

# American Profile

Celebrating Hometown Life

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"You can relax for a while now, Jasper. I'll let you know when it's time to start being good again."  
by *Tom Milner*

## Other Regions

## A Stop on History's Road

by *Sheri Rehwoldt*

A half mile offshore from Delaware City (pop, 1,453), where the Delaware River begins widening into the bay, is Pea Patch Island—the site of a Union fortress that housed 13,000 Confederate prisoners during the Civil War. Each year Fort Delaware's ramparts, passageways, and living-history demonstrations—together with the herons, egrets, and ibis that nest in the island's marshes—attract some 30,000 visitors. All of them, catching the ferry to the island, pass through Delaware City.



Delaware City looks with pride on its rich past and historic architecture.

*Adele Starr*

The town wants them to stay awhile, and the effort to get them to do that—headed up by Town Manager Paul Morrill—has sparked something of an architectural renaissance in Delaware City.

It's a renaissance grounded in the town's legacy. In 1826, the Newbold family drew plans for Delaware City, fully expecting it to rival Philadelphia in commerce, situated as it was at the eastern terminus of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal. But the town's commercial shipping boom ended when the canal entrance was realigned south of the town in 1927.

Now, some 250 historic structures, including impressive Federal and Queen Anne-style homes in varying stages of renovation, are beginning again to speak of Delaware City's former prosperity. With \$4 million in state grants for waterfront improvements, downtown revitalization in hand, and lots of local enthusiasm, Morrill is working to position Delaware City as a major tourist destination. A

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million dollars already has been spent updating the waterfront area. Most tourists take little notice of the new floodwall, bulkhead, landscaping, and lighting, but as the historical business district undergoes a facelift, new businesses will entice them to shop, feast, and stroll the area.

Retaining Delaware City's small-town charm is equally important. "Even though we want everything to get fixed up," says Morrill, "we're not looking to become gentrified."

Morrill has hired a promotion manager to attract businesses that will add to the town's heritage. A blacksmith will soon arrive, as will a Shaker furniture builder and an antique dealer. Several new stores already are open for business.

Sunny and Maurice Whitlock own Grand Illusions, a clothing company specializing in reproductions of mid-19th century and Civil War uniforms. A Confederate frock coat, based on an original worn by a Fort Delaware prisoner, can be purchased in the storefront they recently opened on Clinton Street. Sunny and Maurice live just across the street in an 1830s brick townhouse. Most of their revenue comes from their website and their contacts with Hollywood film studios seeking accurate period costumes, but they're hoping to expand on that.

"We have another shop in Gettysburg, but we brought our business back here because of the renovation," Sunny says. "For a lot of years we've been a little dot on the map on the way to the beach. It's a shame it's taken so long to get noticed. We're hoping we develop a walk-in business."

Rebecca Keifer can be found in her new retail space on Saturday mornings. Keifer has been producing homemade soaps since 1994, under the Delaware City Soap Co. label. Her signature bar is "Peach Blossom," a recollection of the town's heyday as a nationwide peach producer. In 1845, Delaware City had more than 110,000 peach trees, but orchards were decimated by blight 40 years later.

"Delaware City has a rich history, and when I make soap, I feel a real connection to the past," Keifer says.

Residents are cautiously optimistic that commerce may yet give the town—already so rich in history—a more vigorous economy. But they also want to keep feeling at home.

"There's a fine line between taking care of the residents and the visitors," says Elaine Derrickson, 61, a lifelong resident and historian at Delaware City's new Port of History Center. "I just hope we can be a great place to live and a great place to visit, so it's a nice, pleasant place for everyone."

***Sheri Rehwoldt is a freelance writer in Wilmington, Del.***

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