

Delanco's Historic Riverfronts

By Peter Fritz

For a village like Delanco, nestled between the Delaware River and the Rancocas Creek, it was natural for its early residents to be tied to life on the water. From early times, local watermen netted shad and sturgeon, hunted ducks, geese, rail and reed birds, and built the specialized small craft that made these activities possible. Delanco's Historic Preservation Advisory Board is seeking information on this chapter and we need your help.



A wooden tugboat and a two-masted yawl sitting at a wharf at the foot of Poplar Street. The PRR trestle bridge is visible in background. Can anyone name these vessels or help us date this photo?

Transportation on the Delaware and Rancocas

We know that as early as 1787, regular steamboat service on the Delaware between Philadelphia and Burlington City was attempted by inventor John Fitch. It was not commercially successful and lasted less than a year. Others followed, and in 1823 regular steamboat service was established between Philadelphia and Lumberton and Mount Holly by way of the Rancocas Creek, with stops for passengers and freight at the many wharfs in between.



Steamboat Admiral of the VanSciver Freight Line is shown on the Rancocas Creek near the foot of Buttonwood Street in Delanco. Regular steamboat service between Philadelphia and Mount Holly began on the Rancocas in 1823 and continued well into the 1900s.

One such wharf, Wallace's Landing, was located at what would later become Delanco. Can anyone help us identify Wallace? In 1850 a fine deepwater crib and rubble wharf was built at the foot of Union Avenue on the Delaware River. It was originally referred to as Parson's Wharf for the retired dentist who operated a nearby boardinghouse on Union Avenue.

Known wharves and landings in the Delanco area

Ca. 1823	Wallace's Landing	Rancocas at Burlington Avenue?
Unknown	Poplar Street Wharf	Rancocas at Poplar Street
Ca. 1851	Bechtold's Wharf	Rancocas at Pavilion Avenue
1850 - 1969	Parson's Wharf	Delaware at Union Avenue



The Delaware River steamboat John A. Warner is shown discharging passengers at the Union Avenue Wharf in Delanco. The ship was later renamed the Burlington. This photo is probably from the 1890s.

Shipyards and boatyards of Delanco

We know from early maps that most boatyard activity was located on the Rancocas between the railroad bridge (built in 1834) and the cart bridge (built in 1870). Richard F. Wilmerton established his sawmill about 1848, and materials became readily available to support the industry. Nathan S. Crane established a shipyard at the foot of Buttonwood St. about 1854. Crane later bought the sawmill operation from Wilmerton.

Known boatyards of Delanco and vicinity

1854	Crane shipyard	Buttonwood
Ca. 1895	Hartley boatbuilder	Buttonwood
Early 1900s	Sam Borel boatbuilder	Ash?
Ca. 1913	L.D. Steel Shipbuilding	Poplar
1922 -1939	Rancocas Construction Co.	Poplar
1919	Delanco Shipbuilding Co.	Bet. Ash and Poplar
1939 – 1941	Robins Shipbuilding & Welding	Poplar
Before 1958	Lakeman Boat Company	Orchard/Ash
Ca. 1958	Harry Wolf Shipbuilding	Unknown



Delanco was known for its sturdy workboats and sleek pleasure craft. This undated photo of a wood-framed ship is shown at the Poplar Street yard. It is probably one of many tugboats produced there in the 1920s and 30s. The Ash Street home of industrialist Andrew J. Ridgway appears in the background to the left.

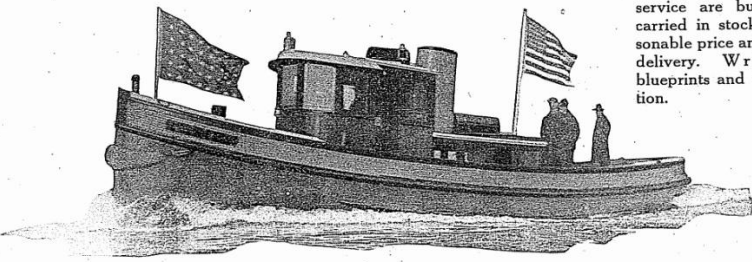
STANDARDIZED MOTOR TUGS

Designed by J. Murray Watts, N. A.

BUILT BY

DELANCO SHIPBUILDING CO., Inc.

DELANCO, N. J.



These sturdy tugs framed of oak for hard service are built and carried in stock. Reasonable price and quick delivery. Write for blueprints and description.

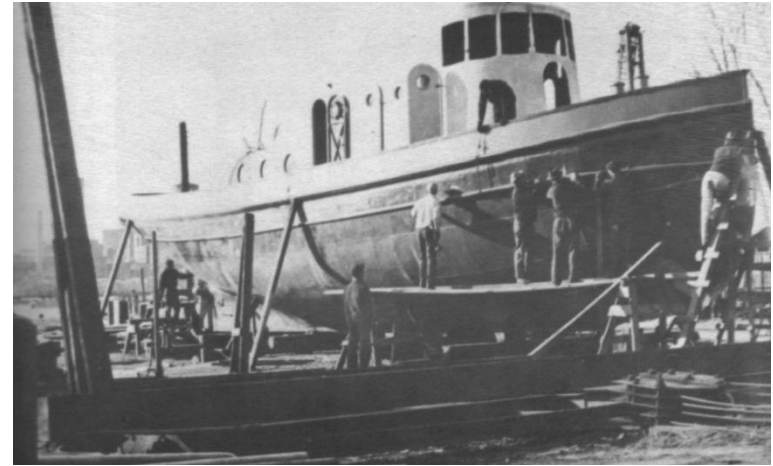
This magazine advertisement for Delanco-built tugs dates from 1922.

Early Delanco Business Directories tell us Samuel Seeds shipbuilding was operating by 1876, followed by George Hartley by 1895. Sam Borel's Boatyard appears in the early 1900s. In 1913, a young man named Louis D. Steel, son of industrialist Thomas C. Steel, began building pleasure boats on Rancocas Avenue near the foot of Poplar Street. He took on several partners and reorganized as Rancocas Construction Co. in 1922.



Two boys share a lunch while sitting on the massive carriage on Delanco's largest shipway. The first home of Thomas C. Steel, located on the Poplar Street Wharf is shown in the background. Can anyone identify this wooden tug or the names of the children?

Delanco Shipbuilding Co. was in operation by 1919. Then between 1939 and 1941 Edmond E. Robins Shipbuilding and Welding Co. was established between Ash and Poplar Street, building steel-hulled ships for military use. During WWII, the large loft of the former Ridgway Shoe Factory at the foot of Ash Street was used to replicate patterns for U.S. Navy Patrol Torpedo Boats; making a useful contribution to the war effort.



The tugboat Emma R, named for Mrs. Robins is shown in its finishing stages at Robins Shipyard in 1941. Delanco was particularly known for production of seagoing tugs that were exported to England, the Netherlands, South America, and the Caribbean.



Two welders at work on a steel-framed ship under construction at Robins Shipyard sometime between 1939 and 1941.

Special thanks to the Daniels and Steel families, formerly of Delanco, and the Robins family of Riverside for providing many of these photographs to the Delanco town archive for preservation. Thanks also to Jay Cohen of Delanco and the Riverside Historic Society for research. Thanks to Paul Schopp for his review and suggestions.



A steel ship, probably the 65-foot, 60-ton US Army Ferry Maj. Carroll Edgar, under construction at Robins Shipbuilding in Delanco. It was launched September 9, 1941 and put into service at Ft. Slocum, NY.

Prior to 1958, the Lakeman Boat Company was established off Rancocas Avenue and Orchard. It then moved to the foot of Ash Street at Rancocas. It is not yet clear if Lakeman was a broker or a builder. By 1958 Harry Wolf Shipbuilding was constructing tugboats for service on the Delaware River and beyond. In its heyday Delanco's boatbuilding industry had several marine railways. The largest, capable of hauling ships of 65 feet of length and a draft of five feet, is still located at the yard at the foot of Poplar Street.

A 1920's news article announced a drydock capable of handling ships of 120 feet and a houseboat factory were planned. But we have no evidence they were ever built.

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The Delanco Historic Preservation Advisory Board asks anyone who has additional information on any of these companies to contact us. We have displayed material on Delanco's Historic Shipyards in the past. If you have additional photos, hand tools, ship models or other artifacts to lend or donate for future exhibits, please let us know. We can be reached by email at: PFritz5976@aol.com or by phone at 609-760-7746.

Peter Fritz is Chair of the Delanco Historic Preservation Advisory Board.

March 10, 1922
MOTOR BOAT
41

Just the boat you've had in mind

**Standardized production has made it a reality
—and priced it to fit nearly every pocket.**

How many times have you planned, in your mind, a cruiser just like this—and wondered why some one did not supply it at a price within reason?

Well, here's the boat you've dreamed of—the "Delanco 27"—complete at \$1500.

No digging down for extras.

Consider this special equipment on each one of these V-bottom "Delanco 27" Cruisers—

This V-bottom "Delanco 27" is 27' x 8' 6" x 2' 8". Main cabin 6 ft. 8 in. long and forward is a roomy toilet. The after end of the raised deck structure has a galley 3 ft. 4 in. long and the width of the boat. There is 5 ft. 8 in. head-room under the cabin in the cabin. The cockpit is 9 ft. 8 in. long. 16 h.p. four cylinder Kernath power unit drives the boat, has high tension magnets and impulse coupling, reverse gear, etc. The gasoline tank is of 32 gal. capacity.

THE DELANCO SHIP BUILDING CO., INC.
At Delanco New Jersey





\$1500

for this cruiser—complete
in every detail.



A Boat without
A Competitor



A 1922 magazine advertisement for a 27-foot motor yacht selling for the princely sum of \$1,500. The cost rose later in the year to \$1,800. This advertisement was provided by Jay Cohen.

Produced by Delanco Historic Preservation Advisory Board
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