

Delaware before the Railroads: A Diamond among the States

Dave Tabler

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Delaware before the Railroads is filled with artful images that evoke a pivotal time in Delaware's once-agrarian history.

Dave Tabler's *Delaware before the Railroads* is a rich photographic history of the small but significant state of Delaware in its early days.

Gathering photographs of historical sites, buildings, and artifacts from 1638 (when the colony of New Sweden was founded) to 1832 (when the New Castle & French Town Railroad was chartered), the book illustrates how railroads changed the region by increasing the ease with which people and goods could be transported. This, in turn, changed the flow and rhythm of life in each locale that the railroads reached. To capture the essence of life in Delaware before the industrial age, this travelogue through time thus concentrates on the early Swedish settlers and the Lenni Lenape people before journeying toward the modern world.

The photographs center everyday objects, tools, and possessions that were integral to the lives of Delawareans during the preindustrial era. These images appear in full color and reflect strong attention to detail. There's an eye-catching image of a sailing ship of the sort that brought the first European colonists to New Sweden; another features a living room of the Corbit estate, one of the many interiors that gives a feel for life across the range of culture and class in the period. Still another captures the mist-enshrouded Dover state house; and another, a courthouse refracted through a raindrop.

Esoteric images of early medical and measuring devices like the chondrometer (an instrument for calculating the density of grain, an indicator of quality) and a set of bloodletting implements appear; these serve as reminders of the slow progress of science and engineering throughout the era. A series of clocks details the precision and craftsmanship that was a mainstay of that profession. There are also reminders of historical events that reach beyond the borders of Delaware, including a marker placed by Mason and Dixon on their famous survey.

There is a wealth of information in this short book. Each photograph is accompanied by a descriptive paragraph explaining its importance; many are also cited in the copious end notes that recover the context and importance of the sites and objects being displayed. However, the book is somewhat vague on topics like the physical locations of the scenes it pictures, even though there are aids for placing the photographs within history and culture.

Delaware before the Railroads is an appealing photographic tour through the preindustrial history of the "First State."

MATT BENZING (July 21, 2023)

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