

Changes in Topography and Geography in Two Hundred Fifty Years

In the more than two hundred and fifty years since Abraham Allee built the Allee House there have been some significant changes in geography and topology on the lands surrounding the site, even though looking out from the house today the view might seem similar to that in 1754, with cultivated fields, woods, and, in the distance, tidal marshes. While agricultural methods have changed from those practiced in the eighteenth century, the crops of wheat, corn, and other grains remain the same as those grown by Abraham Allee after he inherited the property from his father in 1718 and changed the plantation from tobacco to grain production.

When Abraham built his house in 1753, there was a small stream a short distance from the north side of the house. This stream was small, but large enough to carry a flat-bottomed boat. That small stream flowed into Duck Creek, and whether you turned left or right, Duck Creek would lead you to Delaware River or to Delaware Bay. Abraham Allee, or probably his slaves, could load corn, wheat, and other grains grown on his plantation into small boats, pole the boats downstream to Duck Creek, and then load the cargo onto larger vessels that could sail up Duck Creek to the Thoroughfare. The Thoroughfare was a canal dug between the northern end of Duck Creek and Delaware River in 1682 and now called the Smyrna River. After sailing through the Thoroughfare to the Delaware River, Philadelphia became an easy up-river destination for marketing the plantation's grains. If instead the boats turned south, they could sail down Duck Creek to the Leipsic River (Abraham called it the Dona River) and Delaware Bay.

In the eighteenth century, streams, creeks, and rivers were the highways in the Delaware colony. Today that small stream at the Allee House is only a ditch, a slight depression marked by a row of trees. Like most of the small streams in the region, it has been filled with silt caused by erosion from clearing the forests and cultivating agricultural fields. The same has occurred in even larger bodies of water. Many large creeks and rivers in tidewater Delaware, once a navigable transportation system, have been reduced to shallow, slow-moving streams.

Although not directly affecting the Allee House, Duck Creek and Bombay Hook Island also were involved in another change, this one more dramatic. Hurricanes were not uncommon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the one in 1878 was not unusual. Local accounts reported winds of only seventy-two miles per hour as it churned up the Delaware Bay and River. Yet this storm, which became known as the Great Tidal Wave, was perhaps the worst ever to hit this localized area of the Bay and its shoreline.

Before 1878, Bombay Hook Island extended from the Smyrna River in the north to the Leipsic River on the south, separated from the mainland by Duck Creek on the west. The island was a quite different place then. The Smyrna Railroad crossed Taylor's Gut to a wharf on the bay at Pierson Cove, just north of Woodland Beach. Cruise ships from Philadelphia and Wilmington took passengers to a resort hotel on Fraland Beach, just south of Bombay Hook Point and just north of what became Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge. Roads connected Bombay Hook Island to the mainland, and parts of the island had farms with cultivated fields, meadows for grazing cattle, and orchards, as well as houses and barns. It also had areas of inner marshes, but the bayshore was protected from high tides and storms by dunes and high banks that fronted the bay.

On October 22, 1878, eye witnesses at Fraland Beach reported seeing what they thought was a low cloud or fog bank rolling toward them from the bay, only to realize that it was a wall of water, a huge tsunami-like wave twelve feet high that broke down the banks and protective dunes, smashed the buildings, and demolished everything in its path for as far as two miles inland.

Bombay Hook Island was covered with water. Just north of Pierson Cove there was a major break in the shoreline. The tidal wave flooded the land in that area, creating a large brackish lake, and washed out the channel of Duck Creek. When the waters finally receded, what was left was a tidal salt marsh. Duck Creek that prior to the storm ran from the Smyrna River to the Leipsic River, a distance of about fifteen miles, was cut in half. Its channel disappeared into the newly created marsh that had a web of small guts and tidal steams. Then it emerged again to flow on southward to the Leipsic River as it does today. Bombay Hook Island also was changed. What once had been upland farms washed away, and it became brackish and tidal salt marshes.

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