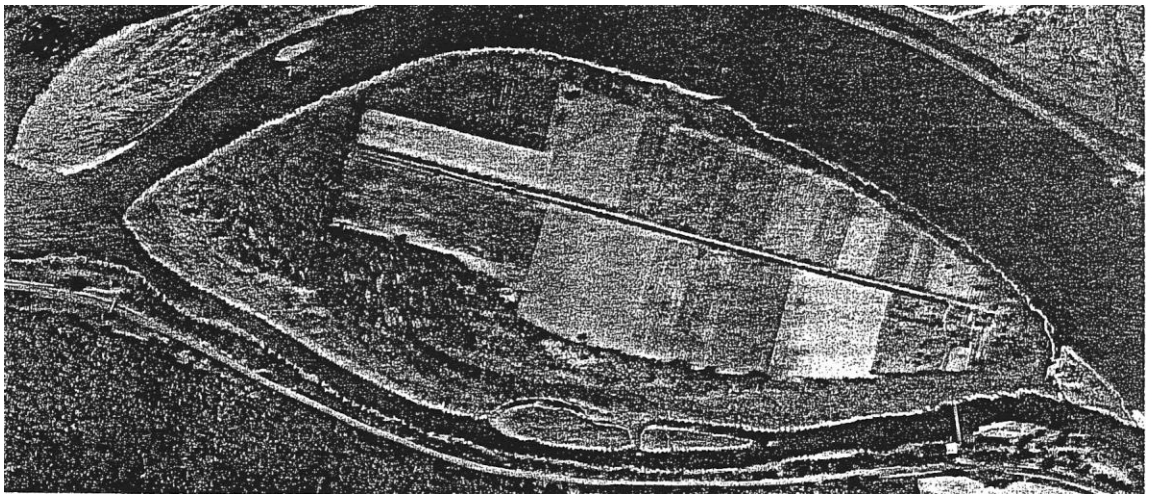
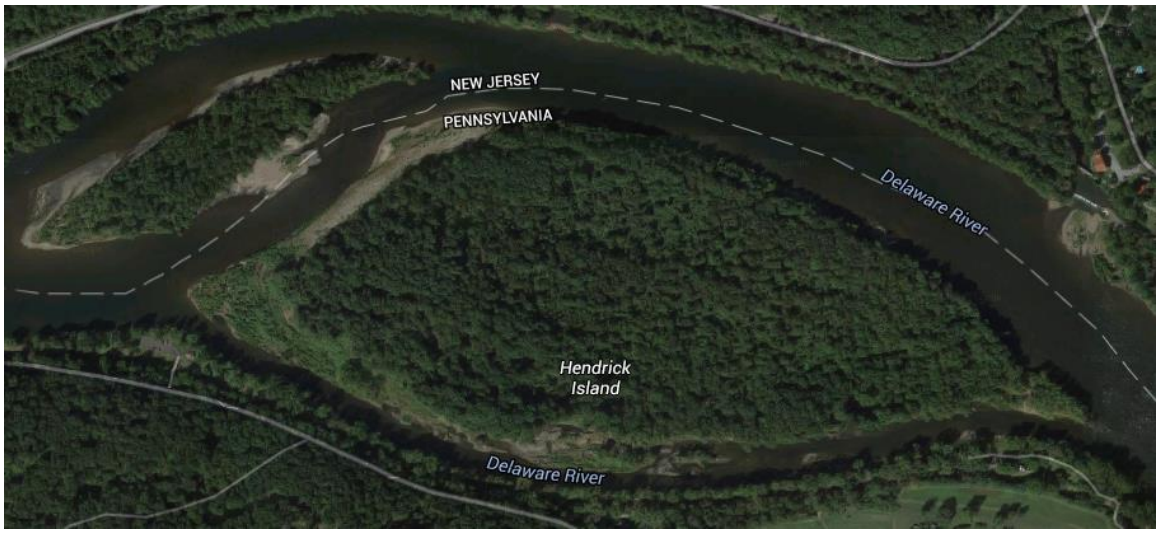
SOLEBURY TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL SOCIETY

EDWIN HARRINGTON BOOKS

SOLEBURY TOWNSHIP
HENDRICKS ISLAND



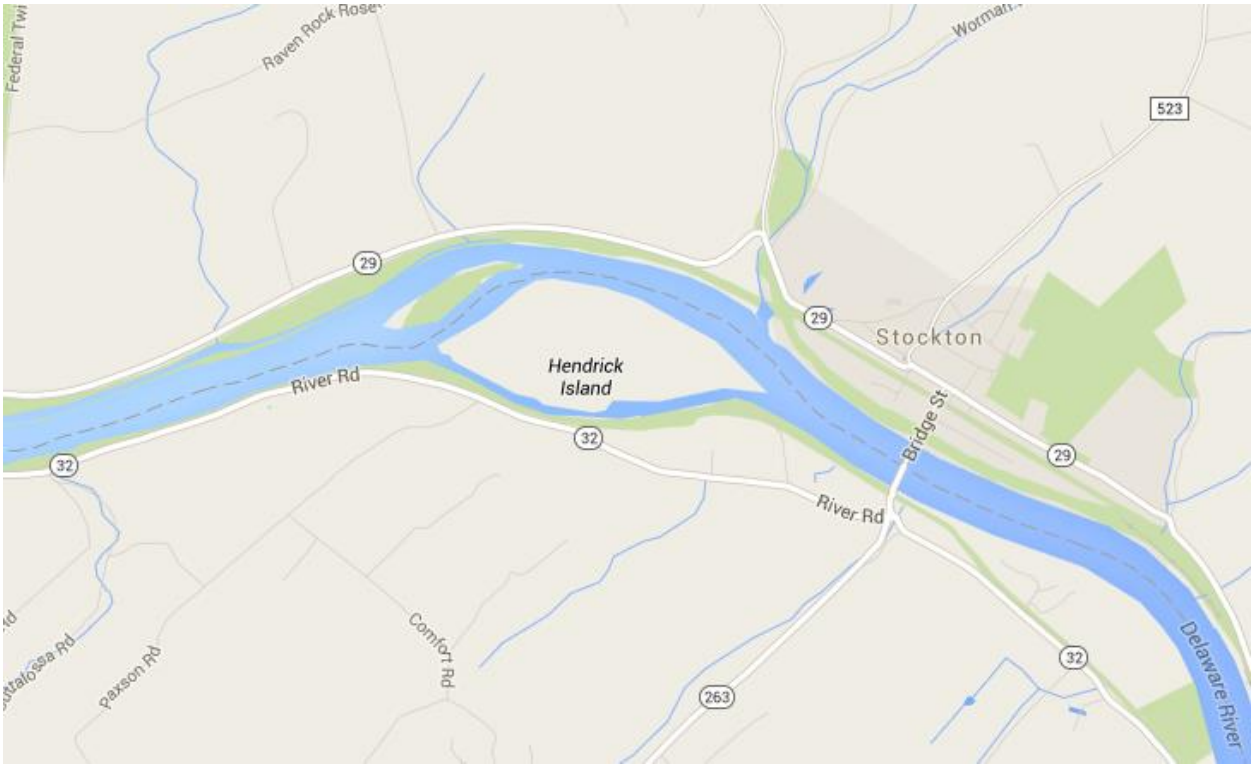


Google Maps

SOLEBURY TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL SOCIETY

EDWIN HARRINGTON BOOKS

Hendricks Island



Google Maps

Previously published in the New Hope Gazette, November 1, 2001

Published in book form in 2001 by the Hillside Press, Edwin Harrington

Given by Mr. Harrington to the Solebury Township Historical Society

Retyped and republished 2015

SOLEBURY TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL SOCIETY

EDWIN HARRINGTON BOOKS

Hendricks Island

In the Delaware River, between Solebury Township and Hunterdon County, there is a 112 acre island, with a long and extraordinary history. Over the years, it has been called Turkey Point, Paxson Island, Johnson Island and Hendricks Island – the last being its current designation. It has been owned by Indians, early settlers, millers, lumber merchants, a bankrupt saw mill operator an artist, retired executives, a tax-dodger, a speculator, an author, a con-expert, a utility, a conservancy, and finally the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

When, in 1702, Surveyor General John Cutler's field men measured out eight tracts along the Delaware, in the newly-formed Solebury Township, the one that became known as tract 12, in Eastburn Reeder's Early Settlers of Solebury Township, included a wide flood plain extending toward the New Jersey shore. It was not then an island; but sometime around 1745, probably during a flood, the river cut a narrow western channel that separated the plain from the Pennsylvania mainland.

There is an unanswered question as to whether said Turkey Point was originally part of the area that William Penn warranted to Henry Paulin in 1682, yet unsurveyed. Paulin lived in Middletown Township, and sold his right to the land along the Delaware to Richard Burgess, also of Middletown. Richard married Elizabeth, only surviving child of Henry Paxson the elder; and sold the land, still unsurveyed and indefinite, to father-in-law Henry. Richard knew then that his health was poor, and he died in 1698, after having been married only two years. Alas, Elizabeth followed him to the grave about 1700, leaving no offspring. Henry Paxson was comfortable in lower Bucks County, along the Neshaminy, but held title to the Solebury tract, as surveyed and delineated in 1702. Being childless, after the death of Elizabeth, he willed the mainland of tract 12 to his great-nephew James, a son of his nephew William. But in 1714, nine years before his death, he willed Turkey Point to his nephew Henry Paxson the younger, who had settled on nearby tract 14 in Solebury. Henry the younger sold the land, apparently by then an island, to his son Thomas, in 1748, when Thomas was twenty-two, and that same year had married Sarah Harvey.

Thomas Paxson did not use the island, and willed it to his son Benjamin in 1778. By then there was included a shoreline area of about 23 acres. Apparently Benjamin built the first house around 1790. He died in 1814, and his son Thomas was the executor, selling the island and shoreline part to John L. Johnson of Germantown. John sold it to his two sons, John R. and Edwin Johnson; but they transferred it back to the father in 1849, apparently not happy about living there. John L. and his wife Sarah immediately sold it to Jacob Armitage of Solebury, of a family that lived and operated mills along the Cuttalossa. From 1814 onward, the house on the island was described in deeds as a mansion, and there was a saw mill in operation. Benjamin seems to have built well, and prospered during his fairly long occupancy.

Jacob and Hannah Armitage retained the two tracts for five years, and in 1854 sold to Thomas Walton of Philadelphia. Thomas is designated in the deed as Esquire, which would indicate a person of wealth, or a lawyer. Two residences are mentioned, both on the island, one probably a tenant house. Thomas only kept the land for three years and then sold to Rosella Walton, wife of John J. Walton: evidently all in the family; no close relationship to the local Waltons of Byberry and Bucks County. Rosella and John were from Brooklyn, obviously well-to-do. The Walton family was in the lumber business, with headquarters at the town of Walton, Delaware County, New York – in the Catskills and on the upper

Delaware River. There was a series of articles, including "Rafting on the Delaware," by Joshua Pine III, in the **Walton Chronicle**; and certainly the Waltons had business with the timber rafts that were made up in that area of New York and in nearby Pennsylvania. The rafts, assembled by shippers, were taken over by courageous souls who rode and steered them down the river toward purchasers in Bucks County, the Trenton area, and Philadelphia. The recipients had to be alert for a raft bearing a board that was marked for their destination, and then they would snag it into captivity. No doubt the Waltons felt they could advantageously use a site downstream for overseeing the trade. The accounting procedures must have been elementary, but it was profitable while it lasted. Yet by 1860 the Waltons saw the coming sunset of their enterprise.

Thomas Walton had paid the Armitages $5,600.00. In 1860, John J. and Rosella sold the premises to Lewis S. Coryell, of a respectable New Hope family, for $6,070.00 – indicating that there had been some improvements made to the buildings; and by that time there was a bridge connecting to the Solebury mainland, making access to the island greatly more practical.

There has been much speculation about when the bridge was first built. The 1859 map of Solebury Township shows it, and each map thereafter until the l954 USGS Lumberville quadrant. It is known to have been a Roebling bridge, by tradition, and confirmed by a news item about a man who fell off the "wire bridge" in 1961, at the time of the funeral of John L. Johnson. John L. must have remained in the neighborhood, after having sold to Jacob Armitage, and could have been a tenant in one of the houses, for twelve years throughout ownerships by the Armitages and the Waltons, and into the ownership by Lewis Coryell – perhaps a lonely widower with no better place to live. Roebling had moved his industry from Saxonburg to Trenton in 1848, and was building medium-sized suspension bridges at various nearby sites. His fame with larger bridges came a few years later, the most noted being the Brooklyn Bridge. No library, or firm heir to the Roebling industry, has been able to provide precise information on the origin of the island bridge. But the Waltons seem to have had the motive and the money to arrange for its construction.

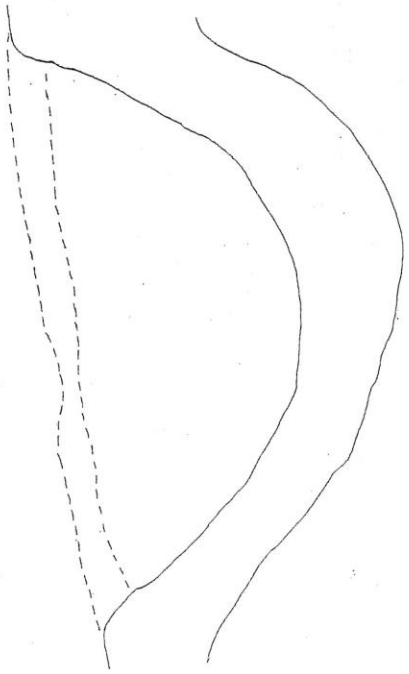
Lewis S. Coryell was a descendant of John Coryell, who operated a ferry at future New Hope and also at future Centre Bridge, in the latter 1700s. Lewis' father was Joseph, of Lambertville; and Lewis was born in 1785, married Mary Vansant, daughter of Squire Joseph Vansant of Mechanic Street, in 1813. He served in the War of 1812, and as an aide to President Tyler in the 1840s. Before that, he was active in helping to build the canal through New Hope, and he worked toward improved rafting on the river, which naturally eased him into the lumber business. He was part mill-owner, with Beaumont, Maris and Parry, at the site of Union Mills on South Main Street; and he was a friend of Samuel Ingham. He was also a skilled engineer and carpenter, and a notary public: an all-round busy person. He and Mary had four sons and two daughters. He was already seventy-four when he bought the island, probably as a place for retirement, along the river that he knew so well.

Lewis, long a widower, lived by himself on the island until his death in 1865, just five years. His will did not direct a disposal of real estate; but his executors, son Martin and friend Dr. Samuel Lilly, both of Lambertville, determined that cash assets could not cover indebtedness, and therefore the Orphans Court ordered that the property be sold at auction. John Hendricks of Lumberville was the successful bidder, at $6,500.00.

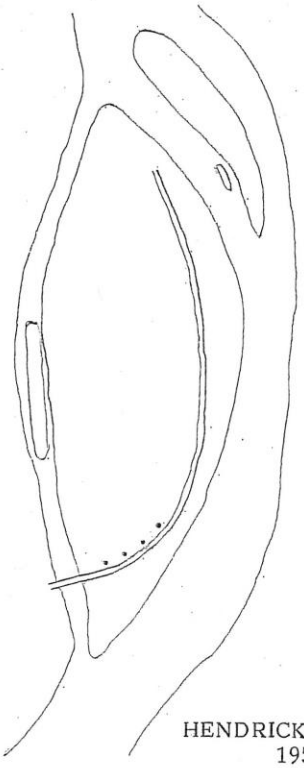
SOLEBURY TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL SOCIETY

EDWIN HARRINGTON BOOKS

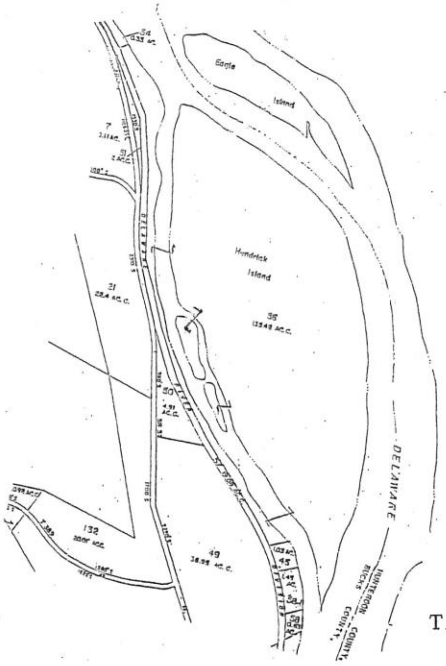
Hendricks Island



TURKEY POINT
1703



HENDRICKS ISLAND
1954



TAX MAP
1999

EDWIN HARRINGTON BOOKS

Hendricks Island

John, son of Francis and Rachel Hendricks, was born in 1816, near Point Pleasant, and married Mary Jane Carr of Lumberville in 1840. They had two daughters, one of whom married Henry C. Wanamaker; and two sons: Francis, who died unmarried in 1868, and Charles, born in 1846. Charles served in the Civil War, returned in 1866, and married Hester A. Sharp; and they lived on the island. They had son Harry, who died young; then sons John S. and Daniel R., the latter being well remembered locally as the husband of Lizzie R. Black, and they had twelve children, who helped to populate upper Solebury Township – one having been Margery, wife of J. Walter Livezey; and forward through succeeding generations.

John Hendricks was already fifty when he and Mary Jane acquired the island, where he revived the saw mill that had been built around 1800 by Benjamin Paxson. John was helped by son Charles, returned from the war, about to be married. The bridge was a vital convenience, spanning the narrow river channel to connect with 13 acres of property on the shoreward side, next to the canal – which had been constructed during ownership by the Johnson family. By 1866, there was little timber remaining on the island, or on the nearby mainland. It had been principally hemlock, ideal for framing and flooring houses, barns and business structures. And also, by then, less lumber was coming from the upper Delaware, as that source diminished.

It seems, therefore, that the Hendricks family had come a little too late to gain profitability from the lumber and saw mill business, which had started going downhill during the Walton era. John Hendricks just did not prosper, in spite of his hard work, and by 1880 he was bankrupt. And by then he was sixty-four years old, and Mary Jane had died three years before. Sad, indeed. He called upon Samuel A. Firman, the legal terrier of Carversville and Doylestown, who became assignee and sold the entirety to Thomas O. Atkinson for a measly $510.00: two houses, the saw mill, outbuildings, bridge, and 127.5 acres of land on the island and shore. Poor John lived on until 1905, supported by son Charles and his wife Hester, and by daughter Rachel and her husband Henry. He rests in the Carversville cemetery, next to Mary Jane. He had one enduring legacy: from his time forward, the name of his former property has been Hendricks Island, having before been Paxson Island and Johnson Island.

Thomas Ogborn Atkinson was of an old Wrightstown Quaker family, going back to immigrant John in 1699. The men, over generations, had a habit of marrying Smith ladies, if sometimes Simpson or Heston – slight departures from the neighborhood. He was a son of Edmond and Ruth Simpson Atkinson, born on the family farm in 1834. He married Mary B. Heston of Buckingham in 1861, while a merchant and postmaster at Penns Park. They had one son, Edmond, who died young. In 1871, they moved to Doylestown, and he became a partner in real estate with Samuel A. Firman. It was an easy deal for him to buy the island properties when Samuel put them up for sale. But there is no indication that he and Mary ever lived there, because he went from real estate to being a founding officer of the Bucks County Bank, and was involved there until 1905. The purchase just seemed like something to good to pass up, at a rock-bottom price. In 1899, he and Mary sold Hendricks Island and the shore strip to Oliver P. Fisher of Philadelphia, for a cool $10,000.00. The dealings of Thomas Atkinson were as successful as those of John Hendricks had not been.

Oliver Fisher and wife Mary owned the island properties for four years, evidently never residing there. During that time the main house was neglected and the saw mill deteriorated until it was no longer

operable. They sold to William L. Stevens, also of Philadelphia, for the same $10,000.00, just seeming to want out of what had been a useless investment. No Mrs. Stevens is mentioned, and this appears to have been another half-hearted adventure into country real estate. Thus then another four years, and Stevens sold to Andrew W. Angle of Philadelphia, again for that $10,000.00. Andrew and Mary Angle should have known better by this time, because they only kept it until 1898, while the infrastructure went more and more to pot. Almost exactly a year later, in June 1898, they sold it to Mary Jane Redfield of Philadelphia. It looks as if all this group were of the same neighborhood and told each other great stories about the island's potential – as their enthusiasms gradually faded away, because Mary Jane bought it for only $3,000.00. The bright stars had fallen. Mary Jane was the widow of James Redfield, who was the stepbrother of Edward Redfield's father Bradley. But that is getting ahead of the story. Suffice to say that Mary Jane bought the premises on June 20, 1898, and then sold them to Edward on July 9, for the same $3,000.00. And thereby hangs a tale . . .

Edward Willis Redfield was born in 1869, on a farm in Bridgeville, Delaware, sixth and youngest child of Bradley and Frances Giles Phillips Redfield. His parents were Quakers, and Bradley owned a nursery, flower and fruit business. Even as a child, Edward was always drawing, and the father encouraged that skill and sent him to the Franklin Institute, the Spring Garden Institute, and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Financed by his father, Edward went to Paris in 1889 and studied at the Academie Julian. At times he stayed at the Hotel Delegant, in Brolles, south of Paris, where he met and married Elise Delegant, in 1893. She was a young widow, who had already lost her husband and a stillborn baby. They came to America, and lived with his parents in Glenside, where he worked as a florist and painted on the side. A daughter Elizabeth was born in 1894, but she was killed by a falling barn door in 1899. Elise was devastated, and Edward took her back to Brolles for a rest. Their son Laurent was born. They were ready to return to America, and wanted a place to live that was distant from the sad memories of Glenside. Edward had come to know the New Hope area, and also knew that the island property was on the market for a modest figure: near a burgeoning artist colony. Since his Aunt Mary Jane lived in Philadelphia and was a friend of the Angles, he arranged with her to buy the properties and then deed them over to him. And so the arrangement was made and Edward and Elise acquired the lands for a bargain price, while the Angles obviously wanted shut of the whole unfortunate investment.

There was an old stone building between the river and the canal, which had been a mule barn. Edward renovated it into a livable house, with a large north window for his studio. They had only been there a few years when along came the 1903 flood, that rose above the window sills and also damaged the neglected buildings on the island and the Roebling bridge. Never having had a use for all that land anyway, Edward and Elise decided to sell the island and about fourteen acres of mainland, keeping about an acre around the house. The buyer was Fred John Miller of East Orange, New Jersey, the editor of **Popular Mechanics** magazine, who was planning to retire. The deed stated a price of $1.00, and so the actual figure stays hidden; but it must have been a considerable sum. Edward had already received several national awards for his artistry, and thus concluded that he could live on that money plus the proceeds from the land sale. They continued to reside there, and he progressed wonderfully with painting, until 1931, when he was sixty-two and Elise was sixty, and the children had all matured and moved on. They bought a house and six acres along the canal, closer to Centre Bridge, for $15,000.00, from the estate of Jacob W. Bowlby, and lived out their days there. Elise died in 1947, and was buried in Solebury Friends cemetery, evidently having long since changed from being Catholic to Quaker. Edward

spent eighteen years alone, cantankerous and outspoken as usual, still occasionally painting, until his demise in 1965, at age ninety-four. There was a private memorial at the meeting house, and he was buried next to Elise. Son Laurent, who married Dorothy Hayman, died in 1990; Horace, who married Martha Ruos, died in 1948; Louise, who married Robert Stevens, died in 1980; George, who married Eugenie Burges, died in 1957; Frances, who married Evan Hume, died in 1976; seventeen grandchildren and thirty great-grandchildren. That is a brief account of Edward Willis Redfield, and of course there is much more; but this is basically a story of the island, and so onward . . .

Fred John and Julia R. Miller lived on the island from 1904 until 1921, and they also owned much of the shoreline area, except for the lot that Redfield had retained, with its reconstructed house. By 1921, they were probably well along in years, and he would no longer have been active in publishing. In July of that year, they sold out to the Bucks County Trust Company for a token $1.00. Again there is no way to determine the actual price, not then having been a federal or state tax on real estate. Nor is there any record of a bank holding a mortgage, and so it seems that the Millers had borrowed from the bank without collateral, had spent freely to improve the premises and the bridge, and Fred was by then jobless. They were just too far in debt to find a way out, and neither the Bucks County Trust Company nor any other institution cared to assume a mortgage for a couple that old. Fred and Julia disappear from the local scene without a trace. Neshaminy Manor, perhaps?

The bank found itself saddled with two properties, two houses, a barn and other buildings, and a durable bridge. Evidently it advertised widely, yet only found a buyer after a year and a half. Benjamin J. Bernstein of Brooklyn paid an undisclosed amount, that same token dollar being stated in the deed, as of December 27, 1922. But he seems to have found rural island living not so ideal, after Brooklyn, and slightly less than a year later sold to landscape architect Paul R. Smith and wife Helen, of Hopatcong, New Jersey. Again no actual figure, just that pesky dollar.

The Smiths were owners from 1923 until 1935, apparently living there at least part of the time. They were recorded as residents of Hopatcong and of Phillipsburg; and probably were out of landscaping by the latter year, ready to diminish their style of living. They sold to Leon O. and Helen B. Head, of New York City. The price was only $2,400.00: a depression-time figure. Mr. Head was president of the American Railway Express Company, having been born in Georgia, educated in Texas, and having come up through the ranks of the firm. He was then fifty-six years old, and they were looking for a quiet in the country. They took an interest in the activities of the Delaware Valley Protective Association, especially its efforts to preserve the canal.

Leon and Helen Head sold the island and mainland strip in 1946 to Lewis E. Miller, for $13,600.00: a considerable jump in price, but the result of wartime economics. Mr. Head was by then sixty-seven years old, presumably retired as president of the express company, and not up to maintaining the premises. There is no indication that Lewis and wife Eva lived on the island, their address being Willow Grove. This was after the war, a time for speculation. Miller duly speculated, but experienced a modest loss as the financial world settled back to more normal conditions, and sold for $7,500.00, in February 1947.

EDWIN HARRINGTON BOOKS

Hendricks Island

The buyers that time were Frank L. and Lila W. King, of Maplewood, New Jersey: a suburb of Newark. Two years later, the Kings, then on record as residents of New Hope, sold the Samuel Schechner and Philip Mandelbaum of Newark – Schechner being shown as an agent and Mandelbaum as a lawyer. Bob Stevens, husband of the Redfield's' daughter Louise, lived nearby on the mainland, within sight of the bridge, and he recalled that IRS personnel used his garage to observe the activities of the Kings, comings and goings. It appears that there was some financial chicanery taking place, specifically taxes owed to the federal government. Next, a flashy advertisement went out from Louis Traiman Auction Company, of Philadelphia: "127-Acre Island Farm in the Delaware River . . . ABSOLUTE AUCTION without limit or reserve, clear of mortgages; Live Stock, Farm Equipment, Furnishings in Separate Lots. Saturday, October 28, 1950, at 2 P.M. Open for inspection Sunday, October 22, from 2 to 5 P.M. Regardless of sacrifice, no matter how low the bid, this property must be SOLD. The present owner would never dream of parting with it if it were not that his business has forced him to move to another locality."

Cuba? South America? Leavenworth? One way or another, the Kings were not on good terms with the Internal Revenue Service.

But legally the shysters Schechner and Mandelbaum owned the premises at the time of the auction sale, which of course the flyer or proceedings did not reveal. Then, on November 16, 1950, Samuel and Fannie Schechner, Philip and Ella Mandelbaum sold them back to the Kings, in the Bucks County Court House, while several IRS agents, with hat brims pulled down and arms folded, stood nearby. At the very same time, the Kings sold to the successful bidders at the auction, represented by realtor Wynne James, Jr. – Arthur and Mamaine Koestler, then of New York and of London. The closing bid had been $9,900.00, a normal market value for those times.

As can be seen, by then the island properties had passed through more hands than Elizabeth Taylor. And now come the odd-storied experiences of Arthur and Mamaine, and forward through a Gotterdammerung spanning some fifty years, until a more halcyon present.

Arthur Koestler was born in Budapest in 1905, his father Russian and his mother Austrian, both Jewish. He studied in Vienna, then joined a kibbutz in Palestine; then returned to Europe and worked for a German newspaper, and joined the Communist Party. Thereafter he visited the Soviet Union; then to Paris, and a correspondent during the Spanish civil war. He was captured by Franco, but was exchanged and freed, lucky not to have been shot. He became disillusioned with communism and resigned while lecturing and writing in France. Next he joined the French Foreign Legion, but deserted and found his way to England. There he enlisted in the British Army Pioneer Corps, which accepted aliens. In England, he met Mamaine Paget at a party in London. She was an identical twin, of Suffolk country gentry in background. She and sister Celia had been born in 1916, and had a typical boarding-school education, loved music, were motherless and lonely. After their father died in 1928, they went to live with an uncle and aunt in London. Uncle Jack was wealthy and conservative, retired from the military. Aunt Mamaine was French, considerably younger than her husband. Arthur Koestler and Mamaine were instantly attracted to each other, and they went together on a holiday in Wales. Then he was sent to Palestine by Chaim Weizmann to arbitrate with Jewish trouble-makers; then back to England and Mamaine, and to Wales again. After several years of uncertainty, and the fact that Arthur did not want to have children but Mamaine did, they were married.

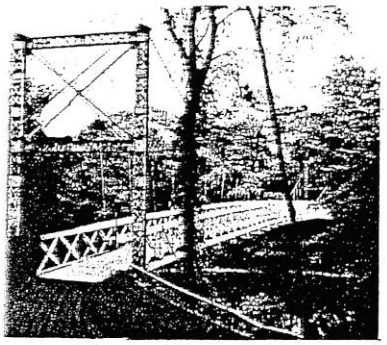
SOLEBURY TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL SOCIETY

EDWIN HARRINGTON BOOKS

Hendricks Island

Edward Redfield

Arthur Koestler



The Roebling Bridge

Island Farm

EDWIN HARRINGTON BOOKS

Hendricks Island

Arthur had been considering a trip to America, with the idea of living there part time and absorbing its culture; and he went to New York in September 1950. He soon met members of the New Hope intelligentsia, including Budd Schulberg. Budd became aware of Arthur's plans, and told him about the impending sale of the island properties, and arranged for Wynne James to represent the Koestlers as bidder. Just prior, there must have been many cablegrams before Arthur and Mamaine came to an agreement, all in a short while, between the time of advertising and the sale on October 28.

Mamaine arrived in New York on December 27, and together they attended some social gatherings that were rather high and raucous. They moved to the island in early 1951, and of course Mamaine found it enchanting and delightful: "awfully nice people" in the area; "Stockton is very pretty, there is a super inn and a lovely bar, a very good grocery store . . . I love all the people I have met so far. This is really one's dream place if it weren't so far from Europe." Ah-hah! Thus begins the disillusionment and downfall of charm. They were actually land-poor, had some local servant help that they could not afford, spent on fine new furniture, and soon were deep in debt. They had to decide about renting the land to a nearby farmer, and they bought several dogs from the SPCA. Next they learned about winter in the Delaware valley, and began to consider going to Europe to escape; and they were already being told about the hot, humid summers, and the bugs. Some of Arthur's novels and a play were making moderate money, but they donated the take to the Fund for Intellectual Freedom. Mamaine wrote further to her sister: ". . . our daily highballs and old-fashioneds. I only drink bourbon here because one gets used to it; it is a good drink, better than gin, and one needs a good slug of something strong after the sort of day's work I do, believe me."

More socializing with Budd and Geraldine Schulberg, et al, the smart set; ongoing problems with the hired help and the weather: "the pressure of this godforsaken country . . . when one lives damn it all on an island . . . more and more homesick for Europe." Automobile problems, trouble getting a piano across the bridge; visiting Washington and Boston; more overloaded parties. Back to London and Paris in June; and then the marriage broke up. Never did either one return to America or to the island. It had been a tragedy of errors from the beginning.

From all evidence, the buildings on the island were unoccupied from June 1951 until January 1955. The Koestlers continued to own the property and Wynne James paid the taxes for them during those years. Whether he also arranged for tenants is questionable, being white-collar Doylestown. In 1954, Lowell Birrell well-known owner of Echo Falls Farm near Solebury, was looking for additional land on which to raise his prize Angus cattle. He approached David Johnson of Burgess Lea, along the canal and river opposite the island; but Mr. Johnson was not interested in selling or renting out his land. Then Birrell looked toward the island, and recalled to mind the Koestlers of a few years ago and their ménage, and the various liberal bashes he had attended there. He arranged with the law firm of Eastburn and Gray to contact the Koestlers, divorced but still joint owners. But Mamaine had died in June 1954, having named her twin sister Celia Goodman executor. Arthur was still living in London. With the cooperation of the American Embassy, and a lot of paper work going back and forth, a deal was concluded. Birrell acquired the island and shoreline properties for $40,000.00 to Arthur Koestler, $40,000.00 to Mamaine's estate: far more than the Koestler's had paid.

EDWIN HARRINGTON BOOKS

Hendricks Island

Lowell Birrell was always an enigma to his neighbors, merchants and township officials. He was born in Indiana in 1907, son of a pastor, graduated from the University of Michigan in 1928, became an attorney of sorts, had offices in New York, and succeeded financially in mysterious ways. In 1937, he bought a house and farm on Meeting House Road that had been built in the early 1700s by Thomas Heed, and had descended to the Eastburn family: filled with history. In 1941, he married, for the third time, Merrie Johnston; and they proceeded to live it up, spending freely and giving flashy parties. The place was named Echo Falls Farm, where horses and fine cattle abounded. He was a friend of Stewart Hopps, who had bought nearby Blackfan Farm, and Birrell bought that property when Hopps moved to California. He also bought the Enright house next door, the Ingham house from Budd Schulberg, and Fairview Farm from Moss Hart. Hendricks Island was the next to be swept up, with money never seeming to be a problem. In fact, Birrell's spending was phenomenal, and he did not challenge a price – sometimes recorded, sometimes that elusive dollar. His empire of shady deals brought forth unending funds.

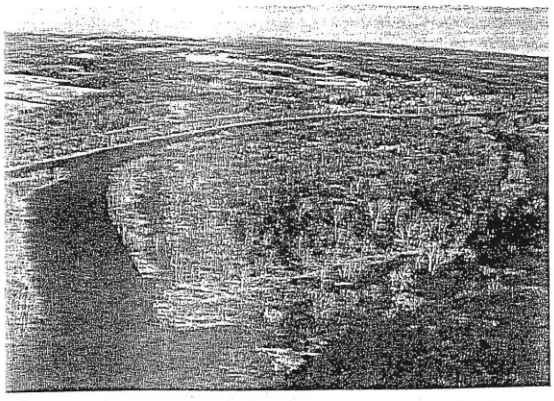
Birrell installed an employee in the house on the island, and began stocking the farm land with his prize cattle. It looked like a great enterprise, and was a shot in the arm to the neighborhood. All was going along rather nicely, while no one really knew where Birrell was finding the money – an everlasting question to this day. But then: on August 19 and 20, 1955, Hurricane Diane struck and turned the world upside down. Small streams flooded ferociously during Friday night, and villages along their banks were inundated and badly damaged. During those same hours, the storm dumped upon the Catskills and Poconos, tearing out lakes and bridges, taking lives. Word was sent from upstate that a massive flood was on its way. Birrell's men began driving and trucking cattle off the island, to temporary quarters on the other farms. Then the high water arrived, destroying bridges upriver, at Point Pleasant, and at the island. The venerable Roebling bridge, that had withstood past natural assaults, was carried downstream to an unmarked grave. Birrell managed to locate a couple of helicopters and lifted out a few more Angus; then his men chased those that remained to higher and safer ground on the island. The houses and the barn were badly smashed, and the smaller buildings disappeared entirely. Then the waters receded, and the people of the valley began to pick up the pieces.

Following on briefly with the misadventures of Lowell Birrell: his many financial shenanigans caused the Securities and Exchange Commission to look into matters, and he was served with a subpoena in 1957. He made a precipitous journey to Cuba, and remained there until Castro came along; then shifted his residence to Brazil. Along the way, he managed to pay off some debts to local businesses. Brazil had no system for extradition, but Birrell returned voluntarily in l964, was tried, and spent time in jail. Meanwhile the SEC took over any real estate held in his or in dummy-corporate names. Released in 1968, he and Merrie faded into the sunset. She died in 1985, and is buried in the Solebury Friends cemetery. So far, there is no information on when and where he departed this earthly realm; and there is some doubt as to whether he plays a harp in the next.

In 1954, a year before those trouble August 1955 days, there had been rumors and counter-rumors about the presence of uranium ore along the river near Centre Bridge. Prospectors flew over the area, using sensitive instruments, and did find traces. Then someone with a Geiger counter turned up radioactivity in an abandoned quarry on the Charles Kieffer property: on the west side of River Road, opposite Burgess Lea and the island. There was mild interest, but there was also opposition. Most

people did not like the idea of a mining operation in the scenic river valley. In March 1955, some localities formed a company, incorporated in New Jersey and called U-7 Company, intent upon seeking uranium. Mr. Kieffer was a stockholder.

HENDRICKS ISLAND - 1950



HENDRICKS ISLAND - 1990

Lowell Birrell
(as Colonel Henry Knox)

GOVERNMENT PERSONNEL DIG INTO
BIRRELL'S BUSINESS FILES

EDWIN HARRINGTON BOOKS

Hendricks Island

The story soon circulated that Philadelphia Electric was considering a nuclear power plant in the area, and there was plenty of ranting among the populace. PE, however, revealed no details to the media concerning its intentions, and denied any such plan. Meanwhile, Birrell had found himself moderately embarrassed by recent losses and by the federal government breathing heavily upon him. Therefore he sought to sell the island properties, sitting idle in a devastated condition. No doubt he bent elbow with executives of PE, among others, and surely he knew more than did the general public. In any case, he was noted for being able to sell hot coffee in hell, and his then-active corporation of Echo Falls Farm sold Hendricks Island and the strip to PE in December 1955, for the neat sum of $100,000.00: $20,000.00 more than he paid for it. Not bad, considering its sad state and real estate values of that era. PE again denied any disturbing plans, and three months later leased the island land to a local farmer for five years. It also sold off several properties on the nearby mainland, that it had picked up earlier, including the Kieffer property where uranium had been scented. Of course the Delaware Valley Protective Association expressed continued alarm and distrust.

What was to be believed? There was just no definite information. PE demolished the buildings on the island in 1979, declaring that they were beyond repair. It did then make a statement that, fifteen years previously, it had considered building a fossil fuel plant on the island, but later decided not to do so, and the future stayed indeterminate. About 1990, Wynne James Realty made an unenthusiastic pitch to sell the island, as an estate or for subdivision, showing pictures of the buildings as they had been before the 1955 flood, and by that time non-existent. The stated price was $1,500,000.00. There were no takers.

Finally, in 1996, after years of restlessness and doubts, the Heritage Conservancy of Doylestown made arrangements with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to buy the island from PE, by that time known as PECO, and to maintain it under a conservation easement, so that it could not be developed – aware that developers had been sniffing around. The price was an even $400,000.00: a large sum, but in keeping with the times, and less than developers had offered. The same day, DCNR bought it from the Conservancy for the same amount, in a well-planned arrangement. It is now state property, with a Conservancy naturalist to oversee its wildlife and safety, and to pick up beer bottles left behind by gypsy campers, the only occupants. Anyway, no more eccentric owners and no nukes.

Ned Harrington
October 2001