

Historical Notes: Hopewell Presbyterian Church

Historical Notes on the Hopewell Presbyterian Church

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Two articles from Ian Burrow on the history and construction of the Hopewell Presbyterian Church (80 West Broad Street, at Louellen), reprinted from The Messenger (the Hopewell Presbyterian Church Magazine):



The Purple (Hummelstown) Bricks of The 1914 Church Sanctuary Building (2018)

On the distinctive purplish-brown bricks used in the construction of the church sanctuary in 1914, quarried from Hummelstown, Pennsylvania. These also are seen in other buildings around town, most notably the Dana building at East Broad and North Greenwood.



Local History From Beneath The Ground At Hopewell Presbyterian: Beer, Racism, And A Murder Mystery! (2012)

Discoveries unearthed in the 2012 construction around the church sanctuary. This "late 19th century trash" included patent medicine bottles, perfume and ink-bottles, a horse-shoe, many pieces of ironstone and other ceramics including a fine chamber pot, and a teapot lid made in at the Meyer factory in Trenton.

There were also a collection of "champagne" beer bottles, probably consumed at the blacksmith and wheelwright shop that stood at the corner from c. 1870 until the sanctuary was built in 1914. Two beer bottles, embossed "JOHN L. ROSSO JR. KINGSTON NJ", then lead to a salacious story of murder and mystery.

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The Purple (Hummelstown) Bricks of The 1914 Church Sanctuary Building (2018)

Article from The Messenger (Hopewell Presbyterian Church Magazine), 2018

Ian Burrow

The 1914 Sanctuary of the Hopewell Presbyterian Church might have looked quite different. The original intention was to build a “brick and stone” structure, but on February 7th 1914 the architects, Klemann and Fowler of Trenton, presented a less expensive option [1]. The sanctuary would now be built using “brick similar to that used in the High School and Hopewell National Bank buildings”. The High School (later the Borough Hall and more recently the fire-house) had been built in 1912. Hopewell National Bank building, at the corner of Broad Street and Greenwood Avenue, was under construction early in 1914 and was completed later in the year [2].



The southeast corner of the 1914 sanctuary, built of Hummelstown brick.

The 1914 sandstone cornerstone is probably also from the Hummelstown quarries.



The former New Jersey National Bank building (from the northeast), completed in 1914 using Hummelstown Brick

The distinctive purplish-brown bricks look almost like stone. A newspaper article of the time identified them as “Hummelstown brick” [3]. This is their story.

Hummelstown brick came (unsurprisingly) from the area of Hummelstown, a small town lying between Hershey and Harrisburg in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania. From the 1860’s to the 1920’s high quality Triassic sandstone was quarried from South Mountain, about two miles south of the town. The quarries can still be seen today and are on the National Register of Historic Places because of the importance of this building stone for American architectural history [4].

Large-scale quarrying of the sandstone began in the 1860’s, but the most productive years of the operation began in 1891, with the creation of the Hummelstown Brownstone Company. In 1905, to diversify the company’s product line, a massive sand/lime brick plant was built at the quarries. The bricks were made by crushing the sandstone, mixing it with hydrated lime, and bonding the two with heat and pressure. At the height of the operation 40,000 bricks a day could be produced.

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Quality control was a problem, since some bricks were very durable, but others weathered quickly. These differences can be seen at various places around the sanctuary. The operation was not as financially successful as hoped, and ceased operation in 1927. The quarrying operations ended around the same time, and the company finally closed in December 1929.

So if you see a building made of this brick, you can be pretty sure it was built between 1905 and 1927. The porch foundation of 9 Blackwell Avenue uses these bricks, and there are probably other examples in Hopewell Valley. The newspaper reference to the high school is a bit puzzling, since no Hummelstown Brick is visible on the outside of the building today.



Hummelstown Brick and sandstone on the former Hopewell National Bank building



Number 9 Blackwell Avenue, with its porch foundation wall of Hummelstown Brick

Sources:

[1] Trenton Evening Times 2/7/1914

[2] Trenton Evening Times 8/2/1914

[3] Trenton Evening Times, 3/20/1915

[4] Olena, Ben F. and Bill Blubaugh 2001 "Quarries of the Hummelstown Brownstone Company." National Register of Historic Places Registration Form.

Viewable at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hummelstown_Brownstone_Company

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Local History From Beneath The Ground At Hopewell Presbyterian Church: Beer, Racism, And A Murder Mystery! (2012)

**Article from The Messenger (Hopewell Presbyterian Church Magazine), 2012
Ian Burrow**

Earthmoving operations around the sanctuary have provided a chance to learn more about the history of the property. The bottles in the picture below were found by the contractors while digging drainage trenches against the south side of the sanctuary in the week of August 12th 2012, in the early stages of the Making Connections operations.

They are called “champagne” beer bottles, and can be dated to the late 1800’s because of the embossed lettering, and the way they were manufactured. The two on the right are embossed “JOHN L. ROSSO JR. KINGSTON NJ” (see close-up), and they have quite a story to tell.



John Rosso Jr., born in Italy, ran a beer-bottling business in Kingston between 1890 and 1903. He had previously also had a bottling business somewhere in Hopewell Township itself, probably in the late 1880’s.

The *New Brunswick Daily Times* of June 1903 takes up the story:

In June 1903 Rosso was shot to death in his own house, apparently with his own gun, under mysterious circumstances. According to his live-in girlfriend and “housekeeper”, Florence “Flossie” Fawcett, Rosso was shot by burglars. She went on to accuse a Griggstown negro, Charles Anderson, of involvement. Because Anderson had been “unduly familiar” with her, Anderson and Rosso had quarreled, she said.

Anderson (probably wisely) fled the area for a while, but before Rosso died he had apparently exonerated Anderson of the crime, accusing an unknown white man of the shooting. Fawcett herself now became the prime suspect. Both she and Rosso were reportedly drunk on the night of the shooting, and Flossie had shot a revolver into the air in the yard a few hours afterwards. A ladder used by the supposed burglars had been brought from Rosso’s own barn.

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Flossie told the prosecutor that if Ross had indeed accused her of the shooting “she hoped his soul was in Hades”. In November 1903, after several months’ imprisonment, Flossie was released without charge.... and immediately claimed \$200 in housekeeper -wages from Rosso’s estate!

The story doesn’t end there. After Rosso’s death his father, John Rosso Senior, sought a license to continue the business. A “remonstrance”, signed by 35 people, was presented against the granting of the license. The beer operation was “a breeder or crime”, and Mr. Rosso was a dangerous driver and was “intemperate” (he had apparently boasted that no water had passed his lips for 40 years, presumably because beer tasted better). The application was withdrawn.

The contents of these beer bottles were probably consumed at the blacksmith and wheelwright shop that stood at the corner of Broad and Louellen. Owned by the Ege family, this was established sometime between 1869 and 1875, and operated until the Hopewell Presbyterians built the present sanctuary in 1914.

Several other artifacts have been retrieved from the excavations. These include patent medicine bottles, perfume and ink-bottles, a horse-shoe (of course), and many pieces of ironstone and other ceramic, including a fine chamber pot.

Also recovered was a teapot lid in brown-glazed “Rockingham” ware, made in at the Meyer factory in Trenton. These teapots often show the scene in Genesis 24 in which Rebecca demonstrates herself worthy to marry Isaac by offering water to Abraham’s servant Eliezer and his camels at the well. “Rebecca at the Well” was a popular theme on Victorian teapots because it symbolized womanly hospitality.

This late 19th century trash is of course only part of the story of the property. In the mid 1700’s it was part of the large farm owned by Signer John Hart, and in 1785 was acquired by the Phillips family. The oldest part of 86-88 West Broad Street (the Phillips house) was already standing at that time, and had witnessed George Washington and the Continental Army passing along the road on their way to the Battle of Monmouth in 1778.

The Church “triangle” was not created until 1820, when the Franklin and Georgetown Turnpike (present day Louellen Street and 518) came into town. Hopewell remained a very small place until the arrival of the railroad in 1873, but grew rapidly over the next ten years. It was also in 1873 that the first meeting was held to discuss the possibility of having a Presbyterian church in the town. In 1904 the triangle was finally purchased from the Phillips family, and the present sanctuary’s corner stone was laid in 1914.

Sources:

The story of John Rosso, together with copies of the *New Brunswick Daily Times* articles, was published on the New Jersey Bottle Forum by “jwpevahouse” in November 2011 (www.njbottles.com/index.php/topic,59.msg170.html#msg170).

The story of the property is in the Church’s records. Other details are from Richard Hunter and Richard Porter’s book *Hopewell, A Historical Geography*, Hopewell Township, 2004.