

Historic Penn Farm History

The New Castle Common

Although the exact date of the New Castle Common's designation is uncertain, it is likely that it existed in some form prior to William Penn's 1682 arrival in Delaware. Under Penn's leadership, a thousand acres of land within New Castle's boundaries was officially set aside to "lie in Common" for the sole use of benefiting New Castle's citizens. The parcel's initial purpose after the 1701 designation was to be a source of lumber and a pasture for the locals' livestock.

In 1760, residents of New Castle recognized the need for a governing body to regulate and protect the Common and its resources, and petitioned the legislature on the matter. As a response to this inquiry, Thomas and Richard Penn, Proprietors of Pennsylvania and the three counties that would become Delaware, chartered the body known as the Trustees of New Castle Common. Consisting of thirteen New Castle citizens, the Trustees hold "perpetual succession and legal power to protect the Common from wrongful usage."¹

In the late eighteenth century, the Common was divided into eleven tenant farms. In response to this change, in 1792 the Trustees created guidelines for tenants to adhere to during the period of their lease. The contract included stipulations that each tenant was to make specified improvements to the farm, including "hedging and ditching" the boundaries, and constructing a brick house "twenty feet by sixteen-two stories high" with a cedar shingle roof.² The Acting Committee of the Trustees was formed to handle all concerns related to tenancy, including collecting rent and writing leases. Additionally, they changed the time commitment of the leases from thirty years to fifteen years, followed by changes to five years and finally one year. The Historic Penn Farm is significant as the last remaining farm of the eleven established in the boundaries of the New Castle Common.

Historic Penn Farm

The first tenant of the Penn Farm was John Crow, an active member of the local and state community who held a lease on the land from 1799 until 1826. Crow, who was invested in other local tenant farming ventures, served as a member of the Trustees and as the proprietor of a successful tavern in New Castle. Under Crow's tenancy, the farm underwent significant improvements as dictated in the terms of his lease. By 1810, it was noted that he had not only furnished the property with apple and peach orchards, hedges, two corn cribs, a stable, a two-story frame house, and a small kitchen. Such updates meant that in the future, the farm could be subleased for an increasingly high sum. By the time of Crow's death in 1828, the brick portion of the house described in the lease had already been constructed.

The farm maintained its operations as a tenant farm for many years, dealing in crops such as hay, wheat, oats, corn, and potatoes. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Mason Alfalfa Company rented over

¹ National register section 8 page 2

seven hundred acres of land across the New Castle Common, including at Penn Farm. Farmers also raised livestock such as cattle and pigs on the farm, and some kept chickens on the property as well. The last tenants, the Joseph Quigley family, took over the property in 1945. After he died, Quigley's wife Elaine operated the property in his stead.

Delaware Greenways, the twenty-second tenant of Penn Farm, acts in a managerial role to oversee the farm's continued growth and development. As an entity, the organization leases acreage to individuals and groups, including William Penn High School's Agriculture and Culinary program, Toby Hagerott of Against the Grain Farm, and Mr. Paul Lester, who works with the farm manager to clear the land, deal with invasive species, and regulate soil quality. Optimizing the infrastructure and buildings on the land will allow the Penn Farm to remain an accessible, educational, and beneficial model for sustainable community efforts in Delaware.

Continuing into the twenty-first century and beyond, the mission of the Historic Penn Farm is to uphold the original purpose of the land and intent for its use through building sustainable farming initiatives, providing a community space, integrating agricultural best practices, and inspiring people toward healthy eating. Today, the property contains a bank barn, a milk house, granary, and the original brick and frame manor house, as well as acres of agricultural land.