



Our June 2025 meeting will be held on **Monday, June 2, 2025** starting at **7:30 PM**. Historian and diver Dan Lieb will present an engaging program that will explore the history of **NEW JERSEY SHIPWRECKS**. Meeting location: Point Pleasant Borough Municipal Building, 2233 Bridge Ave., Point Pleasant Borough. The meeting is free and open to the public and you need not be a member to attend. Light refreshments will be provided.

“Operator, What Number Please?”

Telephone Service is brought to Point Pleasant

In a 1985 Leader article, “The Tide of Time Reflected”, we read that “Twenty-nine-year-old Joseph W. Johnson of Philadelphia and bike-riding friend, Frank W. Dampman saw the “For Sale: Point Pleasant, N.J. Hardware Store” ad in a Philadelphia newspaper. They came to Point Pleasant and purchased the business and inventory from C.C. Cline and Joseph Backes for \$5,200. In 1892, Dampman decided to return to Philadelphia, and sold his interest in the business to Johnson.

Joseph Johnson had vision and fostered an interest in partnering with other local businessmen to bring technology and services to the community. When he saw a need for a local bank to service business and residents, he joined 8 local men to charter Ocean County National Bank (now a part of Bank of America) and served on its Board of Directors for the remainder of his life. He began selling home furnishings in his hardware store, and as the business grew, he joined with a partner to open Johnson’s Furniture Mart in the Backes Building at Trenton and Bay Avenues.

Johnson operated the hardware store out of the Knox Building at the corner of Arnold and Cincinnati Avenues until 1900 when he built the iconic 3-story Tudor structure designed by Saratoga architect S. Gifford Slocum which currently houses Bain’s Hardware.

When Bell’s patent on the telephone expired, Johnson saw an opportunity to introduce telephone technology to the businesses and residents of Point Pleasant. After determining they could utilize the lines currently powering the local trolley service to carry telephone communications, Johnson partnered with O.B. Van Camp, and William B. Goodenough to form the Ocean Telephone Company in 1895. They set up a small network linking Point Pleasant Hardware to O.B. VanCamp’s store, and to Mangold’s Pharmacy, and then began to sell subscriptions to their telephone service. In his book, “On History’s Trail,” William Hess tells us that the Ocean Telephone expanded to about sixteen locations, including the store owned by State Senator John G. Web Havens’ (Goodenough’s brother-in-law) in Burrsville (now Brick Township). Havens’ store was reached by attaching a five-mile telephone line to trees that lined the road. They also connected two doctors, R.W Herbert and A.S Higgins in Manasquan. This was accomplished by attaching the wire to the rail on the draw bridge over the Manasquan River and running the line through a garden hose on the river bottom across the draw opening in the center of the bridge.

Seeing a need to expand their operation, seek additional capital to erect poles and lines, in April of 1900 Johnson formed a new corporation, the Sea-Shore Telephone Company, with Henry Johnson, and Charles. W. Dampman (Frank’s brother). They purchased the assets of the Ocean Telephone Company for \$5,065.95. Johnson petitioned the Point Pleasant Beach Borough Council to be allowed to erect poles and telephone transmission wires throughout the town “to furnish telephone service to the people of Point Pleasant and vicinity.”

Early telephones were of the “coffee grinder” design, where a small crank generated an electrical current that activated a shutter on the operator’s switchboard which prompted the operator to ask you with whom you wished to be connected. The original switchboard was located behind the hardware store in the Dampman home where Mrs. Dampman was the first operator.

Before Radio, Television, or the Internet, the telephone was a way to disseminate important news quickly. So, it was when President McKinley died from an assassin’s bullet. Colonel Hess relates how Mr. Havens, the superintendent of the Life Saving Service, who had a direct line to New York, called the Point Pleasant operator to report the news and instructed Mrs. Dampman’s 14-year-old daughter (who was covering for her mother who was attending a social function) to notify the subscribers. By the time she got through the first ten, her switchboard was inundated with callers seeking to spread the word to others. One of them, Mr. Cox, who was a stockbroker and seeing the import of the news, sought to verify that it was not a prank call. The young lady sought out her mother to return to take over the task. Soon, Mr. Cox appeared in their home, insisting upon confirmation.

By 1925 the telephone industry in the Northeast was dominated by New York Bell Telephone competing for the local customer base. The Sea-Shore Telephone Company had nearly 300 customers when it sold their franchise to New York Bell which later became New Jersey Bell Telephone Company.

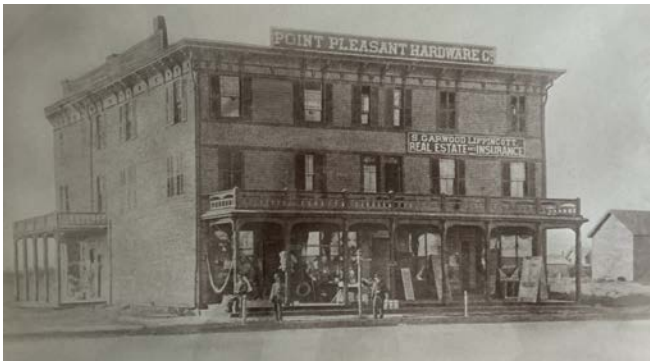
Joseph Johnson continued his involvement in the community, helping to develop emergency services, business growth, and serving as the president of the Point Pleasant Beach Board of Education. His businesses grew with the community, and when he left them to his children and grandchildren, he also left them his dedication to serving the surrounding communities.



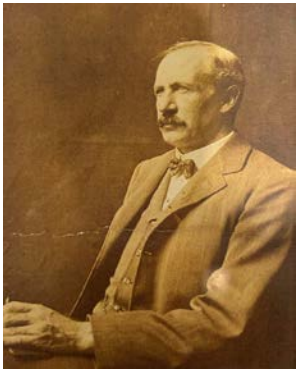
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The 3 story ‘Knox Building’’, was the original home of Point Pleasant Hardware and in 1895 was the first headquarters of Ocean Telephone company.



Joseph W. Johnson

Joseph Johnson’s daughter, Ellen, known to her family as Penny, wrote a series of short stories about growing up in Point Pleasant. Below is a story involving the early telephone service.

Some Winter Guests

By Ellen Johnson Hancock

When I was old enough to have my driver’s license, I would relieve my father by driving to Philadelphia whenever he had errands for the hardware store. It was a great opportunity for me to learn more about my father, his family, and his new life experience of living in a small seaside town named Point Pleasant.’

One story involved the Bell Telephone Company. When Bell’s telephone patent expired, the business was open to anyone. My father and his friend, Frank Dampman, chose to try their knowledge and imagination with this new possibility.’

The town (Point Pleasant Traction Company) operated a trolley system during the summer months. It was not in use during the winter. My father, with permission from the trolley company, found that these wires worked as conductors for voice communication. He eventually took over the business from Dampman and established his company’s wires and poles. He even ran lines under the Manasquan River through a hose. As business grew, the competition from Bell Telephone made it difficult to compete. He sold out to the larger company and continued his work in the family’s new hardware store.’

Papa would tell me stories about those cold winter nights when they were still in the old store. His fellow townspeople of Point Pleasant would gather around the large pot-bellied coal stove to swap stories of bygone times in the town and the strange people who lived in the adjacent Pine Barrens. I am sure stories of shipwrecks, and the Jersey Devil were told and retold.’

One exceptionally cold, snowy evening, the men were gathered around the stove when the front door opened, and a group of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen stepped inside. I say gentlemen because a sight like this was rare in this small town. The ladies were snug in their furs and of course the very fancy hats of Victorian times. My father introduced himself and asked if he could be of help. One of the men introduced himself as Mr. Hamilton Fish. Mr. Fish explained his need for a telephone. The stationmaster had directed him to the store with a telephone. Mr. Fish explained their predicament of missing the exchange of trains in Manasquan to Lakewood. He said he would like to contact Mr. Jay Gould to explain the situation. My father called and a voice answered, “This is the butler speaking’. My father explained the Fish’s situation to the butler. As he hung up the phone, he pictured Gould’s party, with all the glitter and well-dressed socialites gathered around the massive fireplaces, and compared that evening’s entertainment with his, sitting around the pot-bellied coal stove in the hardware store. He just pictured it; I don’t think he would have cared to change places.”

(Written by Jim Harris)