and we ran extension cords from there to where we wanted electric. Except one wire was run secretly back to the refrigerator in the kitchen and I hooked that up. It was illegal to do it I guess but I got it done. The statute of limitations, I hope, will take care of that. Everywhere else we just had the wires. It was piped for gas. We had gas lights in the house and there was water in the house. There was a toilet in the house that ran to the old well in the back that was used as a septic tank. There was an outhouse in the back yard but it hadn't been used and I tore the seat out of that and fixed it for a place to store the lawn mower. This house was one room wide but went on back for several rooms. The front room evidently had been added in years past to the front. Then behind that was another room and behind that another room and then the shed out behind that. So it was only one room wide all the way and there were fireplaces in most of the rooms. It was a real old house, no central heating. We had a heatroller in the front room and a _____ rang back in the kitchen. My sister had a little oil stove up in her bedroom. Outside of that we didn't have _____. Of course you'd freeze in the room in the wintertime, everything would freeze up. It was not a very desirable house. It was damp and very little light, just what came in from an alley. One side was against another house and the other side had an alley between the house next door, 24 the Strand. There was an alley between us and 24. We didn't get much light and the place was pretty well run down. I think it was offered to us at one time for sixteen hundred dollars but I understood a few months ago it was sold. I understand for eighty-eight thousand but I don't know. There's been a lot done to it. The Presbyterian Church bought it, a couple of times I guess sold it and then bought it back for a higher price. Then they tore the wall out between the front room and the dining room. The second room had a thick brick wall, eighteen inches thick. They tore that out and put a steel beam across and used it for a Sunday school. They had Sunday school in there for awhile but then they sold it and it's been since remodeled and everything done over and fixed up in first class shape. It's now a very valuable building on the Strand which is supposed to be a very desirable place to live in New Castle.

Q. Mr. Cable, could you describe generally how the physical appearance of New Castle has changed? Can you remember the ferry and the trollies and things like that?

A. Yes, I remember the trollies. The trollies went from Wilmington down to Delaware City and came through here. There was a bridge over the tracks at the Baldton, a high bridge where they went up over the railroad. It wasn't a great crossing then, the trolley had to go over the railroad. It was a very high bridge and came down and came on into

New Castle. It came up Delaware Street and they had cobblestone, Belgian Block I think between the bricks but that's all been torn up. They discontinued the trollies. Then there was a track down here for a freight line that was separate. It didn't have anything to do with the trollies. I remember it went across the green, across the battery down to the wharf where Mr. Deakyne's father, I forget his first name. Mr. Deakyne's father had a coal yard down there and sold coal. The train went down there to bring the coal to his place. But that's all gone. The track used to cross Forth Street down here and go across South Street. It wasn't used very much, just to deliver coal down there that's about all. Previously there had been all kinds of tracks down there but that's before my time. They had a turntable and everything else down there, but I don't know anything about that.

Q. Do you remember people fishing off the Delaware and fixing nets and things?

A. I remember some of it. I wasn't into that too much but I know they did have fishermen that went from here and Pennsville and Penns Grove and they all fished the river for shad and sturgeon. I think I've seen the sturgeon down here on the Delaware Street wharf. But I know at Penns Grove they use to catch a lot of sturgeon and shad. A lot of fishermen went out from here but I was never into that at all. But I have seen them. They'd hang their nets up down here to dry and to mend their nets. They had their boats up on the battery. They put them there during the winter and get them out and fix them up and take them out in the spring and fish.

Q. Do you remember people swimming in the Delaware at all?

A. Oh yes, they use to bathe down there at Battery Park in the river until it got too contaminated. They ordered that nobody was allowed to swim there anymore. That was before, a long time ago. They use to bathe down there all the time.

Q. Can you remember anything about the ferry?

A. Yes, I remember when the ferry started. It was the White Line, it started, that's a long story. The White Line, they decided to start a ferry here and they organized a company and they called it the New Castle-Pennsville Ferry Company. It was commonly called the White Line, they painted the boats white. They had the New Castle and the Pennsville as the two names of the boats. They had changed the names to that. I don't know what they were before, Manatour or something I don't know what it was. They brought them down from New York and had the ferries here. They started up Labor Day in 1925. I remember taking tickets on the other side. These boats ran for a short time and the Wilson Line, from Penns Grove,

bought a piece of property further north a little ways at the foot of Chestnut Street. Yes that's where it was, Chestnut Street. They put a ferry in down there and they were in competition. It was quite a battle to see who got the traffic, especially on the other side where the two were close together. I remember one forth of July they were over there and they had policemen down there trying to handle the crowds. All the kids were hollering to try to get them to go on the White Line. Everybody seemed to be in favor of the White Line. They were throwing firecrackers at them and anybody that would start on the Wilson Line, everybody would boo them and yell at them and the guys would stop and they wouldn't go on the Wilson Line, they wanted to go on the White Line. If somebody else behind him wanted to go the policeman wouldn't let him, he'd say, "You've got to get in line and wait until this guy goes." So you'd go on the White Line and they sort of got everybody on the White Line. Well it was quite a battle for a long time but then finally they decided it was too much so the White Line finally decided to go in with the Wilson and so they combined and the two of them ran together all under one management. They did away with all that competition.

Q. You mentioned the traffic was backed up far.

A. The traffic was backed up over in Jersey all the way up the roads for miles. The same way here in New Castle, you couldn't get across Chestnut Street the traffic was so bad. If somebody from here wanted to go over you had to try to get in line. If the cop would let you in you could get on. If you couldn't, when I went to work I would have to try to get in the line if the cop would let me in. He'd try to let the local people in but there was still a lot of competition to get to the ferry. They ran several ferries across there, they had different ones. They had a diesel driven ferry and several steam ferries. I don't know how many different ferries they had, but they use to run every twenty minutes. In wintertime it was very bad. The ice would get in the river and they couldn't get in the slips and they'd get stuck out in the river. I guess sometimes they were out there quite a while trying to get in. I went to work one day and they couldn't get the ferry in to get me and I never did get to work that day I don't think, unless it was way late, maybe I did, got over there about noon. They just couldn't get the ferries in. The place would be full of ice. Of course the big steamers coming up and down the river were quite a hazard too. The captain would have to watch out and go behind them and then you'd get the roll from them and the boats would rock pretty bad. There was quite a lot of trouble but they made a lot of money. They were really paid off by the ferries but then they decided to put the bridge across and do away with the ferries. The bridge company or somebody, whoever it

was, bought the ferries and did away with them and wouldn't let them run anymore. So then we used the bridge and I use to drive to work over the bridge, still did until I quit in 1963.

Q. Do you remember the pumps around town, the sewage and when electricity was put in?

A. Electricity was put in a long time ago, I don't know, it was here when we came here. There was electricity in the city. I don't know when, but they put the sewer in just after we got here. I remember them digging up the Strand and putting the sewer pipes in. Before that, the sewer, the water would run from the bathtubs across the street and into the gutter and run down the gutter, and most of them, the kitchen sink and things like that. Of course the toilet flushed into a septic tank or an old well that had been abandoned. They had pumps on the streets. There was one in front of Mr. Platt's store, near Second and Delaware and there was one on Chestnut Street, I remember. I just remember those two but I guess there were several around. Everybody had a pump out front. Of course it was right alongside the gutter where it could be contaminated very easily. I think Dr. Booker was one of the main ones that really tried to put a stop to it. I think he finally got them all eliminated and made everybody use the city water.

Q. Could you describe Saturday night?

A. Oh that was just a joke. Everybody would say on Saturday night you could tell when people had a bath. The water would run across the sidewalk and into the gutter. A lot of the drainage went right across the sidewalk rather than under it. Some of them had pipes under it. Ours at the Strand had a pipe under it and ours here had a pipe under it, under the sidewalk. But many of them went right across the sidewalk. That was just a joke about Saturday night baths.

Q. Mr. Cable you've been involved with researching the history of the First Baptist Church in New Castle. I wonder if you could tell a little bit about the beginning of the church and how it started?

A. Well it started as a Sunday school back in the early days. There was a woman by the name of Mrs. Jonathan George who was very much interested in having a Baptist church here. The Rev. MacMackin came to town from over across in Salem. He came over in a boat most of the time. He and several other Baptists got together and decided that they would organize a church. They first started with a Sunday school on January 16, 1876. They held the Sunday school and then held a preaching service after that. Then finally the group got

together and organized a Baptist church. On September 30, 1876 fourteen Baptists who had obtained their letters from their respective churches met and organized an independent Baptist church. Some of these had been converted under the teaching of Rev. MacMackin and had joined churches in Wilmington and elsewhere. Fourteen members met that night and organized the church. Rev. MacMackin was the first pastor and it continued as a small church from then until the time of pastor Baughman and then they expanded and became a bigger church. Through visitation and getting other members to join they got a larger church. That's when they built the church out at Basin Road and Frenchtown Turnpike. From then on it's been a growing church.

Q. Do you remember the church when you first came and how many people attended?

A. Well, I don't know. It wasn't very many. It was just a small church. The Sunday school probably ran a hundred or so and the church services probably less than that. It just stayed a small church and it was mostly relatives, everybody was related to somebody else. Their families, they brought in different members of their family. It wasn't really going out and getting people from outside the town or anything. It was just mostly people who were related to each other. Different groups and different families brought their friends in and their relatives. The children, they'd bring their children in for Sunday school and their grandchildren and they'd finally join the church. It just never really grew, it was a small church back in those days.

Q. You mentioned that the churches use to meet together on Thanksgiving.

A. Yes, they use to hold joint meetings in the various churches. One preacher would preach in the other preacher's church. All the churches in town would gather together, the colored churches and the white churches, except the Episcopal church which wasn't allowed on account of the rules of their church to have other preachers in their church. They couldn't join in with it but the rest of use all joined together and we had a Thanksgiving service. Then every Easter for quite awhile they had morning Easter sunrise services down on the wharf and everybody came there. At the Easter sunrise service they had different preachers and had a short service down there on the Delaware Street wharf.

Q. Do you remember when the Baptist church had revival meetings and drew fairly well know speakers?

A. Yes, we had a lot of speakers arranged ahead for this one,

well we had several revivals. But this one particular one was called Back to the Bible Week. We had a week of services and a different man spoke each week, each night there were various speakers; Rev. Percy Crawford, Schuyler English, Earl T. McPherson, Robert Fraser, Harold Samson Laird, George A. Palmer, William A. Mierop, Anthony Zeoli, and they spoke different nights. We had a revival each night during the week.

Q. You mentioned the blackout.

A. It was during the Second World War and it was during the time when they had the blackout. The whistle blew and we had to put out the lights one night during the service. The preacher kept on preaching and we had to wait until we got the "all clear" before we could turn on the lights.

Q. Thank you Mr. Cable, I appreciate anything you had to say about New Castle.

A. You're very welcome, I hope I've added something but I don't know if it's of any value or not.