

# In the Spotlight

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## LIVING HISTORY



by Gene  
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### A trolley, a dance hall and an artist

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Lenape Station circa 1900s, originally built as Sagerville station. Postcard courtesy Becky Rogers



Lenape Dance Hall circa 1900s, courtesy Chester County Historical Society.

If you grew up in Pocopson Township, you were near the Brandywine River which has attracted people for generations. Some features of the landscape along the river may be familiar to old-timers who called the area home going back decades. The West Chester Street Railway, the Lenape Dance Pavilion and Lenape Park are three that come to mind, features which are all nearly gone, but which hold important places in the heritage of the region.

During the 1890s, the West Chester Street Railway developed land in the township along the eastern shore of the Brandywine which had previously supported a grist mill and a picnic area. Previously known as Sagerville, the area came to be called Lenape with the addition of the Post Office of that name. The company built an amusement facility—Lenape Park—to promote ridership on the trolley line which ran there from West Chester.

According to author Phyllis Recca, curator of an exhibit at the Chadds Ford Historical Society featuring the park, the site offered amusement rides and a boardwalk, as well as swimming and canoeing. Around the same time, the trolley company constructed a dance pavilion on the western bank next to Lenape Station, which offered service on the trol-

ley and the Wilmington and Northern railroad. The park attracted large crowds, but by the early 1920s it was sold to the Gibney family. The railway retained ownership of the dance pavilion. The trolley continued to be in frequent use by travelers, but with the advent of the automobile, ridership waned. It made its last run to Lenape Station in November 1929.

After the trolley stopped running, John Gibney purchased the dance hall to create a vibrant entertainment site. He succeeded—events were held there on weekdays and Saturdays, promoted along with advertisements for Lenape Park. According to Recca, young people enjoyed “committee dances” on Friday nights, while big band dances attracted adults on both Wednesdays and Saturdays. Gibney had luck for a while; the Park and the pavilion were quite popular, but with the onset of the Great Depression, revenues dried up. By 1937, Gibney gave up on

the dance hall and later sold it to T. Frank Walsh. Walsh was a loner, described by some as a free spirit despite having a college education and a previous career as a CPA. He resided in the dance hall, which had few amenities, living a meager existence, using a wood-burning stove and a crude toilet which emptied into the river nearby.

Children loved to visit Walsh in his dance hall home. They would sometimes chop wood or help paint the roof. He mesmerized them with stories of local Indians, poetry and Greek mythology. Walsh survived by repairing canoes for Gibney; he collected old broken paddles, repainting them and giving them names. Walsh loved the back-to-nature lifestyle. He named the dance hall the Aeolian Place, after Aeolus, the Greek god of the wind. Walsh remained there until his death in 1968.

Another free spirit, artist Tom Bostelle purchased the dance hall following

Walsh’s death. The pavilion became his home and studio; he called it the Aeolian Palace Gallery. Bostelle never upgraded the building, living there in a bohemian lifestyle. His work “Lenape Jesus” is considered a local classic. It is now in the collection of the Brandywine River Museum of Art. After initially painting portraits, including one of fellow artist Horace Pippin (currently in the National Portrait Gallery), Bostelle became more avant-garde, creating shadowy images of his subjects. One of his paintings—on the wall inside the pavilion—displays a mysterious likeness of a person walking upstairs away from the viewer toward an eerie figure looking down. He also created numerous metal silhouette sculptures of various characters which he displayed along the riverbank, an unusual “gathering” for people to

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AND ON  
Holiday Afternoons and Evenings  
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“Lucky Number” Dance on Wednesday Evenings.  
Special Motor Coaches from CHESTER and WILMINGTON will be run to the Pavilion Wednesday and Saturday Evenings. Leave Wilmington, 517 Shipley Street, and Chester, 6th and Spruce Streets, at 7:15 P. M. (Daylight Time). Returning, leave Lenape, 11:30 P. M.  
The Pavilion, now greatly improved with shady porches fanned by cooling breezes from the Brandywine, can be had for private dances and other social affairs.  
Make your reservations early. Write for information.  
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Kelly, Cooke & Company, Engineers  
Operating Managers  
West Chester, Pa. Phone 173

Dance Hall advertisement, courtesy Delaware County Daily Times June 10, 1924.

see. Tom Bostelle passed away in 2005.

Bostelle’s former home sat vacant for years. A private party purchased the building with intentions of renovation, but nothing was ever done. The pavilion was subject to the vagaries of nature; travelers could see the structure continually deteriorating. Brandywine floodwaters broke down its foundation, as they had done to structures at the nearby Lenape Park (renamed Brandywine Picnic Park). The Park was closed in 2019. In September 2021, in a final blow to the area, extreme flooding along the Brandywine caused the dance hall to collapse, its

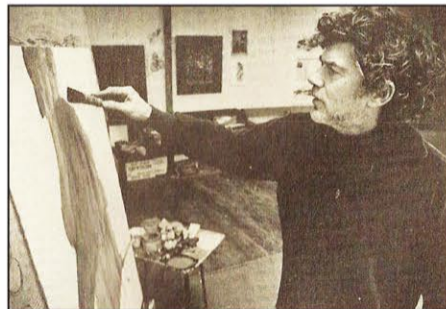
rickety shell barely standing above the ground. The Park on the eastern bank was stripped of most structures.

The trolley line has disappeared, and one can only see the tracks of the Wilmington and Northern railroad. The Park and dance pavilion have largely been destroyed, leaving only memories of their former “lives” bringing pleasure to thousands. Today you can view vestiges of what was once a vibrant place... and if you listen closely, when the wind blows, you can almost hear the joyous shouts of visitors from days gone by...

Gene Pisasale is an historian, author and lecturer based in Kennett Square. His ten books focus on the history of the Chester County and Philadelphia area. His latest book is “Forgotten Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania and Delaware in the American Revolution.” His books are available on his website at [www.GenePisasale.com](http://www.GenePisasale.com) and on [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com). Gene can be reached via e-mail at [Gene@GenePisasale.com](mailto:Gene@GenePisasale.com).



Painting by Tom Bostelle inside Dance Hall.



Tom Bostelle circa 1977, courtesy Aeolian Palace Gallery brochure.



Lenape Dance Hall abandoned, circa 2016.



Photograph of T. Frank Walsh, courtesy Edward Pettit.



Collapsed Dance Hall, circa September 2021.