



Port Norris

The Past for the Future

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Port Norris Historical Society is dedicated to preserving the history of our unique village, located in Commercial Township in Cumberland County, NJ.

MEETINGS Every Second Tuesday at 7:00 pm • 1723 Main Street



Annual Fundraiser *Legends of Port Norris Dinner*

2016 Legends Honored November 13th

LEGENDS IN HISTORY • Samuel Shinn

20TH CENTURY

Willis Robbins, Jr • Joseph N. Fowler • Vera B. Sockwell

LIVING LEGENDS

Barbara Adams • O'Connell Brown

The Port Norris Historical Society celebrated their annual tradition of honoring those who have made a significant impact on our community. Be they business owners, community leaders, or simply great citizens, they represent what is great about Port Norris. Profiles for each legend, will be added to the website.



Alvina Baum, PNHS Secretary presents to Living Legend Barbara Adams, surrounded by her family.



Dr. Robert Cole, standing, grandson of 20th Century Legend, Willis Robbins, Jr. and his family.



Living Legend O'Connell Brown, center, holding his plaque surrounded by his family.



Ginny Campbell, PNHS Membership Chair presents a certificate to the family of 20th Century Legend, Vera B. Sockwell.

Commercial Businesses Through The Years In Port Norris

By Logan Sutton
Eighth Grade Graduate - Port Norris Middle School
Report presented at school on April 9, 2016

Logan was the special guest speaker at our regular second Tuesday evening meeting on June 14. He also completed a model of the K of P Hall. Excellent job and we are pleased to have it in our building. His report was so well done we are publishing it for everyone to enjoy. Thank you Logan.

If you walked outside your house in the early 1900's you wouldn't believe what you would see. Businesses were flourishing because of the Oyster Industry. There were over 90 some businesses thriving in Port Norris. But sadly if you take a stroll through Port Norris now it seems like a ghost town compared to back then. Businesses in Port Norris were a offspring of the oyster industry. Some of the booming businesses were Capaldi Farms, K of P Hall (Knights of Pythias), Miller Berry & Sons and The Palomino just to name a few. Things were different in the early 1900's for Port Norris it wasn't until around 1955 when a terrible disease hit the oyster industry that things started taking a turn for the worse. Little by little people stopped coming to visit the area, work started slowing down and businesses started to feel the pain.

I took the time with this project to make a point to go out and talk to the business owners who's businesses were still up and running in Port Norris. They had some amazing stories to tell about how their business were started and also what things were like back in the day.

My first business man I stopped and talked to was Mr. Dominic Capaldi. He has Capaldi Machine Products located on Main Street which was started back in 1995. He gets orders every day from a business down the street (Miller Berry & Sons). He makes parts for the elevating mechanisms which is the crank unit inside of a casket that raises the body up for a viewing and lowers it when the casket is closed. But little did I know there was a reason he had to start this business because of the family farm that was starting to struggle. In 1906 Mr. Capaldi's grandfather started Capaldi Farm's. It was a thriving business and produced many crops. In the spring he would plant lettuce and strawberries. In the summer he planted tomatoes, cabbage and string beans. In the fall he planted broccoli and cauliflower. He had around 900 acres to plant and farm all of his crops. Some land was leased off of the sand plants. Now he is down to farming only 300 acres with soybeans. This year he told me he will not be planting soybeans because he had trouble with the weeds over taking the plants last year. So this year he is leasing his land to another farmer

to produce corn and hopefully next year he will be able to plant soybeans again. Both of his businesses seem to be struggling now. The farming business had a higher market back in the day and now his machine shop is struggling because everyone is being cremated because of the high cost of burial.

The business that went hand and hand with Capaldi Machine Products is Miller Berry & Sons. They are located on Robbinstown Road. Miller Berry & Sons is run by Dean Berry. He said the business was started in 1968 by his father Clarence Berry. He use to have 22 employees but now only has 8 employees. His company manufactures casket mattresses, spring beds and elevating mechanisms. Mr. Berry told me the business has gotten worse over the years because everyone is being cremated which means no one is in need of a casket. He also has another business as well. Miller Berry & Sons Salt Hay was started back in the early 1900's. They bailed over 100,000 bails of salt hay a year. To this day they only bail around 2,000 a year. The salt hay industry was very popular in Port Norris. Both businesses are still family owned and operated but struggling day to day.

Ricci Brothers Sand Co was next on my ventures through Port Norris. This business is located on Dragston Road. Mr. Samuel Ricci Sr. sat down with me and told his story about how this company came to be. The Sand Company was started back in 1958 but only by accident. In the 1940's two farmers Anthony Ricci and Sam Ricci were getting ready to put in a irrigation well for the farm and when they went down 60ft they realized the silica sand and gravel looked good for mining and distributing to buyers. So they sent it away for testing and the sample came back with perfect results. The brothers knew that their farm would not support four additional families so plans were made to someday start mining. In 1980 they started drying sand. The company started with around 10 employees and in the 60's had around 35 employees. They service customers along the Atlantic Coast, Canada and even as far as the Middle East and Asia. Mr. Ricci said business has grown and is better



Logan Sutton with his model of the Knights of Pythias Hall.

now. He deals with a lot of water filtration companies but also has to be on top of making sure everything meets the standards. Not that long ago when Super Storm Sandy hit our area it washed away Fortescue Beach so Ricci Brothers Sand was brought in by the truck loads to restore the beach and bring it back to life.

One of the last businesses that I visited was Vic's Service Center located on Main Street. Again every business that I went to had a story to tell. His business was started back in 1972 but before that there were 3 other thriving businesses there. Mr. Vic Hruza told me there was a Brick making business called Port Norris Concrete Block and it was started back in 1934. They made brick and concrete blocks. Around 1938 Port Norris Express was started. They were a trucking and auto repair company who to this day is now located on North Ave. In the front of the store in the 1950's was a grocery store called Sal's & Joe's. It was a little convenient store for the local town folk. Mr. Hruza said his auto repair shop use to be busier back in the day. Most of his current customers are from out of town. He puts in many hours but enjoys his work.

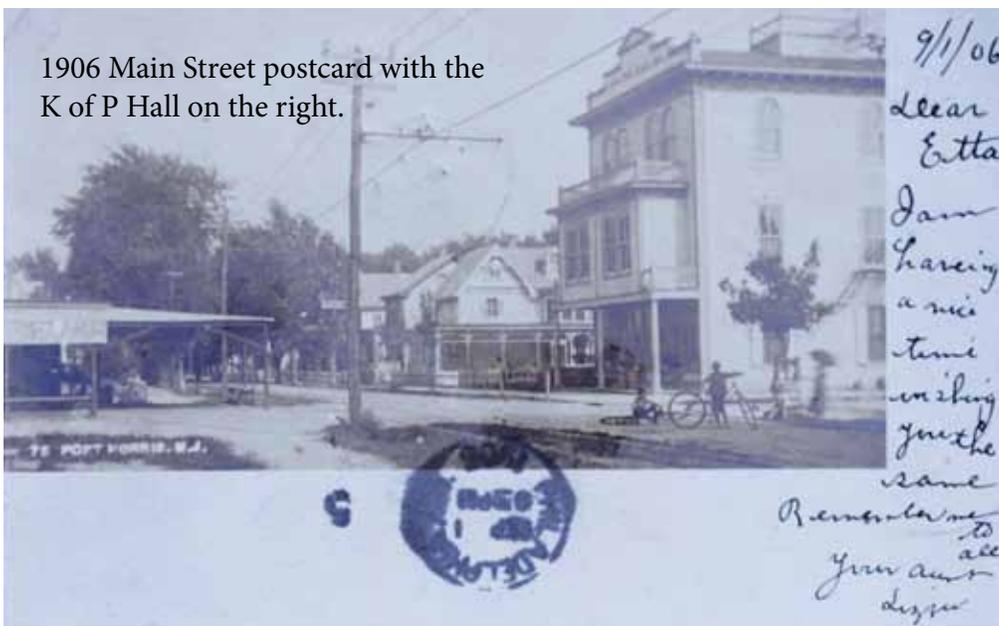
There were three businesses that intrigued me in Port Norris but they are no longer here. Trotters Race Track which was located on Yock Wock Road, The Palomino which is located on Main Street, and Knights of Pythias Hall which was located on the corner of Main and Market Street. Trotters Race Track was started back in the early 1930's. They were known for doing sulky racing which is a single person cart that's attached to a horse for races. People came from out of state to race their horses. I was told it was a very booming place to visit on the weekends. I came across a couple of photos from the track that were neat to see. I can only imagine what it was like.

The Palomino to this day is still standing on the corner of Main and Bacon Street. It was built in 1850. Every person I

talked to seemed to have a fond memory of The Palomino. In the 1920's it was a private home owned by C.W. Hand. Mr. Hand was a oysterman and owned a garage in Port Norris where he sold Dodge and Graham Trucks. This house/restaurant was sold and rented to numerous people over the years. There was some amazing food and many intellectual meetings between Rotary and Oysterman's Associations. If these walls could talk I can't imagine what they would say. It's sad to drive by and see The Palomino house vacant and knowing the history of it.

The one that intrigued me the most was the K of P Hall. It was a happening business in Port Norris. It was built in 1872. It was a three story high building with many thriving businesses. The first floor was the American Store (which reminds you of a ACME) and located out back was a small candy store. The second floor was The Gem Theater, a dance floor and roller skating rink, and it also held high school plays and a opera house. The final floor was Knights of Pythias headquarters and meeting hall. I'm not sure when but it did burn down and was rebuilt in 1902. Unfortunately the building is no longer there. It is just a empty lot. I was able to locate with the help of Mr. Richard Smith (Vice-President of the historical society) a lot of show programs from the K of P Hall. He was a wealth of knowledge and I'm so thankful for all the help he gave me.

From the start of this project I couldn't of imagined I would walk away with a clearer image of how Port Norris use to be. From the bustling street with the trolley car to the busy marines with the oyster boats and the many visitors from out of town. I spoke to a lot of my family members and family friends who grew up when Port Norris was the happening place. The stories they told me made me chuckle and made me feel they truly loved this place and were happy to grow up in such a amazing town with such history.



1906 Main Street postcard with the K of P Hall on the right.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Mr. Smith for his knowledge and his literature about the history of Port Norris.

Thanks for the time all the business owners sat down with me. Mr. Capaldi, Mr. Berry, Mr. Ricci Sr., Mr. Hruza

Thank you family & friends for all of the fond memories of how Port Norris use to be.

Compobosso, Italy to Philadelphia, PA to Port Norris, NJ

By Joyce Massey

My grandfather, Antonio DelRossi, was born in Compobosso, Italy in 1868. He immigrated to America in 1880 at the age of 11 1/2. I don't know who traveled with him to America, but I do remember as a child that he had a sister who used to visit him in Port Norris. She died in Philadelphia in 1959. I do know that some of her family moved to York, PA because years ago I visited a few of my cousins there.

Antonio worked as a laborer and also sold fruit and vegetables from a cart on the streets of Philadelphia. He became an American citizen in 1891. He married 3 times. His first wife, Domenica, was my father's mother. She bore 6 children, only 2 of which ever reached adulthood: that was my father and his older sister Frances. Domenica died from pneumonia after giving birth to her sixth child who also died from pneumonia a month later.

Although my father was always known as Andrew all his adult life, he was actually named Carmine at birth. I think Andrew may have been his middle name and he apparently liked that name better because that was the name he used.

Sometime after marrying his second wife in 1901, my grandfather moved from Philadelphia to Strawberry Avenue in Port Norris, NJ, where he resided until his death in June of 1954. He rented the land at first, but eventually purchased 89 acres for farming. His second wife died while living in Port Norris in 1910. There were two daughters from that marriage: Maime and Mary.

He married his third wife, also named Domenica, in 1911. She was the grandmother that I knew as I grew

up. She bore 3 children: Rose, Angelina and Carmen. They grew up on Strawberry Avenue and attended public schools in Port Norris. Rose, Carmen and my father lived their entire lives in Port Norris. My dad was only 4 years old when my grandfather moved there. My aunts Frances and Angelina both married and moved away from the area.

Strawberry Avenue, for quite some time, was referred to as "Little Italy" because of all the Italian families that lived on that road. They all were farmers at one time.

My grandfather was instrumental, along with other Catholic men in the area, in acquiring land and building the first and only Catholic Church in Port Norris in 1913. He was also one of the first trustees of the church. Mass is still celebrated in that church to this day. St. Anthony's Roman Catholic Church

As a child, I remember my grandfather raising hogs for food. I also remember being very afraid of them. They were huge! Their pen was next to the barn. I can't remember what other animals were on the farm then. I do remember a man-made pond in the back yard filled with big goldfish. They always fascinated me. My mother was always warning us not to get too close to the edge for fear that we might fall into the pond. Fortunately, it was not very deep. My older brother Bob fell in twice that I can remember!

In his later years my grandfather rented out the farm land to other local farmers when he was no longer able to farm it himself. He was 85 at the time of his death. The farm was finally sold about 5 or 6 years ago.

Pickings

July 11, 1890 Walter S. Chambers and party had exceedingly good luck yesterday; they arrived at Bivalve wharf with a catch of one hundred and ten nice weak fish. Walter says he has broke his record.

August 1, 1888 Geo. D. Fagan, who has been visiting the peach country in Delaware, reports that although the crop was at first supposed to be large, the yield, it is now thought, through the yellows and other causes will not reach half a crop, and that what they have does not compare with the Jersey peaches. Even in Medford, the greatest peach growing country over there, the yield will only reach about half of what was at first supposed it would.

August 2, 1890 A very interesting game of ball was played yesterday between the "Muskrats" and "Minks." Wm. Cobb and Harry Green were the battery for the "Muskrats," and George Conahay and Walter Sharp for the "Minks." The score was 11 to 8 in favor of the "Muskrats."

November 20, 1888 Captain George Randolph spends his idle moments waiting for the train in the evening spinning yarns. He can tell silver stories so perfectly that the small boys who listen commence immediately to look at the floor for nuggets of silver.

History of the Robbinstown School, Main Street, Port Norris

THEN



NOW



Metamorphosis of a Treasure

By Jordan Robbins

Age 17 - September 29, 2008

Research paper for Robbinstown School Scholarship Program

Situated in the quiet, peaceful town of Port Norris, New Jersey, the old Robbinstown School resides at Main and Lincoln Streets. This piece of the past has been given a new name and a new lease on life. It is now the Robbinstown School Library. On most days, the outside sun continues to glisten through the wavy glass panes and reflect gently off the glossy book covers within - just as it has done for the last 141 years.

Constructed in 1856, it was erected for use as a house of worship for both Baptist and Methodist. One of the churches had burned down and the closest established church was located in Dividing Creek, an approximate four mile strenuous walk or ride in a horse and buggy.

In 1867 it began to be used as a schoolhouse, and in 1874 Richard W. Robbins deeded the building to the schools trustees and it officially became Robbinstown School.

A barbed wire fence protected the students from the trolley tracks in front of the school. A hand bell called the students to class. Boys and girls formed separate parallel lines before entering. Chest-high slate blackboards embellished the whitewashed walls. A potbellied stove in the center of the room radiated an equator of heat to the students surrounding it. The teacher's dog was often a regular in the classroom, resting on the plank floor alongside its owner. A small pump organ, later replaced by a piano, accompanied daily singing. Black splatters from pens dipped in inkwells gave character to the student desks.

After 1952, the outhouses at the rear of the building were replaced with an indoor bathroom and the potbellied stove was replaced with oil heat.

The school closed in the later 1960s until was reopened for special education classes through 1977. In 1981 Commercial

Township based a tool loan program there for a short time until federal funding ran out.

In mid 1997, concerned citizens of Commercial Township acquired ownership from the school board and extensive renovations were done. The roof was replaced and new plumbing and heating systems were installed. The floors were refinished to a glowing luster. The addition of a central air conditioning unit advanced the building to a modern luster. On October 19, 1997, a ribbon cutting ceremony was held dedicating the tiny, but enduring, building for use as an informal library and museum.

Much of the population surrounding the Port Norris area does not even know of the library's existence. You could drive by it a few times and not even know you have passed it. The library doesn't resemble any of the new "high tech" facilities, nor does it look like especially pretty from the outside. The cracked repainted siding and towering crooked oaks, whose limbs dangle without a single trace of green, testify to its age.

Walking up to the library you will most likely encounter the bed of crushed clam shells crumbling boisterously underneath the soles of your shoes. After completing that obstacle, you will arrive at a little, uneven wooden platform that has faded with time. You are met with a steel door that doesn't particularly invite you to explore the contents held in security on the other side of the threshold.

As you enter and move across the wooden floor boards that creak with every step, the past closes around you, insulating you from the computers and new editions used as decoys to attract a "younger crowd" and "out of towners".

If you are a newcomer you may be impressed with the obvious age of the building or the restoration, or even the quantity and diversity of the books available. But, if you are one of the "insiders", about ninety percent of the towns population logged in to the genealogies housed there, you feel a sense of belonging, an embrace as real as a loved one's return from a long journey.

Robbinstown School Free Public Library Today

By Faye Hickman

As Jordan noted, it started out with a group of citizens wanting to have a Library in town and put to use the old school house. In the beginning many volunteered their time cataloging the many books that were donated to us. Vertie Kunkle was one of the volunteers that helped us learn how to catalog. When the library opened the volunteers took turns opening the doors and manning the desk.

The township provided us with the building and utilities. The volunteers did sales and fund drives to raise the money to help buy supplies and books. (at the time most books were donated) Every spring we would hold a big Book, Bake, Flower and yard sale. We usually made around \$1000. We received generous donations from the township residents and businesses to help us along.

A few years ago we were concerned with the deterioration of the building foundation. The township got a grant and the building was raised and a new foundation was laid. Also at the time the downstairs bathroom was remodeled and made handicap accessible. Most of the books and shelves from downstairs were packed and moved to the Building next Laws and Laws. This building was used as the Library until work was complete.

In 2003, the township agreed to hire a Librarian for 10 hours a week. Since then we have had 4 different ladies as librarian. Maureen White (2002-03), Lisa Jones (2005-2009), Sandi Watson Lore (2010), and Cindy Tawles (2011 to present).

I am not sure of the year but the township provided us with computers and internet.

In 2007, we started a scholarship program. Encouraging junior and senior high school students to get involved with the daily running of the library. We set up a program that they would work at the library a designated number of hours and they would received a \$500 scholarship when the started college. From 2007 thru 2014 we have provided 11 students with scholarships amounting to \$9500. Recipients have been Jordan Robbins, Lisa Jones, Katherine Hawley, Barney Hollinger, Allison Ball, Grace Watson, Chris Moore, Dawn Watson, Bethany Watson, Megan Moore, Keira McMeekin.

During the Summer Reading Program this year, 344 books were read by the participants. The awards were presented on Tuesday, September 13, 2016 at 5:30 pm. Pizza and sweet treats served as well.



1st place - Kaden Bevan Read 155 books
2nd place - Robert Romano Read 27 books
Both under the age of 13 years old.



Faces from the past. Date unknown.



The Port Norris Historical Society
Recognized **Nahzeem Gales** For
Outstanding Efforts in History for
2015-2016 Academic Year
at the Port Norris Middle School
June 13, 2016

Liz Hoffman, PNHS Treasurer presents
award to Nahzeem Gales, at graduation.
See our past student awards
historicportnorris.org/awards.htm

SMALL TOWN - BIG DECISION

By Carol Saul Gromer

The news came long before first light. It was just after 4:30 in the morning when the bells of the Port Norris Methodist Church rang out. They were soon joined by the bells of the other churches in town and those in neighboring villages as they chimed out Victory. The war to end all wars was over.

Before the sun had risen, the celebration in Port Norris was started by four girls with sleigh bells and flags. Soon a parade swelled to a size that would have astounded many large cities.

"All over town every shade was rolled to the top and a light shone brightly from every window." It was a beautiful sight as the parade marched through the streets with four mounted marshals leading. Ladies left their kitchens, men on their way to work made a quick turn away from the oyster wharves and fell in line with the decorated automobiles, grocery wagons, milk wagons and scores of children who followed a brass band that seemed to appear out of nowhere. A truck load of people from Dividing Creek went through Port Norris streets cheering and singing. Spectators gathered from other near-by towns to wave and to cheer. At the corner of Market and Chestnut the Kaiser was burned in effigy.

Later that morning "The Advertiser" hurried to get out programs for an evening Victory Sing. The spontaneous outburst of patriotism continued to be fueled by the continuous ringing of the church bells, the band, Red Men, Boy Scouts, Red Cross members and the fire department with all its gleaming apparatus. There were several hastily made floats. One was of the Kaiser in his coffin and John Barleycorn¹. Another was the embalmed body of the "clown prince."² There was a wagon trimmed with flags followed by other gaily trimmed vehicles. When the parade was over, the Kaiser once again was burned in effigy. That evening it was on to the Victory Sing and nearly endless cheers for our country, our flag, our President, our Allies, our Boys and our Victory. The terrible, terrible dark days of war were finally over.

The above paraphrased descriptions from a *Bridgeton Evening News* article dated November 12, 1918, gives us an idea of the jubilation felt by the citizens and the sense of relief that came with knowing their sacrifices had not been in vain.

Even the darkest events have tiny points of light that shine far into the future. This war was no exception. One little girl from North Port Norris didn't fully understand the unrest and upheaval, but in the midst of it she made a decision. She was not yet four years old when the war started, and she had turned eight only three weeks before the great day of victory arrived in 1918. During those years, she saw mothers crying as their sons left home to face an unknown fate. She heard her family and their neighbors read the welcome letters from their boys overseas. On November 11, 1918 the war was



A very young
Ruth Sockwell.
August 12, 1912
Photo courtesy of
Carol Saul Gromer

over, but for some the misery continued. She watched the wounded return home on canes and crutches and with their heads bandaged and their arms in slings.

Somehow she just knew she had to become a nurse and help the soldier boys who were injured and suffering. Years passed, but her resolve to succeed with her mission never wavered even when her father told her he couldn't help her with schooling. If she wanted to be a nurse, she would have to do it on her own. When her boyfriend asked her to marry him, she didn't hesitate to tell him that she was going to be a nurse. If he wanted to wait for her to finish school she would marry him, but first things first. Married women couldn't enroll in nursing school back then so he would have to wait.

She graduated with her coveted RN degree in June of 1931. From then until she retired on the eve of her 80th birthday, she practiced her profession with compassion for those in need. She was never able to help her precious soldier boys directly. There was no war in progress when she finished nursing school. By the time WWII was raging, she had accepted her sweetheart's proposal and was a young wife and mother. Her name had changed from Ruth Sockwell to Ruth Saul, but her devotion to nursing remained the same.

Even if life didn't exactly follow her plan, the war that was so horrible left soft furrows of caring in the mind of that little girl. The seeds of compassion and concern took root there and flowered into a life of service to others. In a way, she did get to help the soldier boys. While practicing her profession for more than 50 years, her patients were often aging veterans or their children and grandchildren. She loved being a nurse and her patients loved her. Ruth Sockwell Saul's career on earth ended on August 1, 2011, at the age of 100 years 9 months and 2 days.

A life well lived and a job well done.

¹John Barleycorn is an autobiographical novel by Jack London dealing with his enjoyment of drinking and struggles with alcoholism. It was published in 1913. The title is taken from the British folksong "John Barleycorn".

²An idiot. A person who is royalty when it comes to fools. Often someone who says they can do something and fails the task.

Editor Note: Thank you Carol for sharing this story with us.

Moment in History:

In 1902 the Interstate Telephone Company was granted permission to place its poles and equipment for telephone and telegraph purposes in Port Norris.

In this photograph, Left to right top to bottom, Man and Dog dog Unknown, Dan Adams, Sam Cobb, Unknown, Harry Cobb, and Unknown.

Harry Cobb worked as a line foreman with the Interstate Telephone Company from 1909-1911.

It is documented in his time records that they would leave Millville on a Monday morning with a crew of 10-12 men and 2 horse-drawn wagons loaded with supplies, including poles, and return on Friday night. During the week, they stayed at boarding houses. The work was divided up in order to stay on schedule. A couple of men first went ahead to dig holes (by hand) for the poles. Then Harry, who was quite strong, would lift the pole by himself and position it in the hole while the others would fill it in with dirt. The wires had to be run from pole to pole and since Sam didn't mind heights, it was also his job.

Their job entailed setting telephone poles throughout southern New Jersey and the poles you see today along #553 from Port Norris to Dividing Creek were put there by Harry and his team.



Photo Courtesy of Carol Robbins

If you can help identify anyone else in this image, please let us know.

MEMBERSHIP

We would love to add your name to our growing list of members. Please give some thought to joining the PNHS. Membership fees are for Individual - \$10, Family - \$15, Benefactor - \$50 and over, and Student - \$1 (no voting privileges) and entitles you to discounts on our merchandise. Click here to renew or join, historicportnorris.org/membership.htm

Or mail your check to: Port Norris Historical Society, PO Box 187, Port Norris, NJ 08349.

Thank you for your support. Membership is key to applying for grants as well as your dollars help us continue with all of our endeavours.

See us on Facebook and our website historicportnorris.org