

## The Historic Woodland Ferry

Isaac and his younger brother, Jacob Jr. inherited the Cannon Ferry. The brothers were shrewd businessmen and became very wealthy. By 1816, they owned almost 5000 acres of land, operating not only the ferry, but stores, warehouses, and houses. They owned slaves and a number of commercial vessels that traveled to Baltimore. They became the loan sharks of the day, lending money, extending credit,

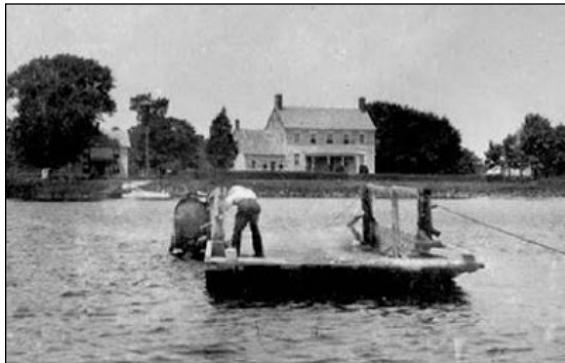


Photo: Courtesy of Delaware Public Archives

extracting fines, and confiscating goods and properties from their debtors. They were often ruthless in collecting debts by foreclosing on properties, even taking cooking pots or beds! Needless to say, the Cannon brothers were despised as exploitive thugs.

Legend surrounds Cannon's Ferry with other nefarious dealings. Cousin, Jesse Cannon and his wife, Patty ran a slave trading business in Sussex County,



Photo: The Tina Fallon, www.wikimediacommons.com<http://www.wikimediacommons.com>

kidnapping both free blacks and slaves. They are reputed to have made use of the ferry to carry their captives to ships on the Chesapeake for transport to slave dealers in the South. No documented evidence exists to prove this claim.

Hatred of the Cannon brothers

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continued until 1843. A sensational end came to their shady business practices. On April 10, 1843, Jacob, Jr. was at the ferry dock, having just returned from appealing to the Governor for protection against threats from people, whom he claimed he had aided. He was approached by Owen O'Day, who accused Jacob of stealing property, supposedly a gum tree branch, containing a hive of honey. In broad daylight, Owen shot Jacob with his musket. As Owen fled, Jacob stumbled home. A doctor found over 27 pieces of musket shot in Jacob's chest, but supposedly no life-threatening injury. He was given a large dose of laudanum (an opiate) and fell into a deep sleep from which he never awoke.

Owen O'Day escaped west. Delaware's Governor offered a reward of \$500 for his capture as Jacob's murderer. A requisition for his return from Ohio as a fugitive was issued on August 7, 1843. Owen may have never been captured. He was never prosecuted. In a further twist to this saga, Isaac Cannon took sick one month after Jacob's death and died on May 16, 1843 in his bed. Both brothers are buried with their mother in the church cemetery near the ferry.

Their sister, Lurana C. Boling inherited the Cannon businesses. After her death in 1844, her family continued to operate the ferry, using a chain cable system to guide the scow. After a long period of decline, Sussex County took over the operation of the Cannon Ferry in 1883. By this date, the community had been named "Woodland". The county purchases a new wooden ferryboat and charged no fee to cross the river. This one-car ferry was outfitted with a Model-T Ford engine in the 1930s to

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power the boat along the cables.

The Delaware Department of Transportation began overseeing the ferry in 1935, purchasing a new wooden boat. By 1958, the old ferry, known as the Patty Cannon became unserviceable due to increased traffic and failure to meet U.S. Coast Guard standards. The state seriously considered a bridge instead of refurbishing or replacing the ferry. The cost of a bridge, plus the uproar of replacing an "old beloved tradition", led to the purchase an all-steel, diesel engine ferryboat.

The new boat cost \$50,000 and went into service in 1961. It was named the Virginia C. after the wife of the state highway commissioner, Dallas Culver. By the 1990s, this ferry had required so many expensive repairs and the wharves were so deteriorated that service became undependable.

In 2007, the state began a \$3.1 million upgrade, building a new, wider ferryboat. The project included improvements to the docks. The current ferry, the Tina Fallon, named for the long-time Seaford state representative, was put into service on October 29, 2008. The old Virginia C. was auctioned online to a Maryland company for a possible use as a barge.

The Tina Fallon can accommodate six vehicles. It is manned by USCG licensed captains. During the first few years, the Tina Fallon was out of service more that it was operational. Oil leaks and other problems with the two thrusters, and snapped underwater cables were time-consuming repairs. Finger pointing and contractual disputes resulted in an expensive, frustrating ordeal. But, now the ferry crosses the Nanticoke daily seven days a week with Thursday mornings set aside for routine maintenance.

In 1973, the Woodland Ferry was



Men at Ferry, Courtesy of Hagley Museum, F. R. Zebby Collection

placed on the National Register of Historic Places, recognizing its historical and cultural value. It is a part of the Nanticoke Heritage Byway. The Woodland Ferry keeps history alive at this river crossing. Take the short trip on the ferry for an interesting way to explore the river and its scenery. The best things in life ARE free!

### SOURCES:

"Remembering Sussex County's Most Notorious River Crossing", Dustin & Mariya Oldfather, www.theoldfathergroup.com/blog.

Remembering Sussex County, James Diehl, History Press, 2009, p.98-99.

Governor's Register 1674-1851, Vol. 1, p. 407-410.

Department of Transportation brochure, "Woodland Ferry: Crossing the Nanticoke River from 1740s to Present".

"State to Sell 25-Year-Old Patty Cannon Ferry at Auction", Wilmington Morning News, March 2, 1960.

"Woodland Ferry is new albatross for DelDot", Wilmington News Journal, April 19, 2011

### MORE ON THE WOODLAND FERRY

- A *DAYS GONE BY* museum featuring history of the ferry and the area is operated by Jack Knowles on the Woodland Ferry Road. Appts: 302-629-9889
- A fictionalized account of the Cannons and the ferry can be found in the 1884 novel by George Alfred Townsend, called THE ENTAILED HAT.
- A woman and her baby were drowned in 1938 when their car fell off the back of the ferry. Another man drowned in a similar accident in the 1940s.
- "James Hemphill's Journal" an 1802 account of a harrowing journey on the Cannon Ferry is described in a 1948 Delaware History publication of the Delaware Historical Society.
- William Morgan in his "Diary and Autobiography 1780-1857" Delaware History Magazine, Fall/Winter 1980 wrote in 1843 on the deaths of Jacob and Isaac Cannon. He referred to their "cheating, oppressing and distressing, selling and taking.....they ly in the graves unlamented and unmourned". Morgan lived in the only house at Cannon's Ferry that was NOT owned by the Cannon brothers.

## High Tide News

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