

## West Vincent's General Stores

Pausing in front of the Victorian building now known as the Birchrunville Café and Post Office, provides a reminder of its earlier function as a general store; the wooden sign above the front porch, the large glass display windows, and the marble date stone above the entrance relate its history.



Even though it was actually the third store to serve the village proper, and the surrounding farms and mills, the Birchrunville General Store became the heart of the historic village, and remains so today, 115 years after it was first constructed.

The location of this third general store was the vacant northeast corner of the crossroads property which Thomas B. Dewees Jr. had inherited in 1896 from his mother-in-law, Margaret (John) Templin.

The stone and frame building was erected by Thomas B., Jr. and Ida L. Dewees in 1898, to house their

new general store and post office, with a meeting hall above and a creamery below. A few years later, in 1901, a frame ice house addition was built over the basement to provide storage and eventually, space for making ice cream. The ice house was not very successful however, because water from Birch Run kept leaking into it, melting the inventory. The creamery processed milk from local dairy farmers, who hauled it there in cans by horse-drawn wagon. Butter was made there too. Eventually, a steam engine powered the cold storage room under the porch, as well as the ice cream machines, and the store itself. Dewees installed the first telephone in the area in his new store.

George B. Smiley was listed as merchant at the general store in the 1900 census and his name appeared on the wooden porch sign in an early photo. J. Hause Dewees, a nephew of Thomas, continued the Dewees family involvement by running the general store, the post office and the creamery from 1920 until his retirement in 1966. At that time, C. Allen and Anna May Houck purchased the store, which they had been operating for ten years prior, from the Dewees family.

The building has a scalloped, gray, slate-tiled mansard roof and delicate carpenter's lace decorating each window set within it, including the marble date stone, centered above the front porch entrance. The top of the mansard roof is tin. The entire second floor, "ensconced" within the mansard roof, was a public meeting room with a stage. Although the second floor was the meeting room for the local chapter of the Improved Order of Red Men and most other civic functions, the front porch was the favorite community gathering place.



During the summer, when the United States Supreme Court was not in session, Associate Justice Owen J. Roberts would often bring visiting colleagues from his farm on St. Matthews road to the store. On this same front porch, they would greet passersby, talk about current events, and "catch up" with friends and neighbors. Birchrunville may have been the "hub of the Universe" according to Thomas B. Dewees, but the front porch of his store was the social heart of the community.

In 1978, the historic and cultural importance of the Birchrunville General Store was recognized by placement of the building on the National Register of Historic Places. Birchrunville residents supported the nomination of the entire Historic District to the National Register in 1992, recognizing the high historic integrity of the village's buildings and setting.



The circa 1850, white-stucco stone building which had housed the second store of the village was directly across the road, on the southeast corner of Flowing Springs and Hollow roads, from the new Victorian store building. This building has a unique attachment on the Hollow Road side, and a stacked semi-circle of stone steps leading to what was the front entrance of the store.

In 1839, Jonah John purchased what had originally been designated as Lot # 3 of the 50 acre John Evan's 1803 property subdivision, considered to be the origin of the village. He built the store and the adjacent barn in 1850, and leased the store to Moses King.

As reported in a letter to the newspaper from West Vincent in June 1857: *"The storekeepers are doing a very good business, but the principal part of it is done by two stores. James Brownback commenced business this spring at the stand formerly occupied by Moses King and Samuel S. Mosteller is doing very well at Ralston's store. They are both very clever young men, and deserve to be patronized."*

In 1868, a petition for the establishment of a post office in Birchrunville was finally approved. The office was located in the 1850 store and Thomas B. Dewees was appointed postmaster. Samuel J. Rowland was the dry goods merchant in 1880 and the assistant postmaster. His 16 year-old cousin, "Clarence" was the store tender. Samuel's wife, Mrs. Ida V. Rowland operated a "fashionable millinery" establishment opposite the store stand. The farmhouse across from the store was the former Jonah John residence. According to the date stone, the original part of the Jonah John house was constructed in 1827. Slightly uphill was the location of the 1833 first village schoolhouse, now only a site, replaced by the current 1863 schoolhouse.

Other businesses utilized the old store space after Thomas B. Dewees built the new store in 1898. In that same year he paid for the second story high school addition to the 1863 one-room schoolhouse. In 1901, Dewees had not only built the frame addition for the ice house onto the new general store, but he also began construction of a Victorian style addition to the old Jonah John farmhouse, known since then as the Dewees house. Three years later, in 1904 Dewees added a brick "modern steam bakery" to the rear of the 1850 general store building.



The first store in the village was originally an addition to a dwelling owned by Peter Fry, constructed in 1822, on the east end of Hollow road. The store was added to the west gable end and was two stories high. The date 1832 is scratched in the basement. The store was also used as a stage stop for the Yellow Springs Stage to Pottstown before the Birchrunville Hotel was built. Nathaniel Savage applied for a license to sell liquor by the quart there in 1843. The grist mill in the meadow began full time operation, and other mill seats became operational in the 1840s along the western end of Hollow Rd. and Birch Run, as the focus shifted westward. Jonah John opened his general store in 1850 at the crossroad. The village was unable to support two stores, so the first store closed and reverted to its original function as a dwelling house.



Birchrunville, from its agricultural roots of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, grew into the social and mercantile center of West Vincent Township in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, it was not the only crossroad in the township to show this pattern of growth. Ludwig's, Matthew's, Ralston's (Evans'), and Wilson's Corners would also provide a convenient location for a general store, drawing merchants and trades people to those crossroads, but none grew to the extent of Birchrunville.