

Upper Merion History Signs

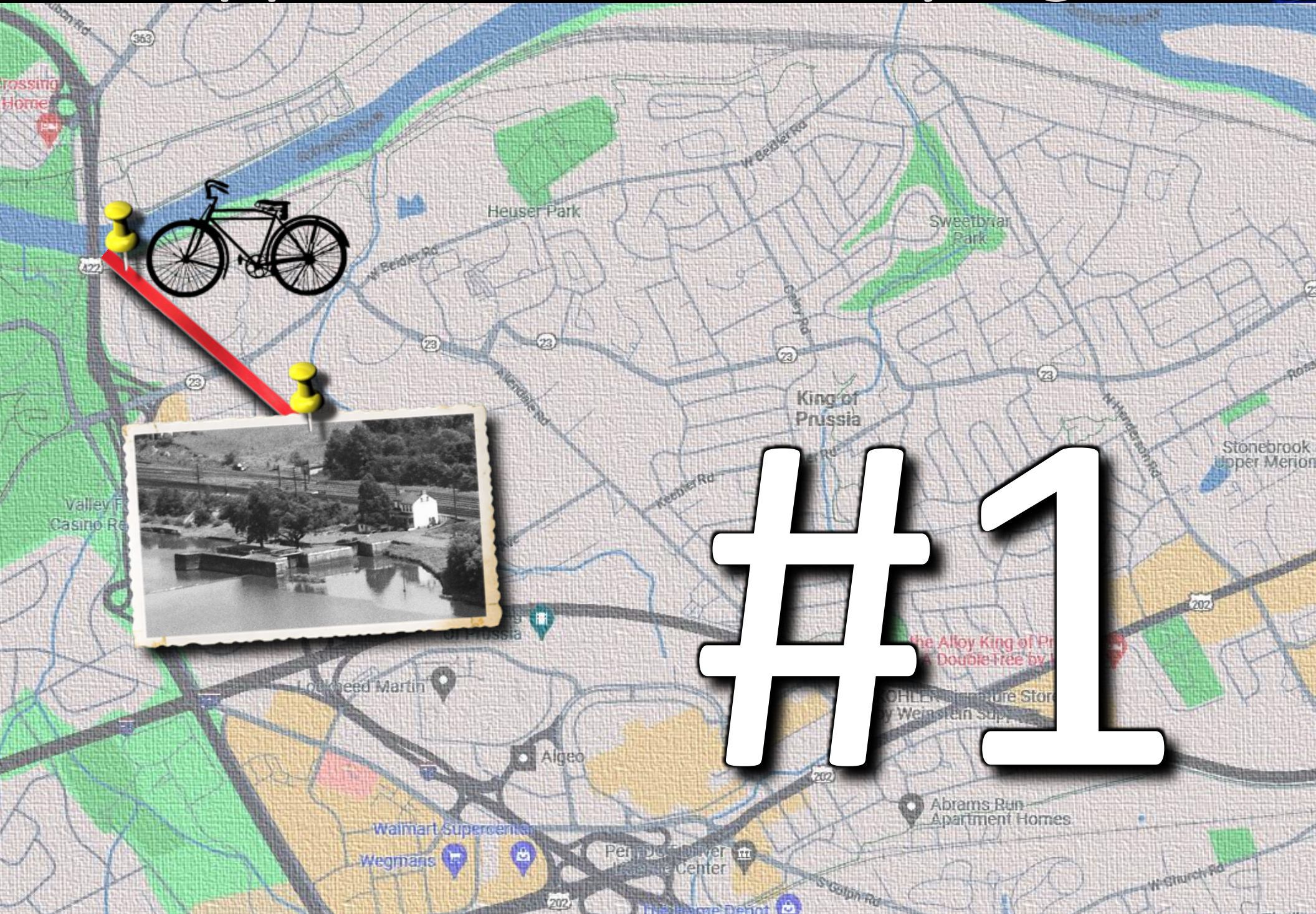
Designer - Neil Sardiñas

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Don Herbert, Scott Sibley, Steve Reilly,
Tina Smith, Gerri Vattimo, MaryAnn Ahearn,
Paul Salamy, Cathy Hranek, Perry Hamilton,
Tina Garzillo, Jerry Recupido, Amanda Lafty,
Kurt Bell, Sue Bradley and Lydia Dan.

Upper Merion History Signs

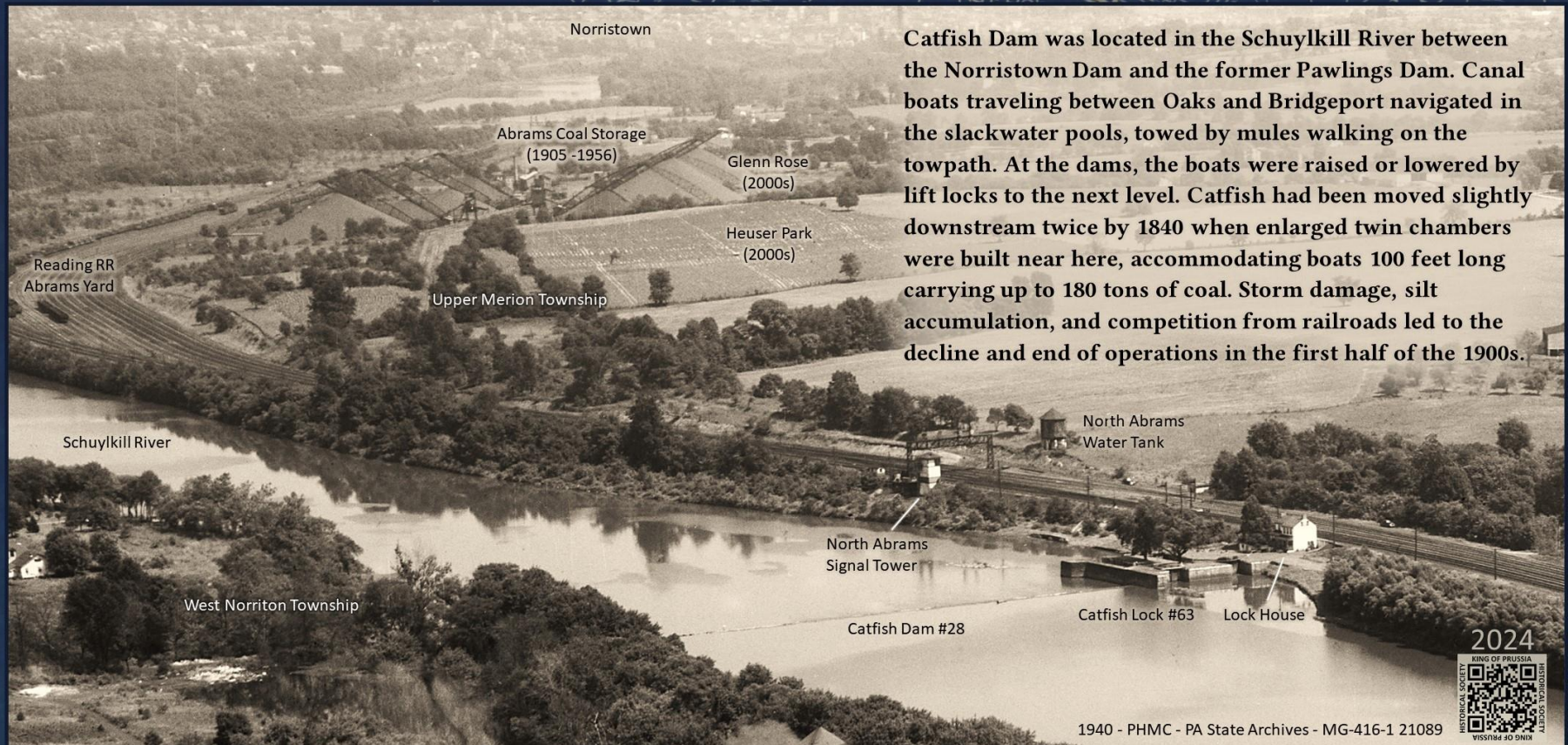
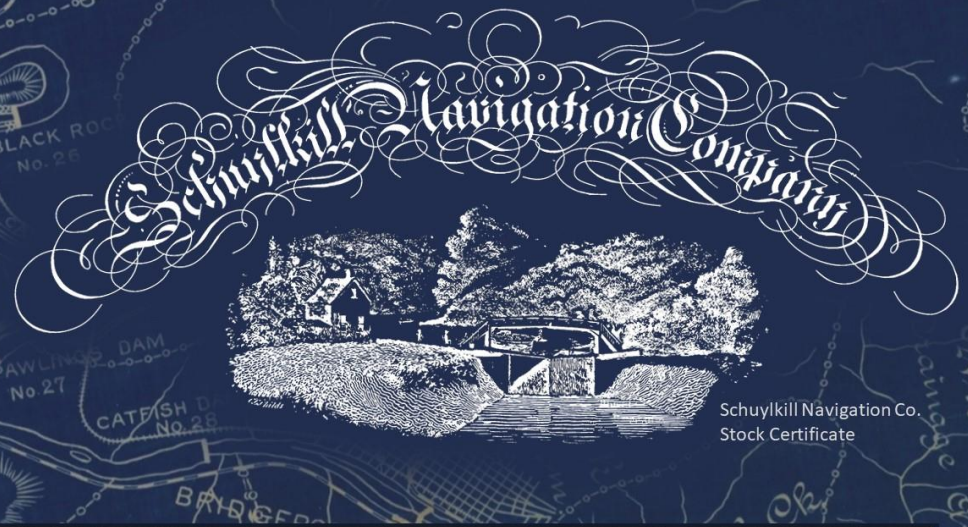


Upper Merion History Signs



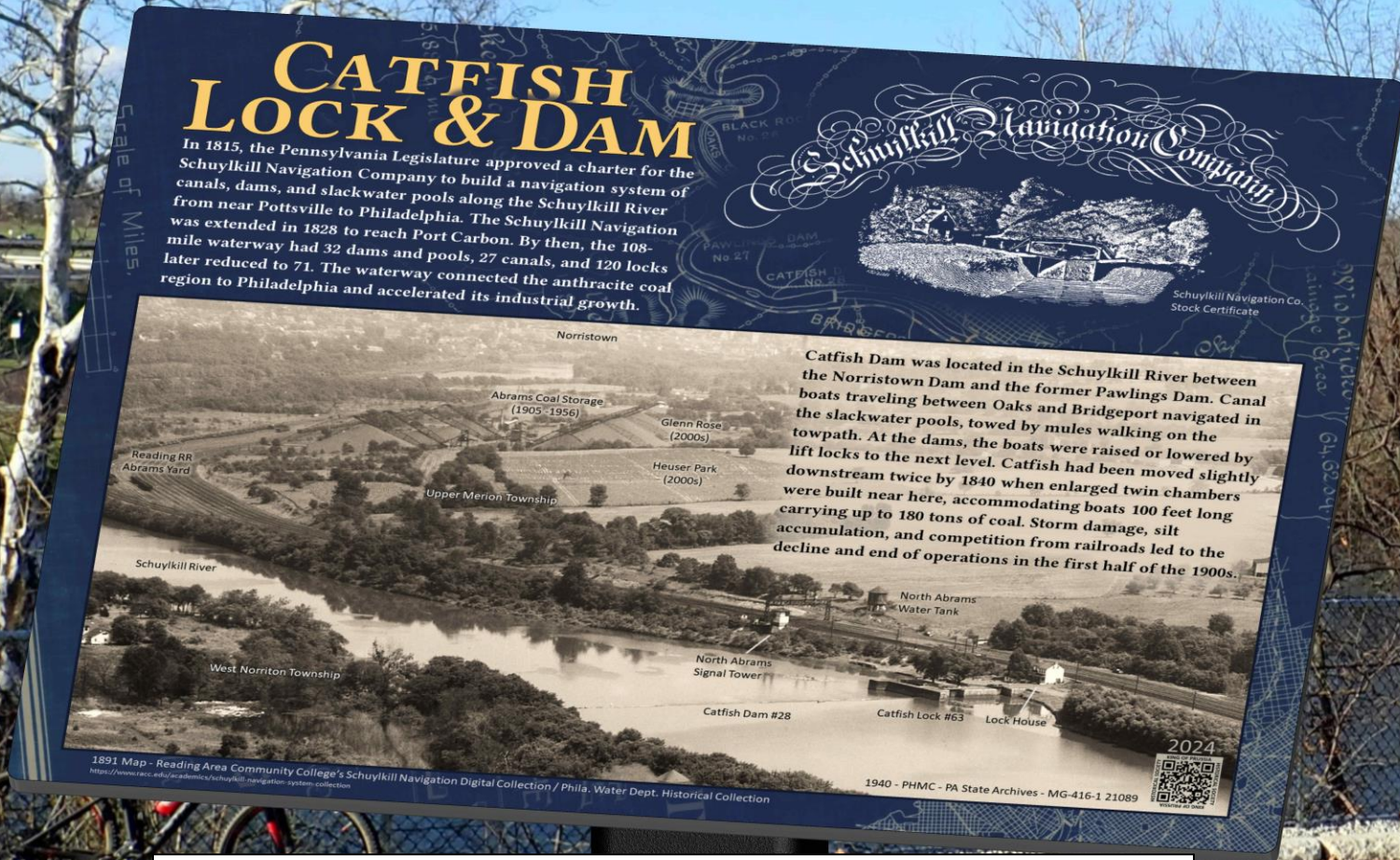
CATFISH LOCK & DAM

In 1815, the Pennsylvania Legislature approved a charter for the Schuylkill Navigation Company to build a navigation system of canals, dams, and slackwater pools along the Schuylkill River from near Pottsville to Philadelphia. The Schuylkill Navigation was extended in 1828 to reach Port Carbon. By then, the 108-mile waterway had 32 dams and pools, 27 canals, and 120 locks later reduced to 71. The waterway connected the anthracite coal region to Philadelphia and accelerated its industrial growth.



1891 Map - Reading Area Community College's Schuylkill Navigation Digital Collection / Phila. Water Dept. Historical Collection
<https://www.racc.edu/academics/schuylkill-navigation-system-collection>

Upper Merion History Signs

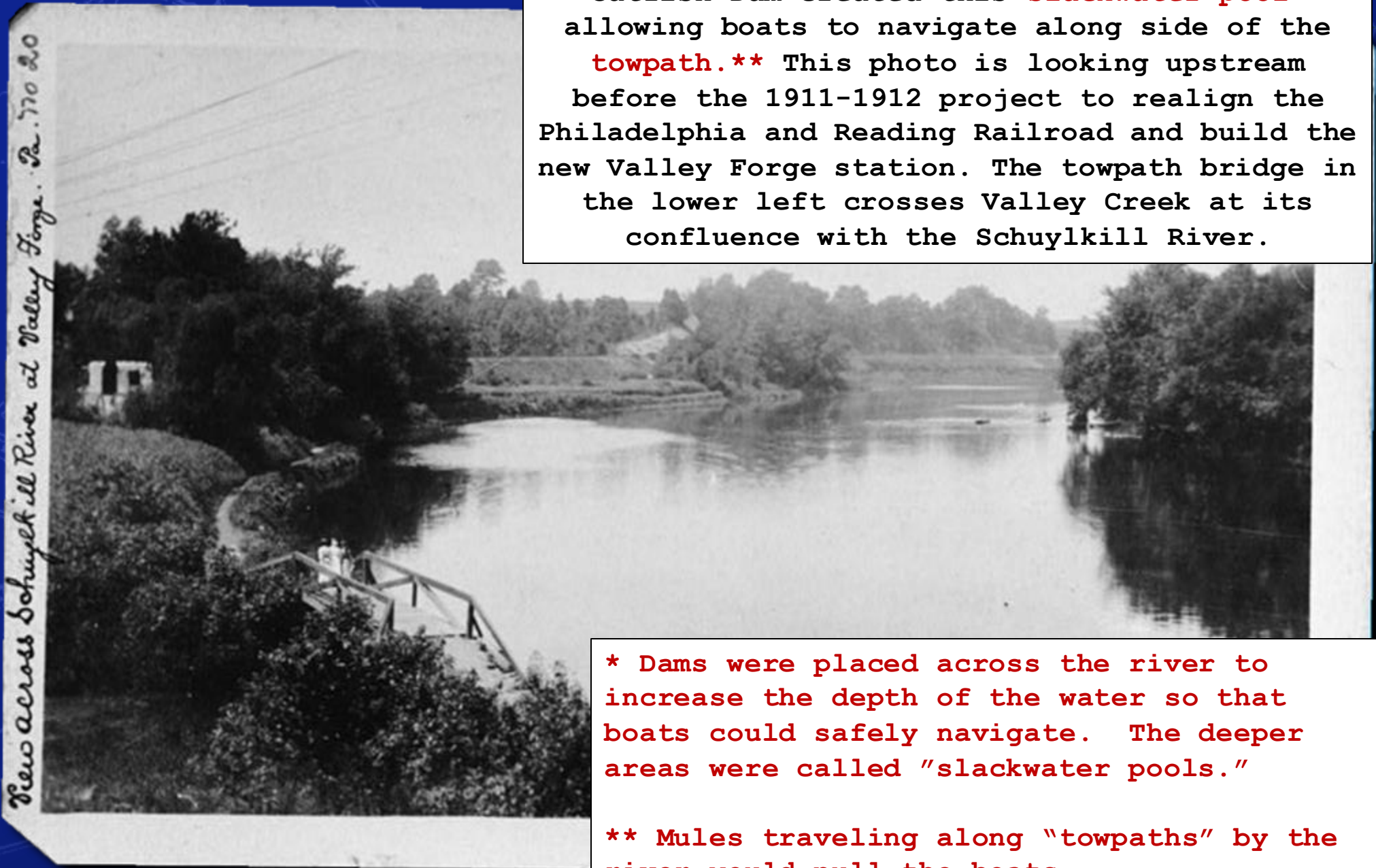


The Catfish Pool's towpath was at the bottom of this slope.

150 years ago, this riverbank was a major throughfare.

Upper Merion History Signs

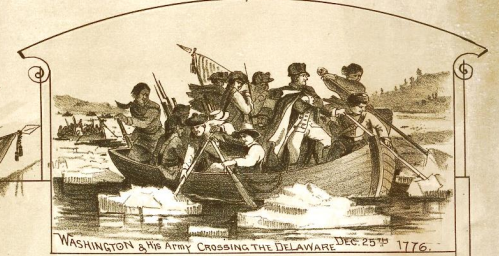
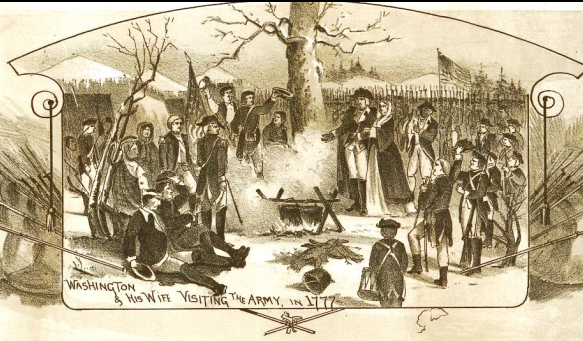
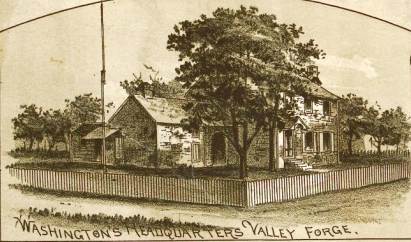
Catfish Dam created this **slackwater pool*** allowing boats to navigate along side of the **towpath.**** This photo is looking upstream before the 1911-1912 project to realign the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad and build the new Valley Forge station. The towpath bridge in the lower left crosses Valley Creek at its confluence with the Schuylkill River.



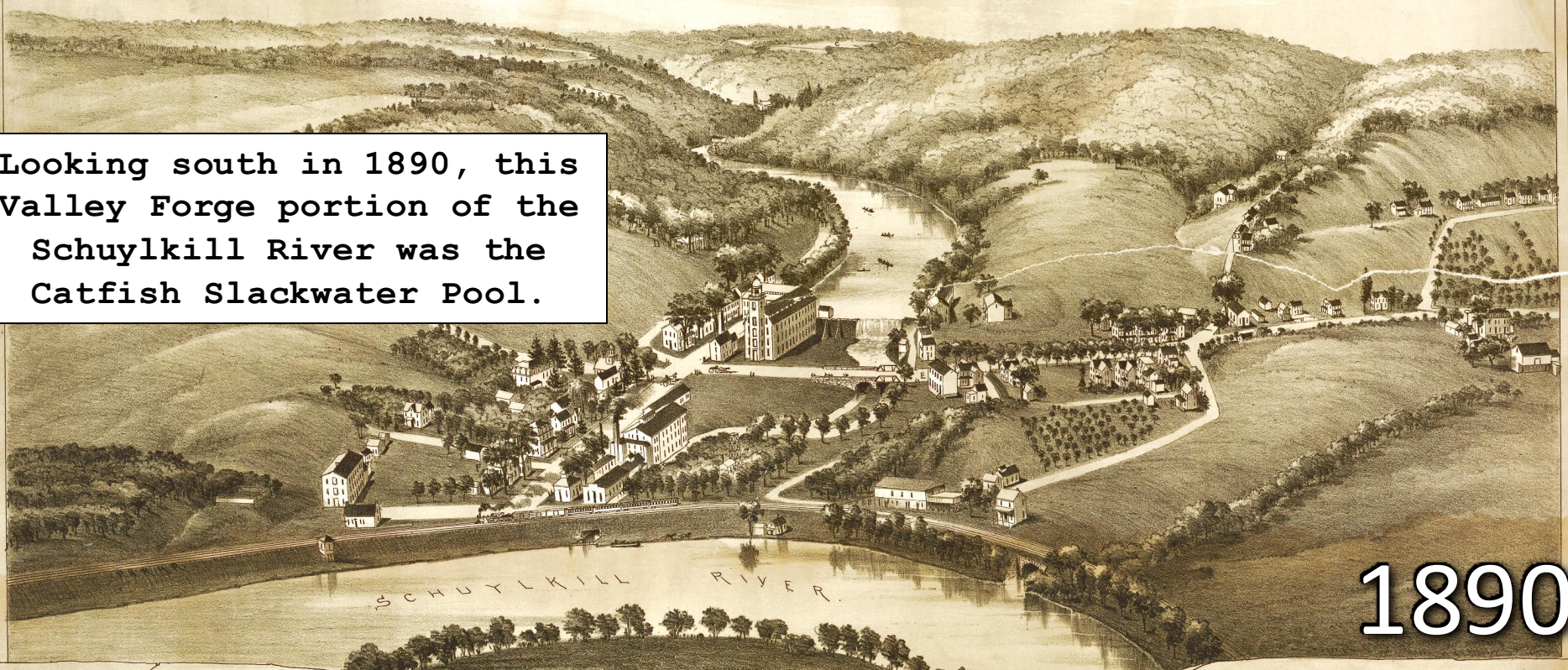
* Dams were placed across the river to increase the depth of the water so that boats could safely navigate. The deeper areas were called "slackwater pools."

** Mules traveling along "towpaths" by the river would pull the boats.

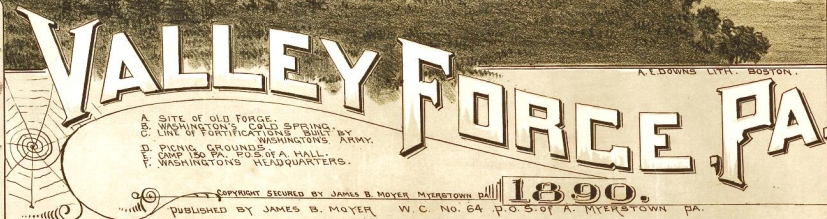
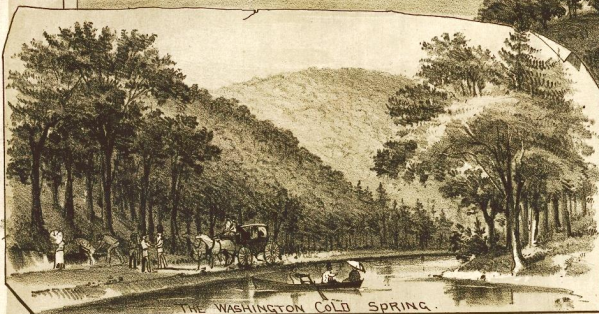
Upper Merion History Signs



Looking south in 1890, this Valley Forge portion of the Schuylkill River was the Catfish Slackwater Pool.



1890

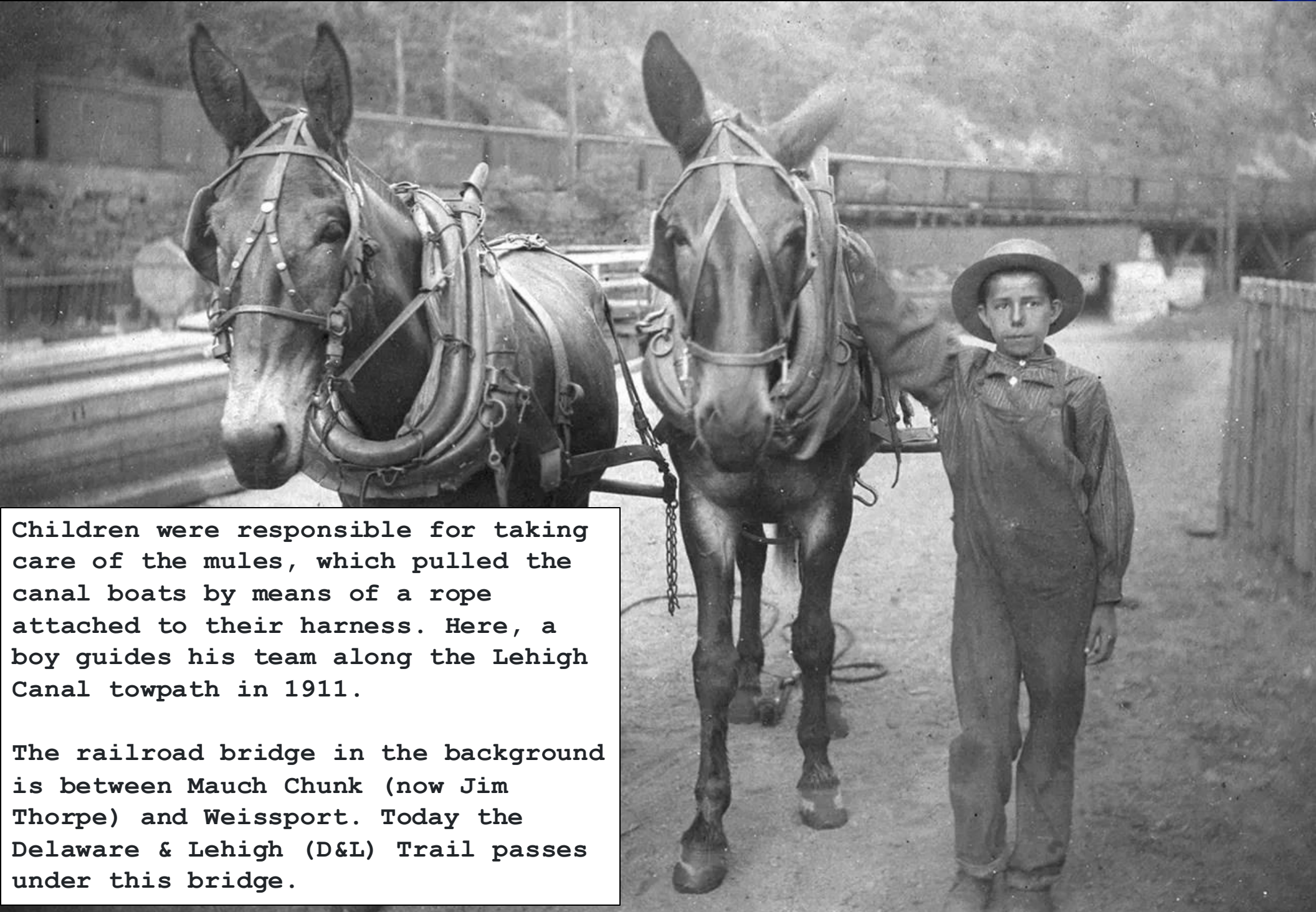


Upper Merion History Signs



Valley Creek Towpath Bridge

Upper Merion History Signs



Children were responsible for taking care of the mules, which pulled the canal boats by means of a rope attached to their harness. Here, a boy guides his team along the Lehigh Canal towpath in 1911.

The railroad bridge in the background is between Mauch Chunk (now Jim Thorpe) and Weissport. Today the Delaware & Lehigh (D&L) Trail passes under this bridge.

Upper Merion History Signs

From the late 1600s through most of the 1700s, Philadelphia was the...

Largest port in America

Largest city in America

Wealthiest city in America

Financial & banking center of America

Capital of Pennsylvania

Capital of the United States

Upper Merion History Signs

By the early 1800s New York City was...

The largest port in America

The largest city in America

The wealthiest city in America

The financial center of America

Upper Merion History Signs

Philadelphia lost 10% of its population to the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793.

In 1800 Washington, D.C. became the capital of the United States

In 1812 Harrisburg became the capital of Pennsylvania

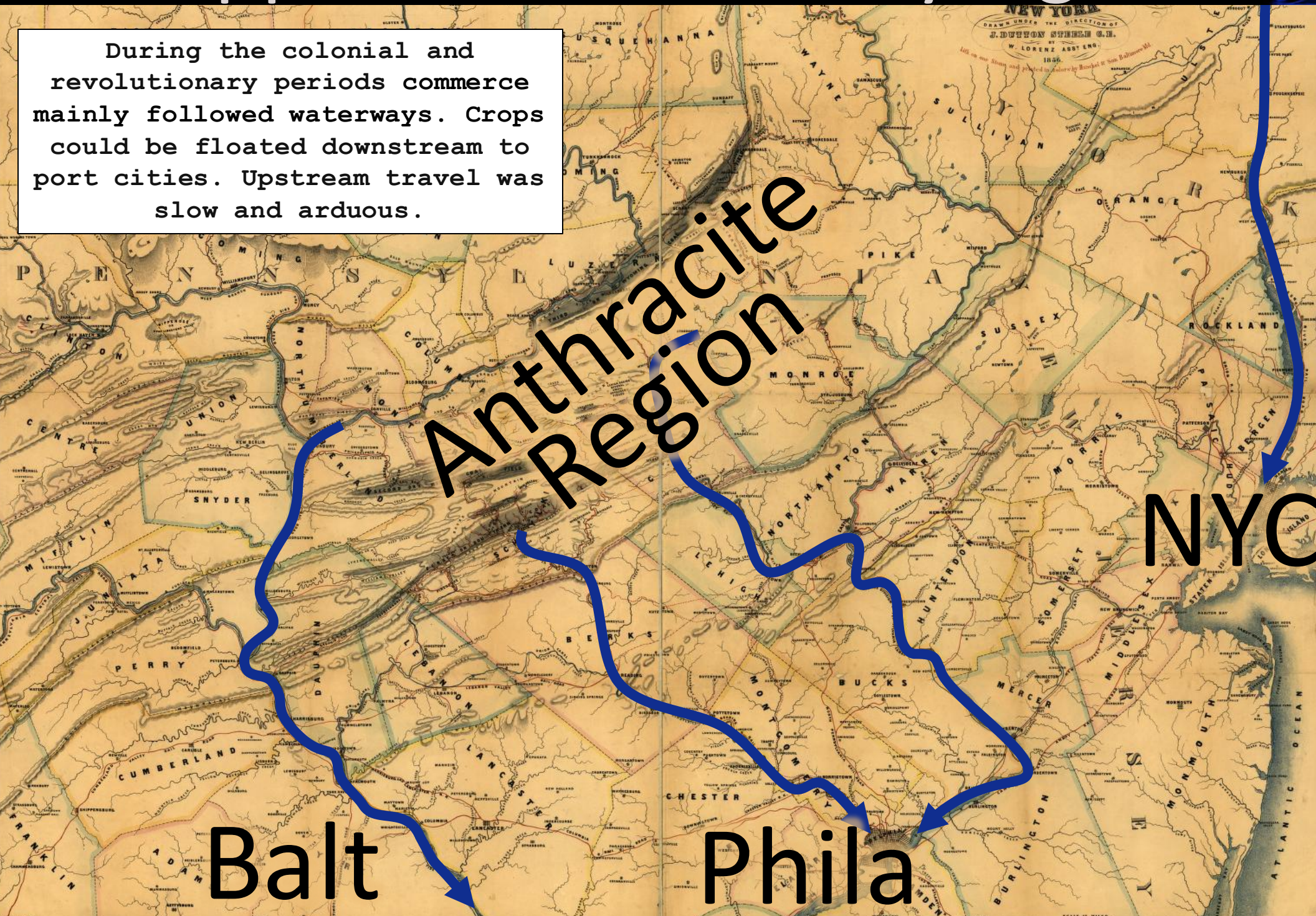
Upper Merion History Signs

What saved Philadelphia?

The late 1790s discovery of anthracite coal at the headwaters of the Schuylkill River ignited the Industrial Revolution.

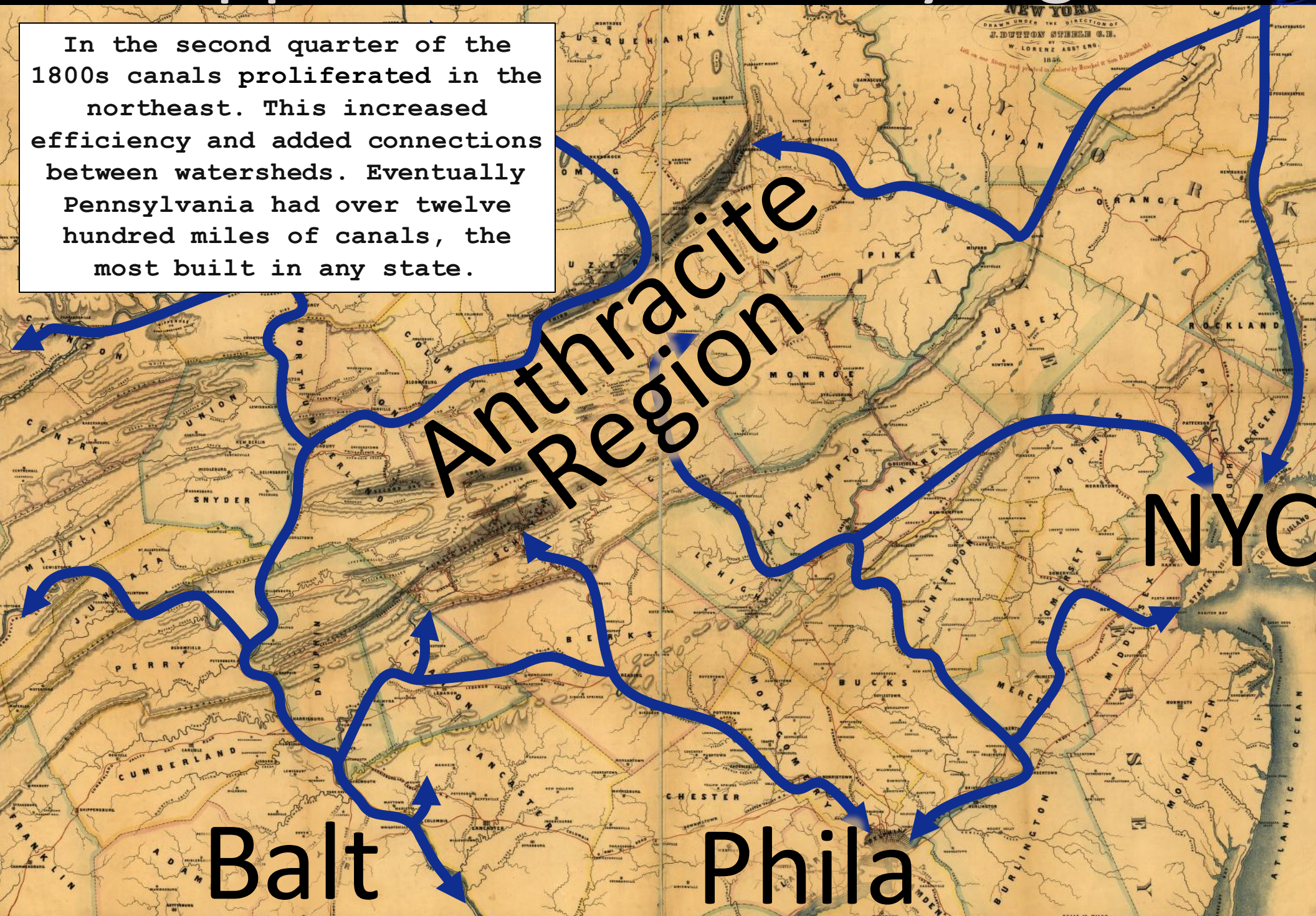
Upper Merion History Signs

During the colonial and revolutionary periods commerce mainly followed waterways. Crops could be floated downstream to port cities. Upstream travel was slow and arduous.



Upper Merion History Signs

In the second quarter of the 1800s canals proliferated in the northeast. This increased efficiency and added connections between watersheds. Eventually Pennsylvania had over twelve hundred miles of canals, the most built in any state.



Upper Merion History Signs

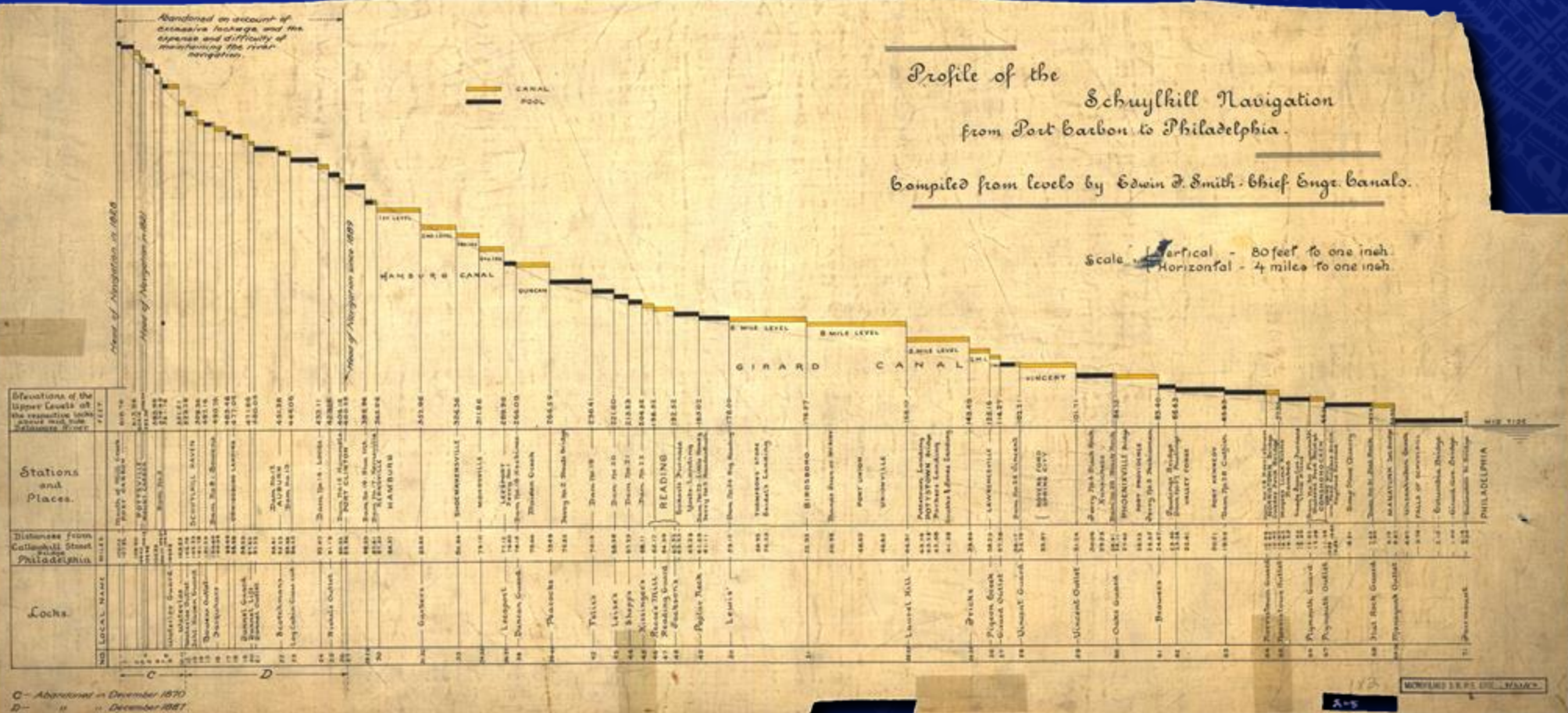
The Schuylkill Navigation is often called the Schuylkill Canal. This name is not accurate. In 1828 there were 27 individually named canals, 32 dams and pools and 120 locks later reduced to 71.

The closest canal upriver to the Catfish Lock & Dam was the Oakes Reach between Mont Claire and Oaks. The closest canal downriver was the Norristown Canal in Bridgeport connecting from the Norristown Dam to Swedesburg. The canal in Bridgeport was originally going to be on the Norristown side of the Schuylkill, but the rival Union Canal Co blocked it.



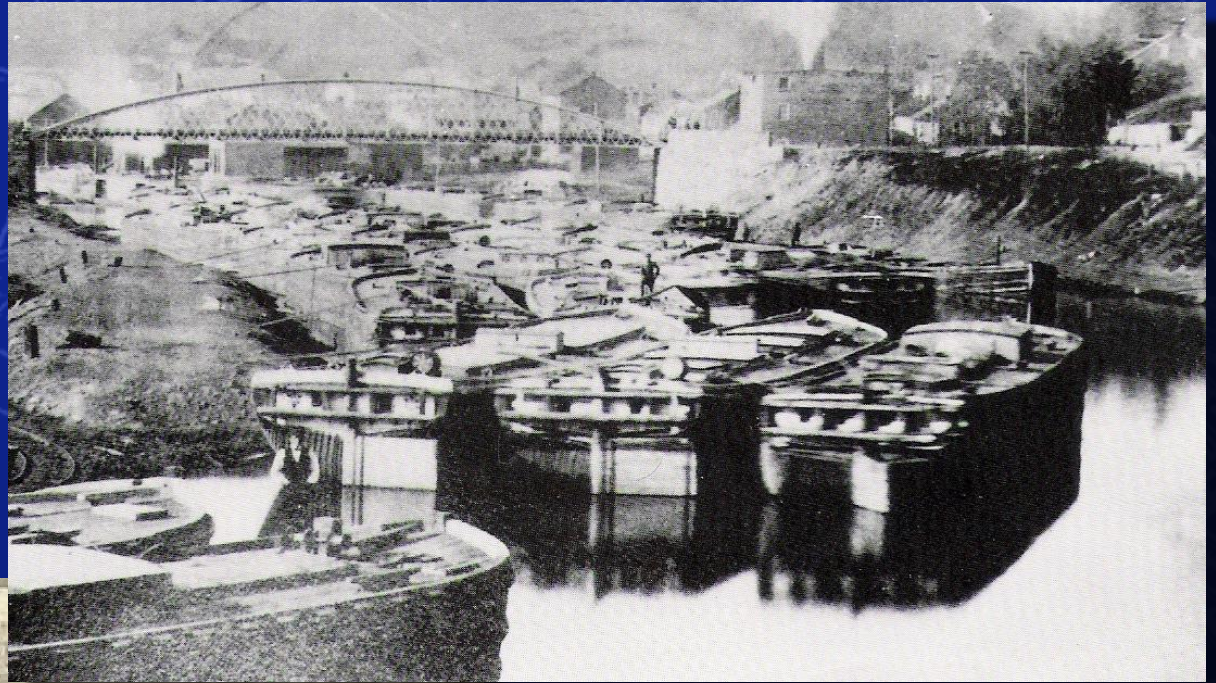
Upper Merion History Signs

This is the Schuylkill Navigation Company's profile from Port Carbon to Philadelphia. Gold lines are canals. Black lines are pools. The system had a 618.76 feet total elevation gain.



Upper Merion History Signs

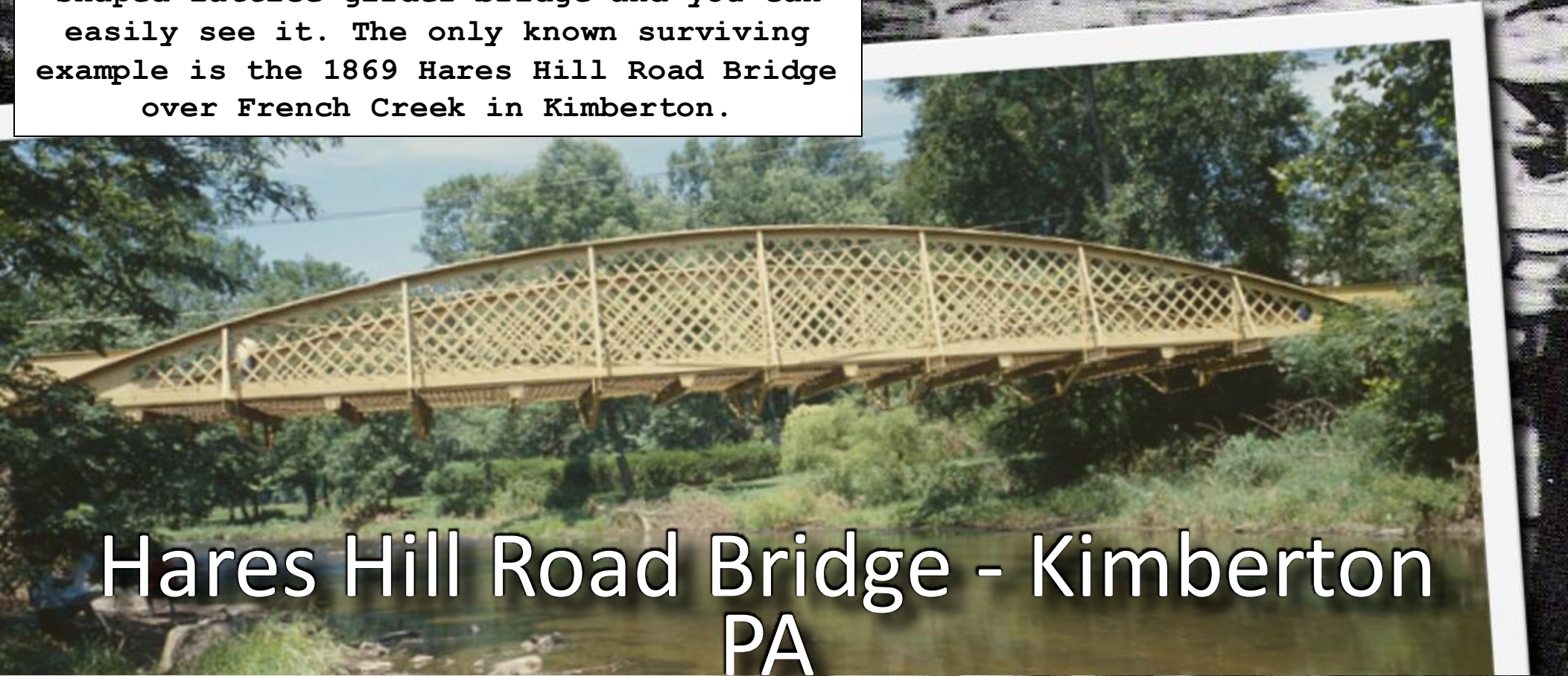
108 Miles
Port Carbon
To
Philadelphia



62 Miles of
Canals
46 Miles of
Pools

Upper Merion History Signs

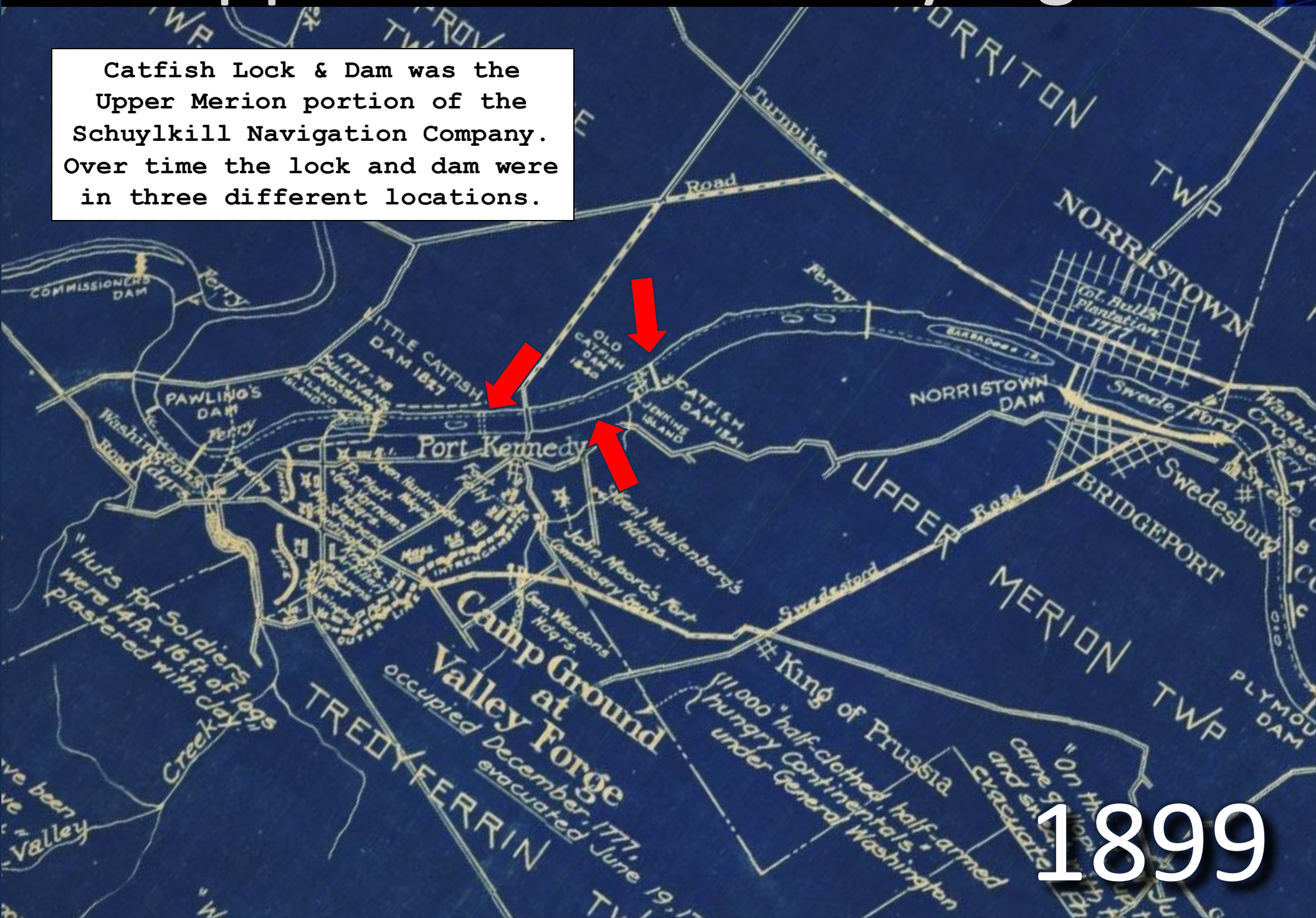
There is one wrought iron, bowstring-shaped lattice girder bridge and you can easily see it. The only known surviving example is the 1869 Hares Hill Road Bridge over French Creek in Kimberton.



Hares Hill Road Bridge - Kimberton
PA

Upper Merion History Signs

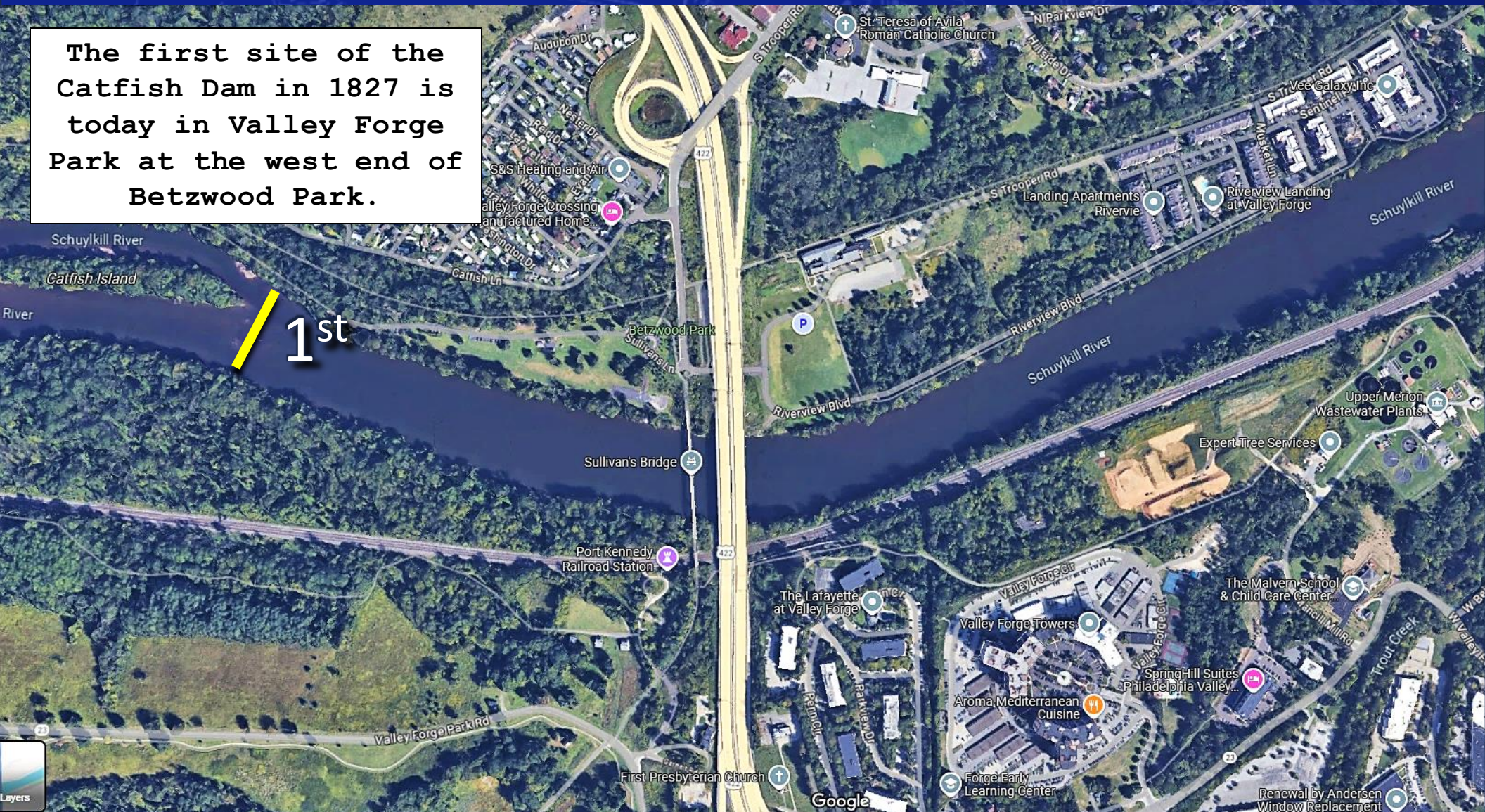
Catfish Lock & Dam was the Upper Merion portion of the Schuylkill Navigation Company. Over time the lock and dam were in three different locations.



1899

Upper Merion History Signs

The first site of the Catfish Dam in 1827 is today in Valley Forge Park at the west end of Betzwood Park.



Upper Merion History Signs



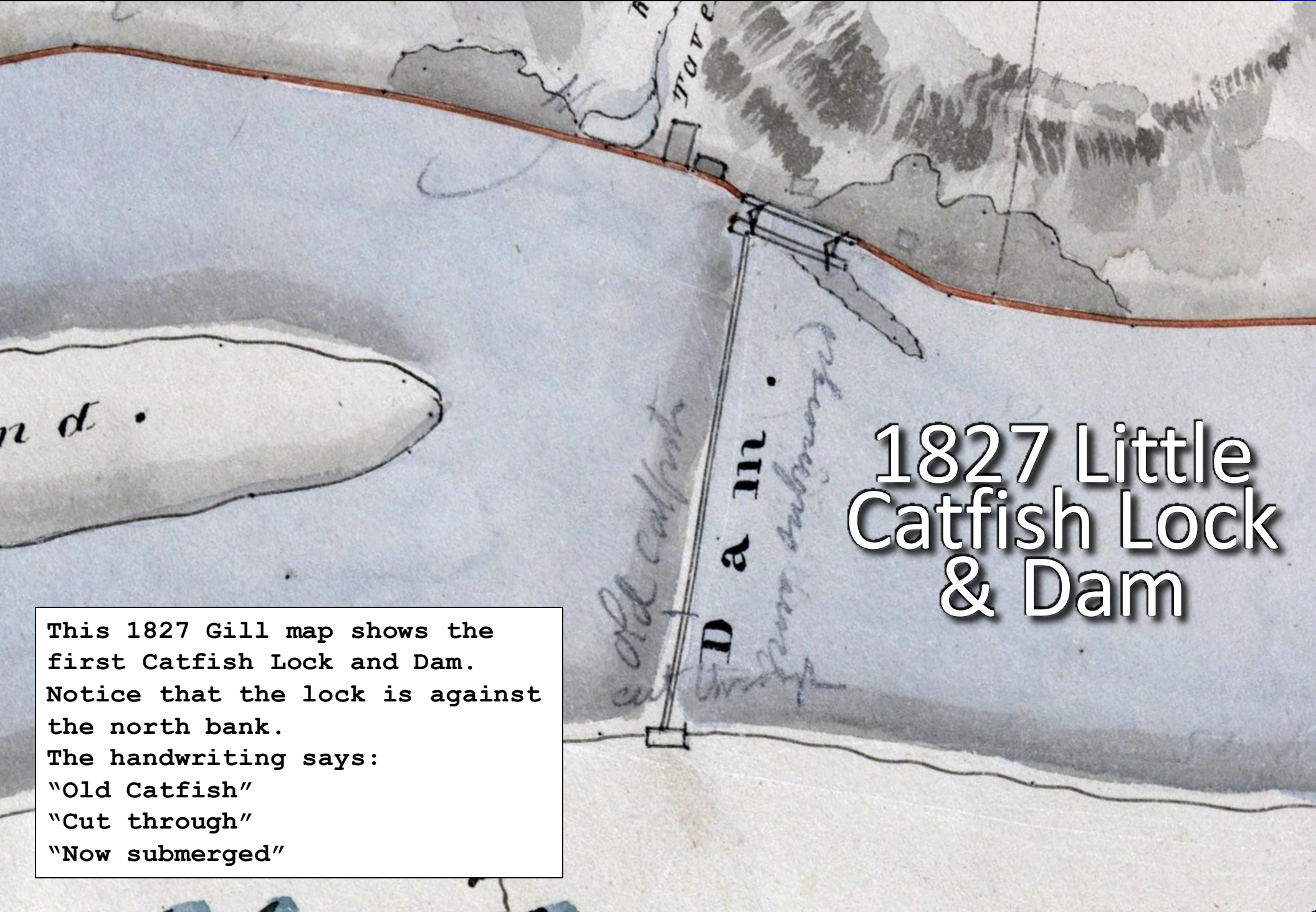
1827 Little
Catfish Dam

The island on the left side of this photo is Catfish Island. The road to the north is Catfish Lane.

Upper Merion History Signs

1827 Little Catfish Lock & Dam

This 1827 Gill map shows the first Catfish Lock and Dam. Notice that the lock is against the north bank. The handwriting says:
"Old Catfish"
"Cut through"
"Now submerged"



Upper Merion History Signs



Little Catfish
Dam location
in 2024

Upper Merion History Signs

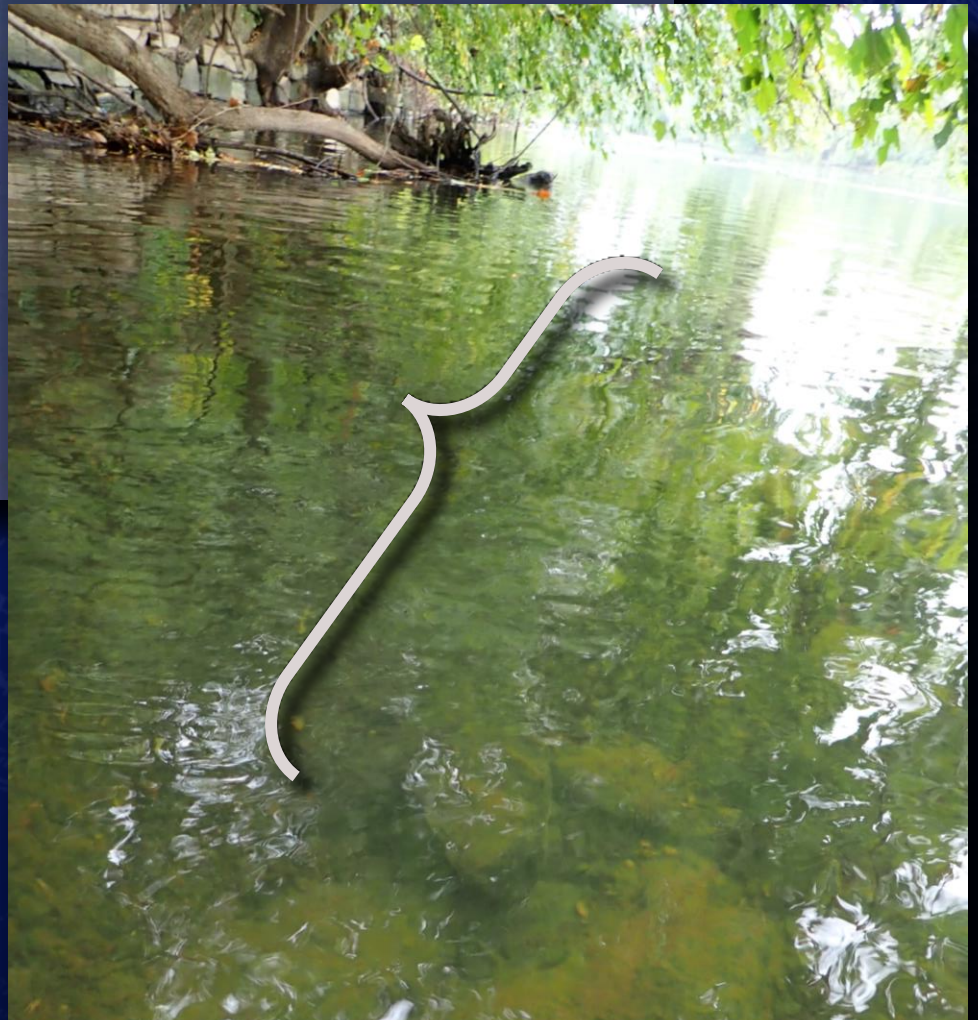
The north wall of the lock chamber It is easily visible from the river. The top of the wall is covered with poison ivy and the wall is not easily visible from the trail.

2024 Little Catfish Lock

Upper Merion History Signs



The base of the lock's
opposite wall is
visible in the water.



2024 Little
Catfish Lock

Upper Merion History Signs



Some people claim that
this was a Schuylkill
Navigation lock
tender's house and a
stable for mules.

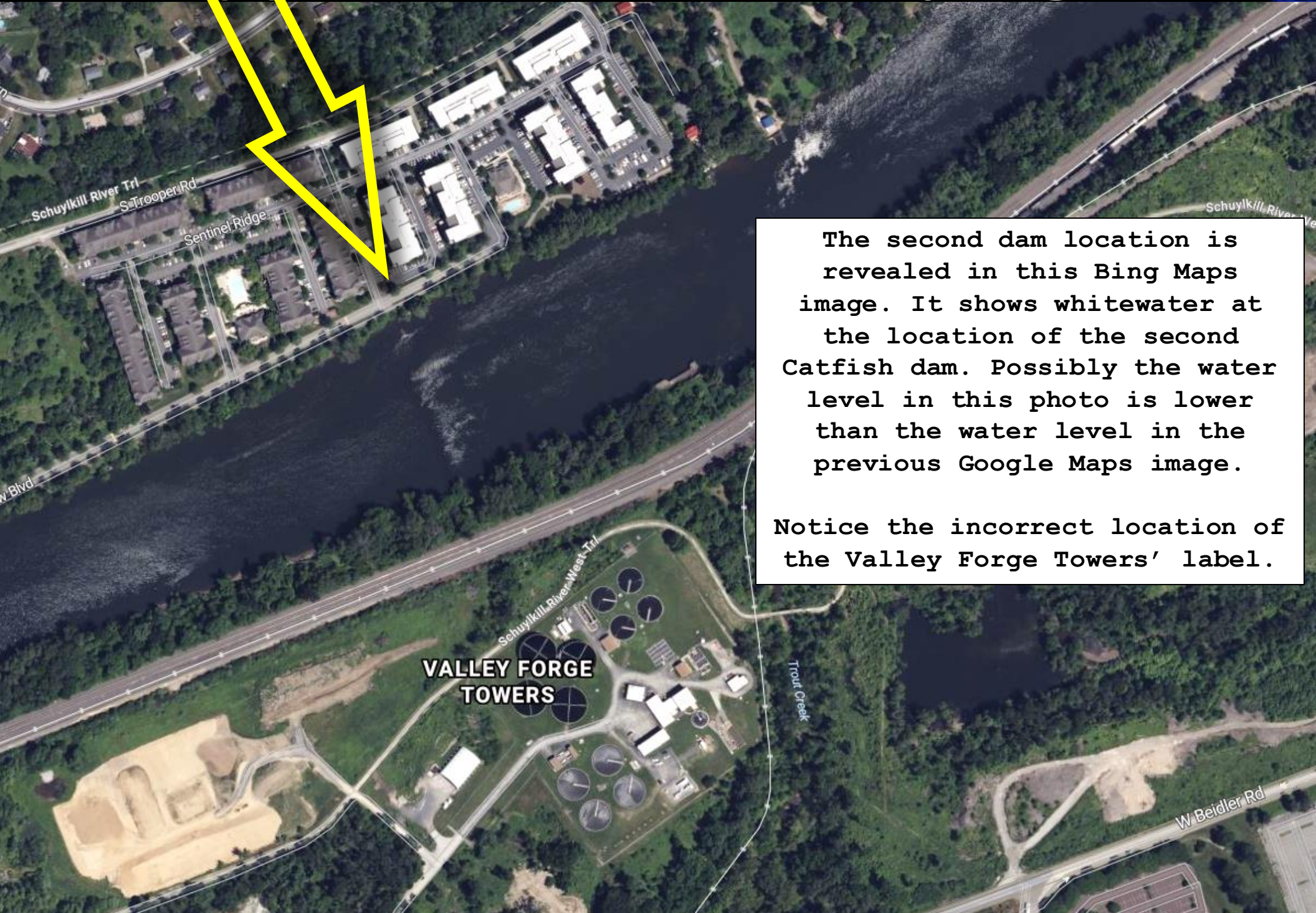
We have not been able
to confirm this claim.



Upper Merion History Signs



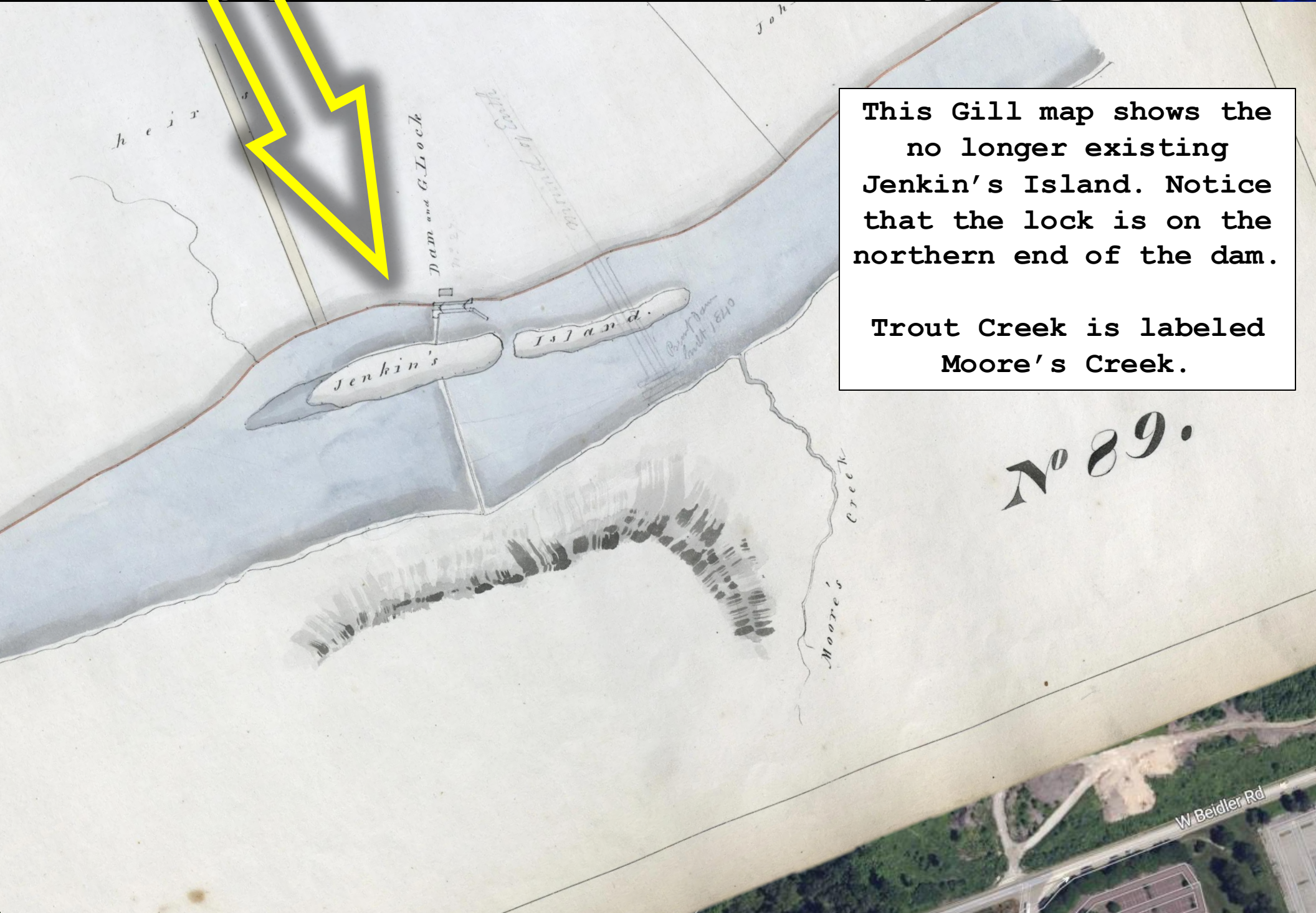
Upper Merion History Signs



The second dam location is revealed in this Bing Maps image. It shows whitewater at the location of the second Catfish dam. Possibly the water level in this photo is lower than the water level in the previous Google Maps image.

Notice the incorrect location of the Valley Forge Towers' label.

Upper Merion History Signs



This Gill map shows the no longer existing Jenkin's Island. Notice that the lock is on the northern end of the dam.

Trout Creek is labeled Moore's Creek.

Upper Merion History Signs

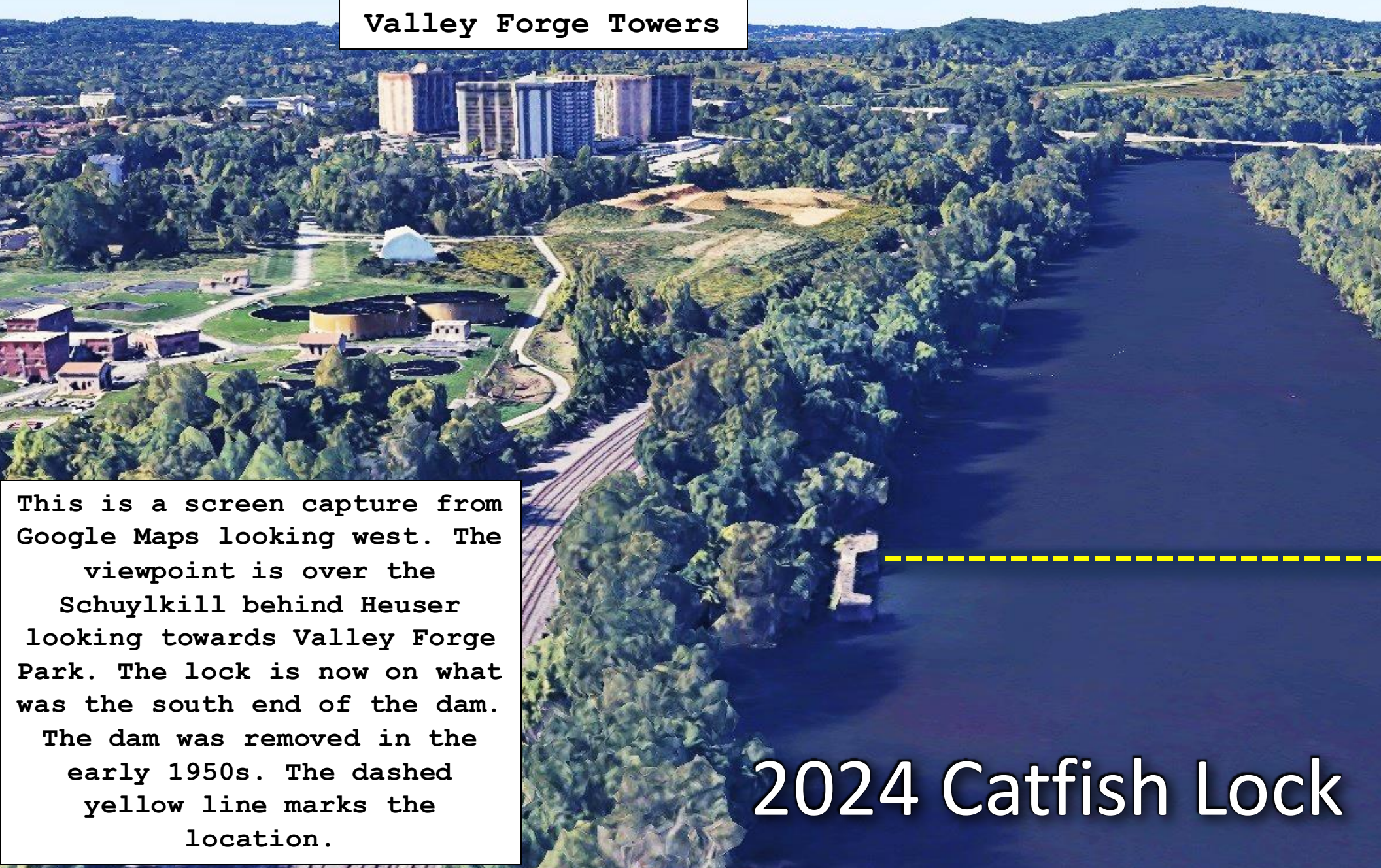
1841: Third Catfish Dam Location

Upper Merion History Signs

1841: Third Catfish Dam Location

Upper Merion History Signs

Valley Forge Towers

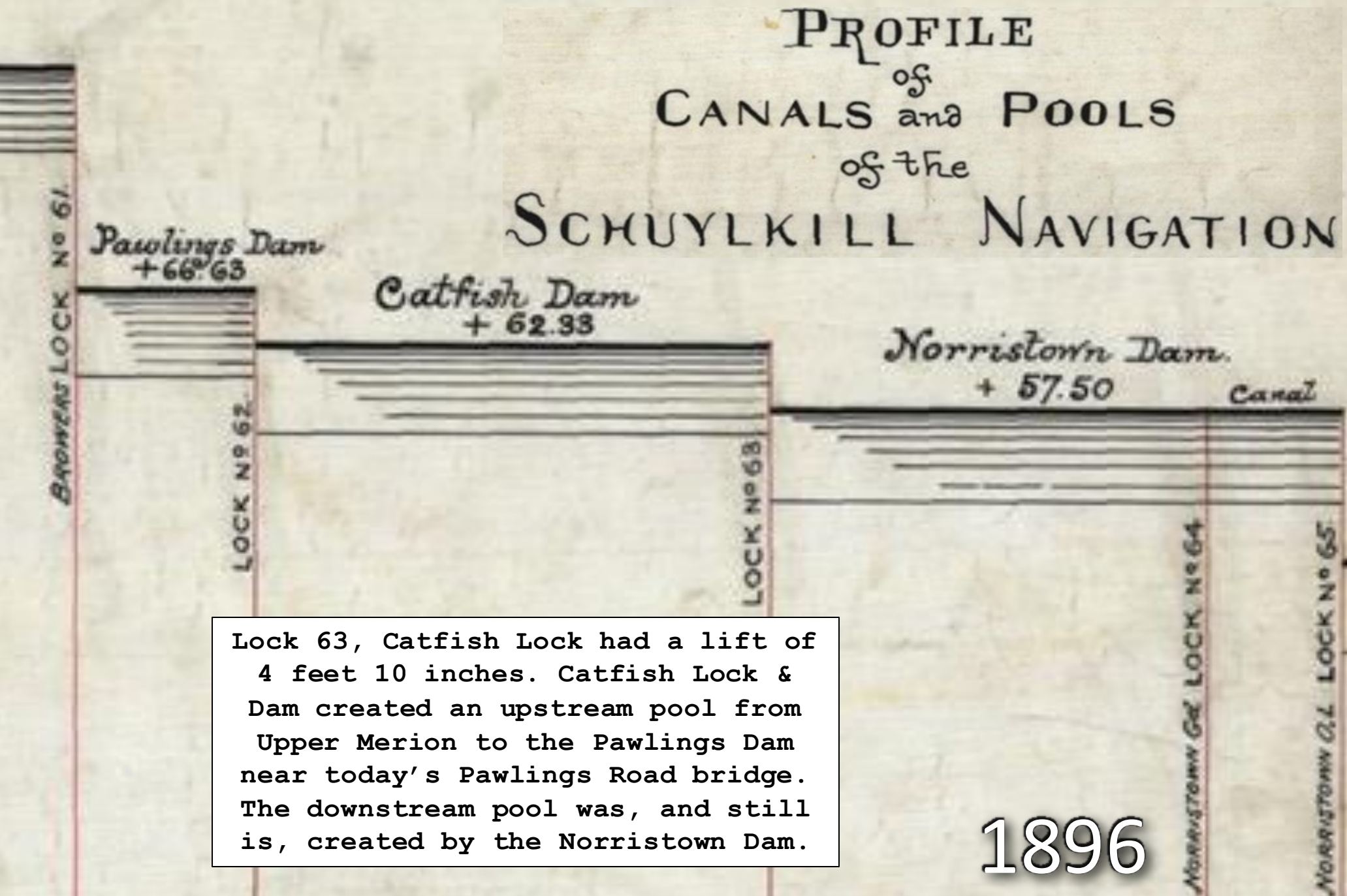


This is a screen capture from Google Maps looking west. The viewpoint is over the Schuylkill behind Heuser looking towards Valley Forge Park. The lock is now on what was the south end of the dam.

The dam was removed in the early 1950s. The dashed yellow line marks the location.

2024 Catfish Lock

Upper Merion History Signs



Upper Merion History Signs

A scenic view of a river, likely the Allegheny River, with a bridge visible in the distance. The water is calm, reflecting the surrounding greenery. On the left side, there are large, leafy trees that frame the view. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

Catfish Lock,
looking east from
Sullivan's Bridge in
2024

Upper Merion History Signs



2023 Catfish Lock

Upper Merion History Signs



Catfish Lock
#63 as seen in
2015. It is a
twin lock

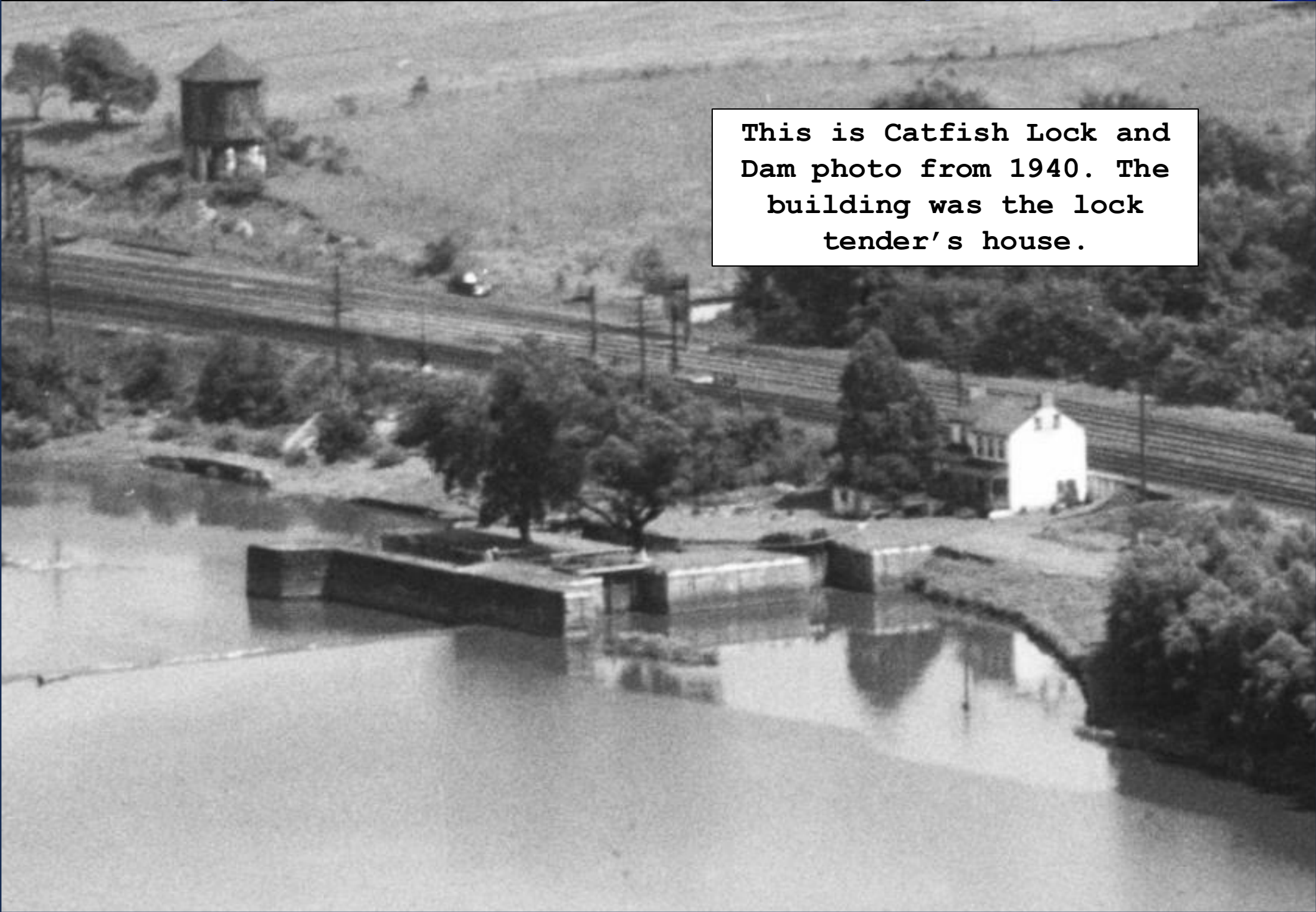
Stonework is
ashlar
brownstone
with hydraulic
cement



Photos by Sandy Sorlien

Upper Merion History Signs

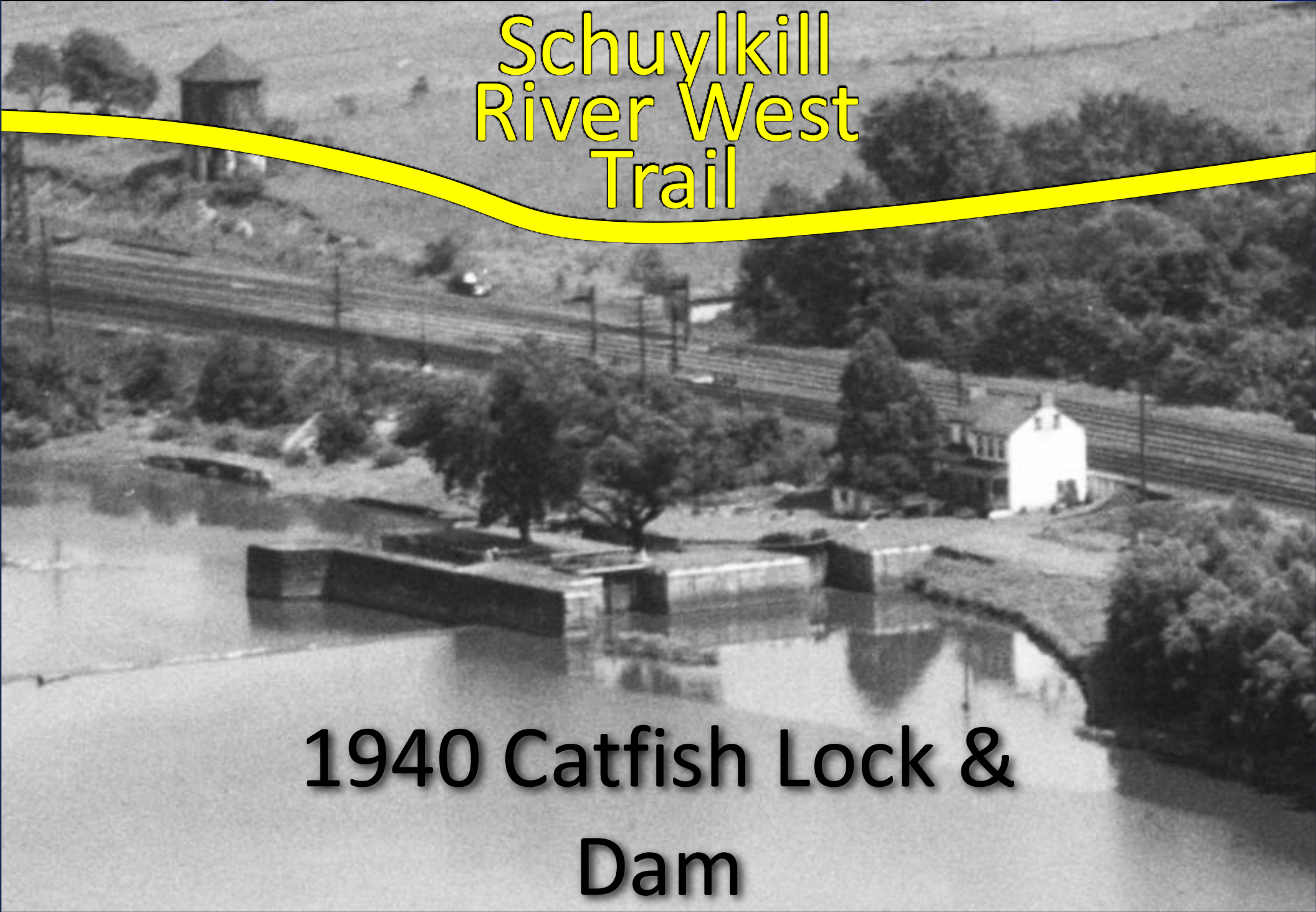
This is Catfish Lock and Dam photo from 1940. The building was the lock tender's house.



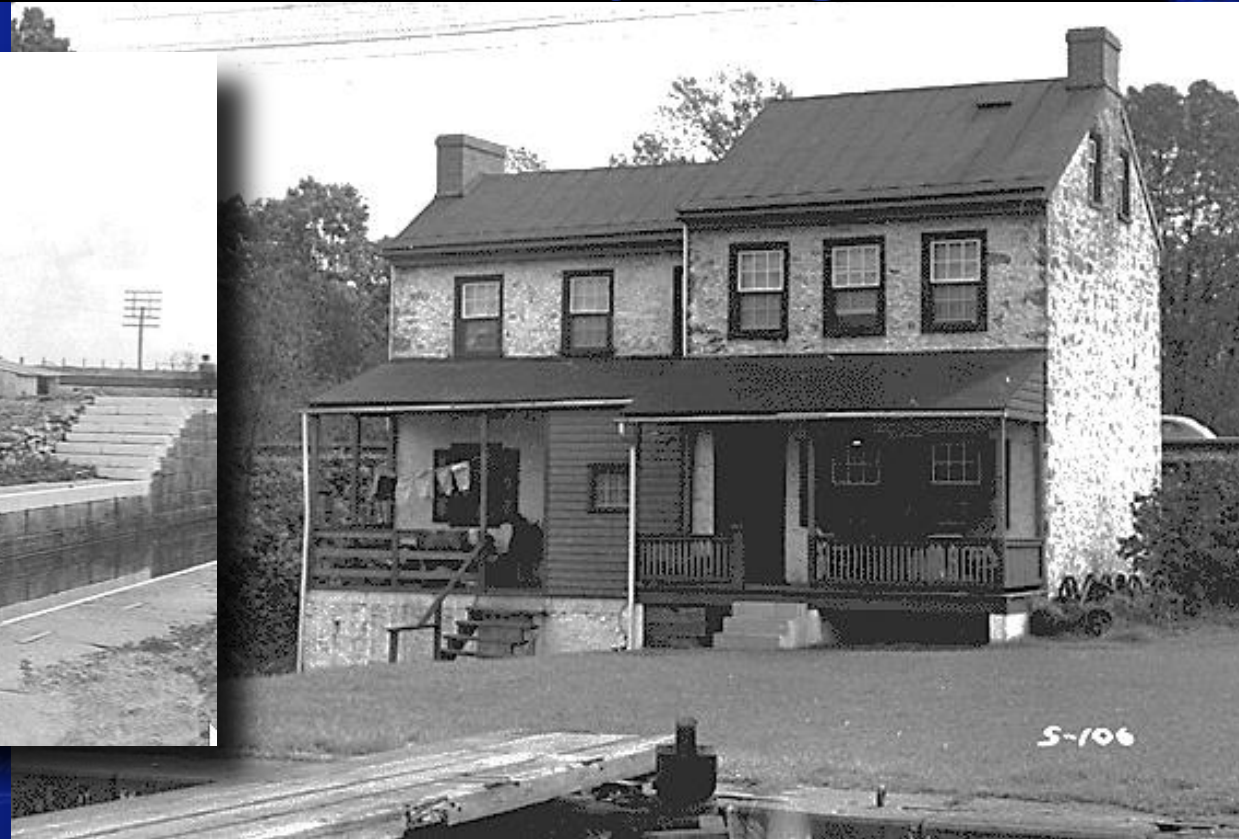
Upper Merion History Signs

Schuylkill
River West
Trail

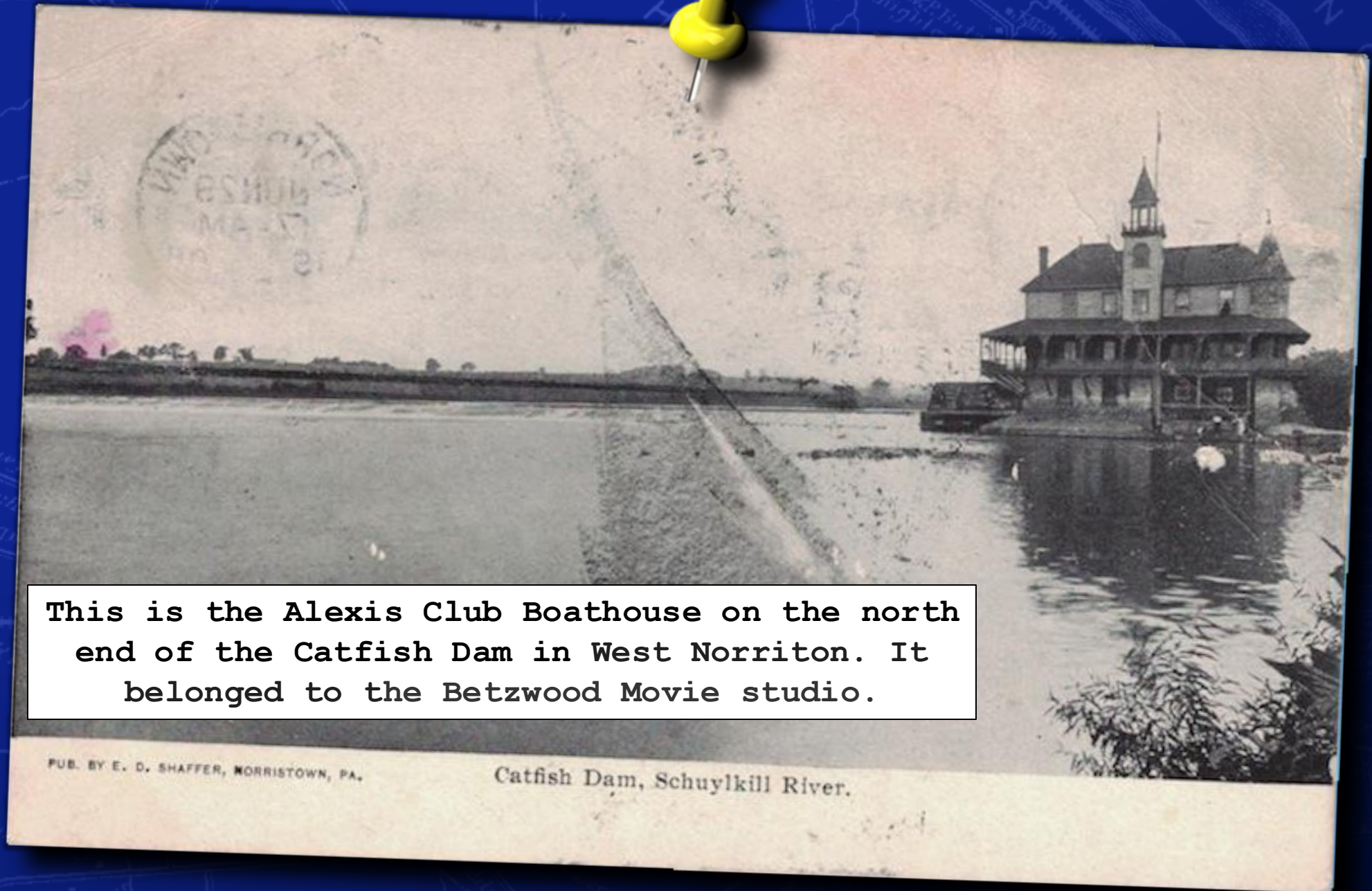
1940 Catfish Lock &
Dam



Upper Merion History Signs

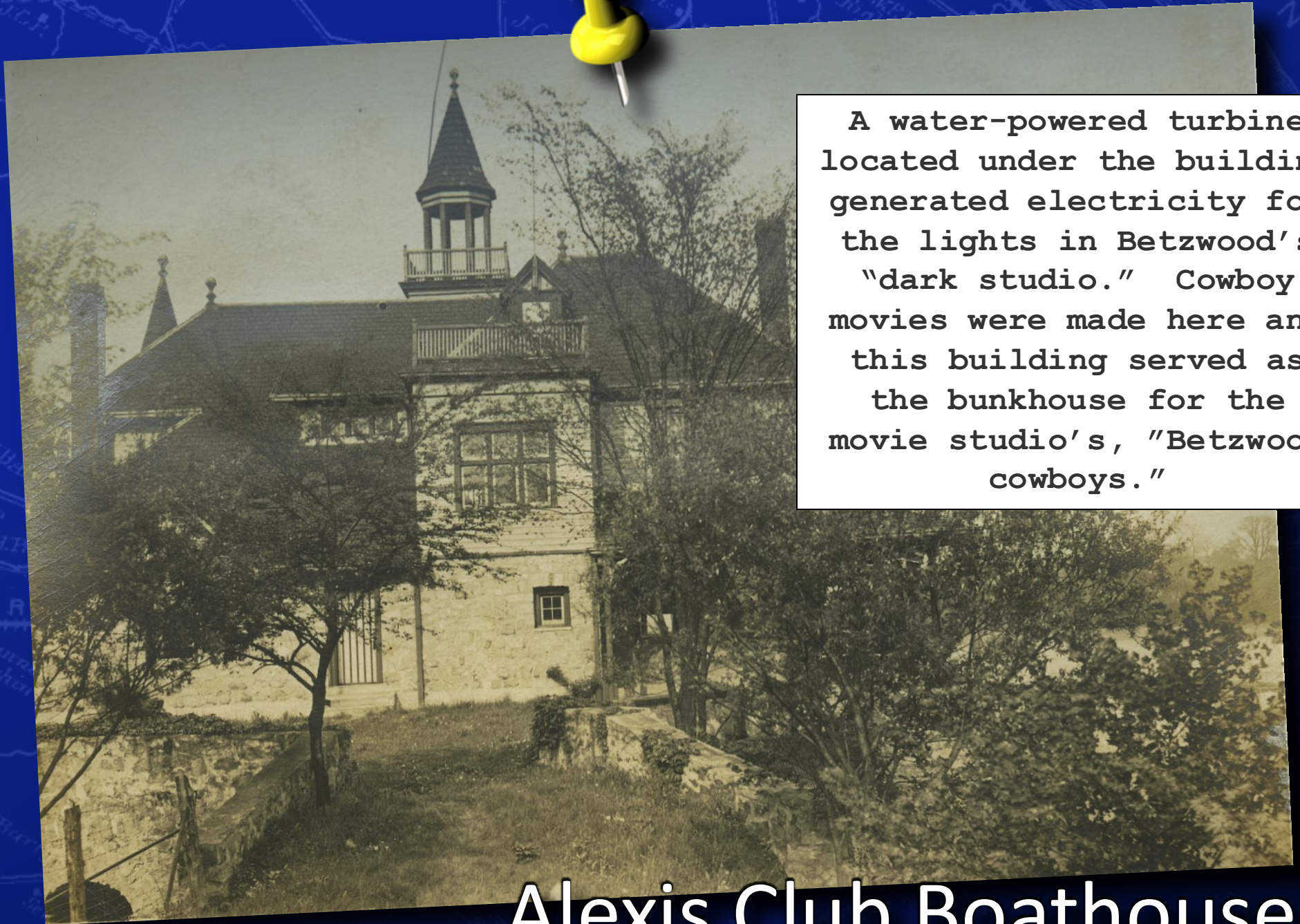


Upper Merion History Signs



This is the Alexis Club Boathouse on the north end of the Catfish Dam in West Norriton. It belonged to the Betzwood Movie studio.

Upper Merion History Signs

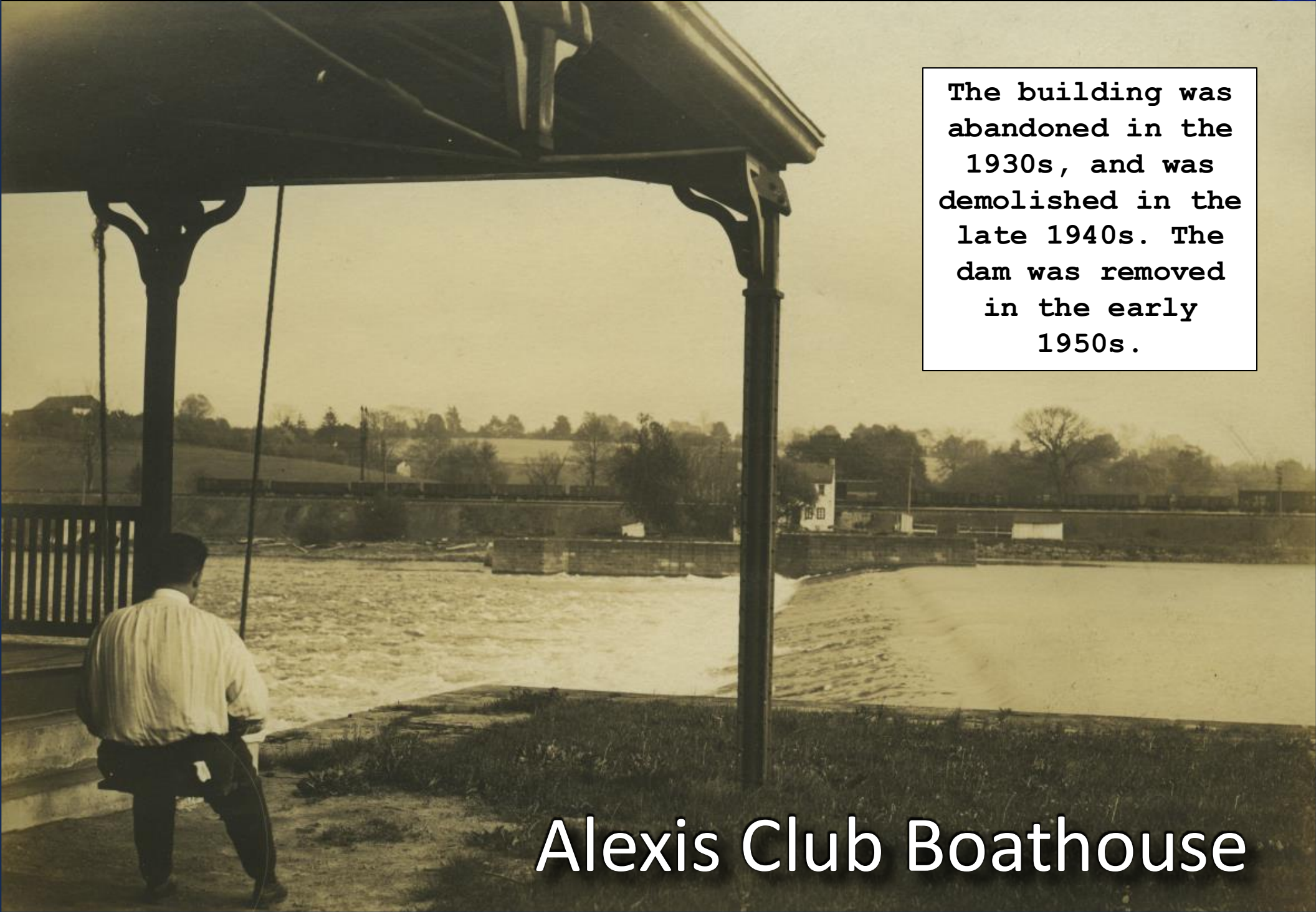


A water-powered turbine located under the building generated electricity for the lights in Betzwood's "dark studio." Cowboy movies were made here and this building served as the bunkhouse for the movie studio's, "Betzwood cowboys."

Alexis Club Boathouse

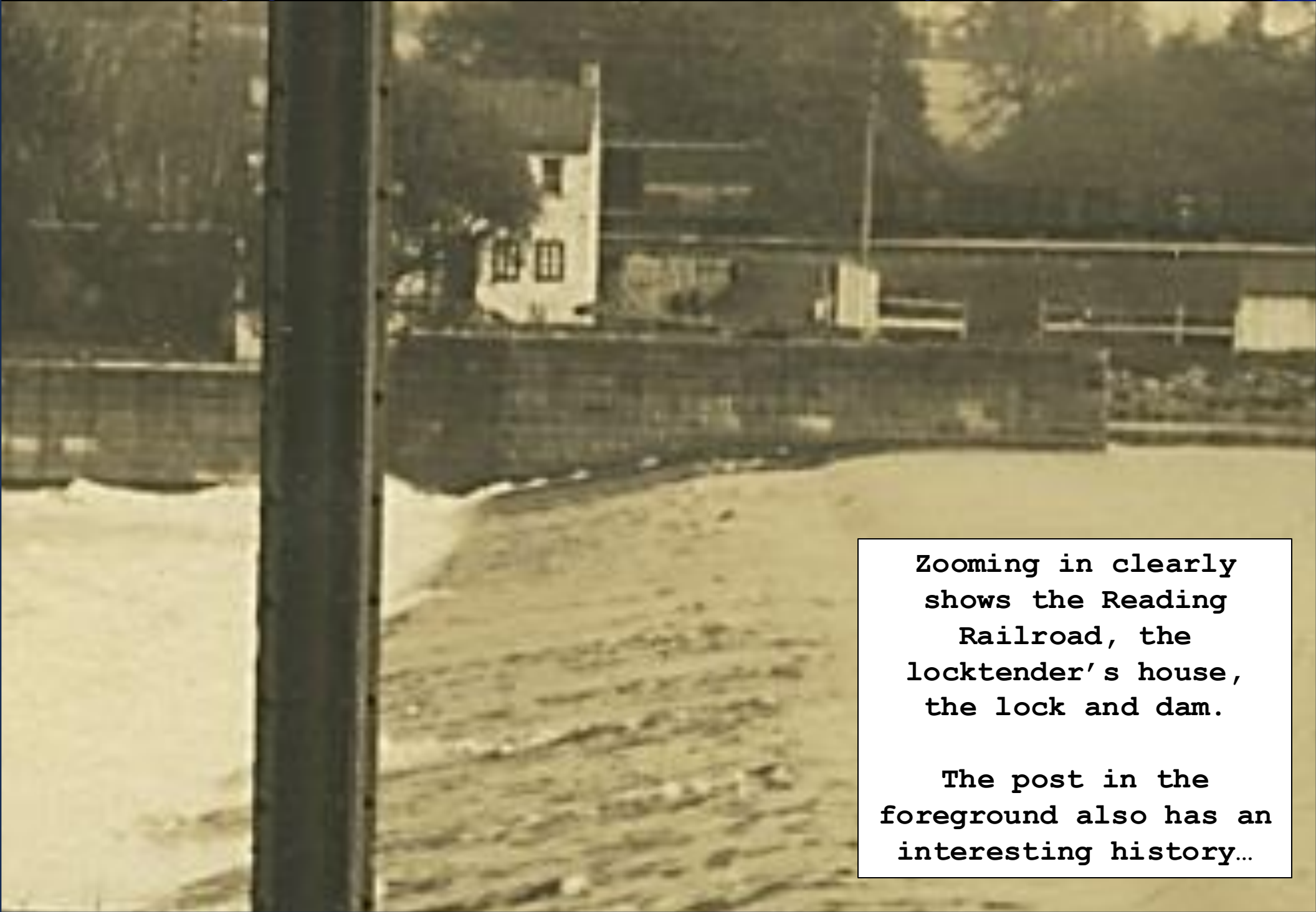
Upper Merion History Signs

The building was abandoned in the 1930s, and was demolished in the late 1940s. The dam was removed in the early 1950s.



Alexis Club Boathouse

Upper Merion History Signs



Zooming in clearly
shows the Reading
Railroad, the
locktender's house,
the lock and dam.

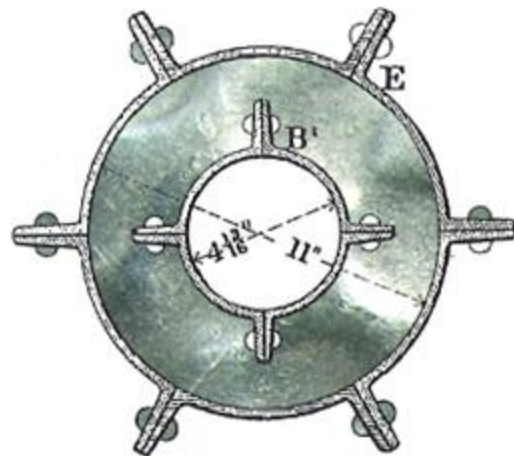
The post in the
foreground also has an
interesting history..

Upper Merion History Signs

It is a Phoenix
Column made by the
Phoenix Iron Works
in Phoenixville, PA.



Upper Merion History Signs

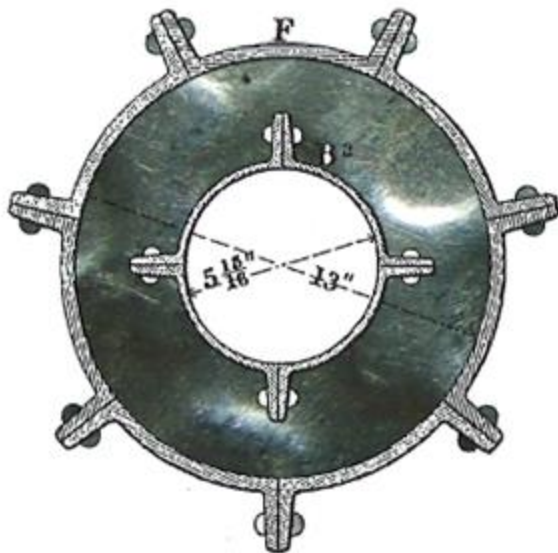


SECTIONS OF PHOENIX PATENT WROUGHT IRON COLUMNS

Made by the
PHOENIX IRON COMPANY.
Office: 410 Walnut St. Phil^a

TABLE OF SIZES.

Mark	A	B ¹	B ²	C	D	E	F	G
One Thickness in inches.	5 to 10	10 to 12	12 to 14	14 to 16	16 to 18	18 to 20	20 to 22	22 to 24
Segment Weight in lbs. p. yard	7,141	12,371	14,221	22,100	28,522	27,100	35,523	30,100
One Area in sq. inches.	20,505	14,500	17,840	14,266	60,243	64,800	24,800	24,800
Column Weight in lbs. p. foot	13,193	66,493	29,362	29,113	66,866	33,200	112,160	266,400



A Phoenix Column is a hollow cylinder composed of four, six, or eight wrought iron segments riveted together. It is lighter and stronger than the solid cast iron columns of that time period. Phoenix Columns were made from 1862 - 1919.

Upper Merion History Signs

Approximately 800 bridges were constructed with Phoenix Columns between 1868 to 1893. Today there are about 40 bridges still in use including the Calhoun Street bridge connecting Morrisville to Trenton.



1884 - Calhoun St Bridge - Morrisville, PA

Upper Merion History Signs



THE PHOENIX BRIDGE CO. PHOENIXVILLE. PA.

This allowed construction of massive structures without the use of heavy load-bearing walls. This resulted in taller buildings and was the start of the creation of skyscrapers and high-stress-load-bearing bridges.

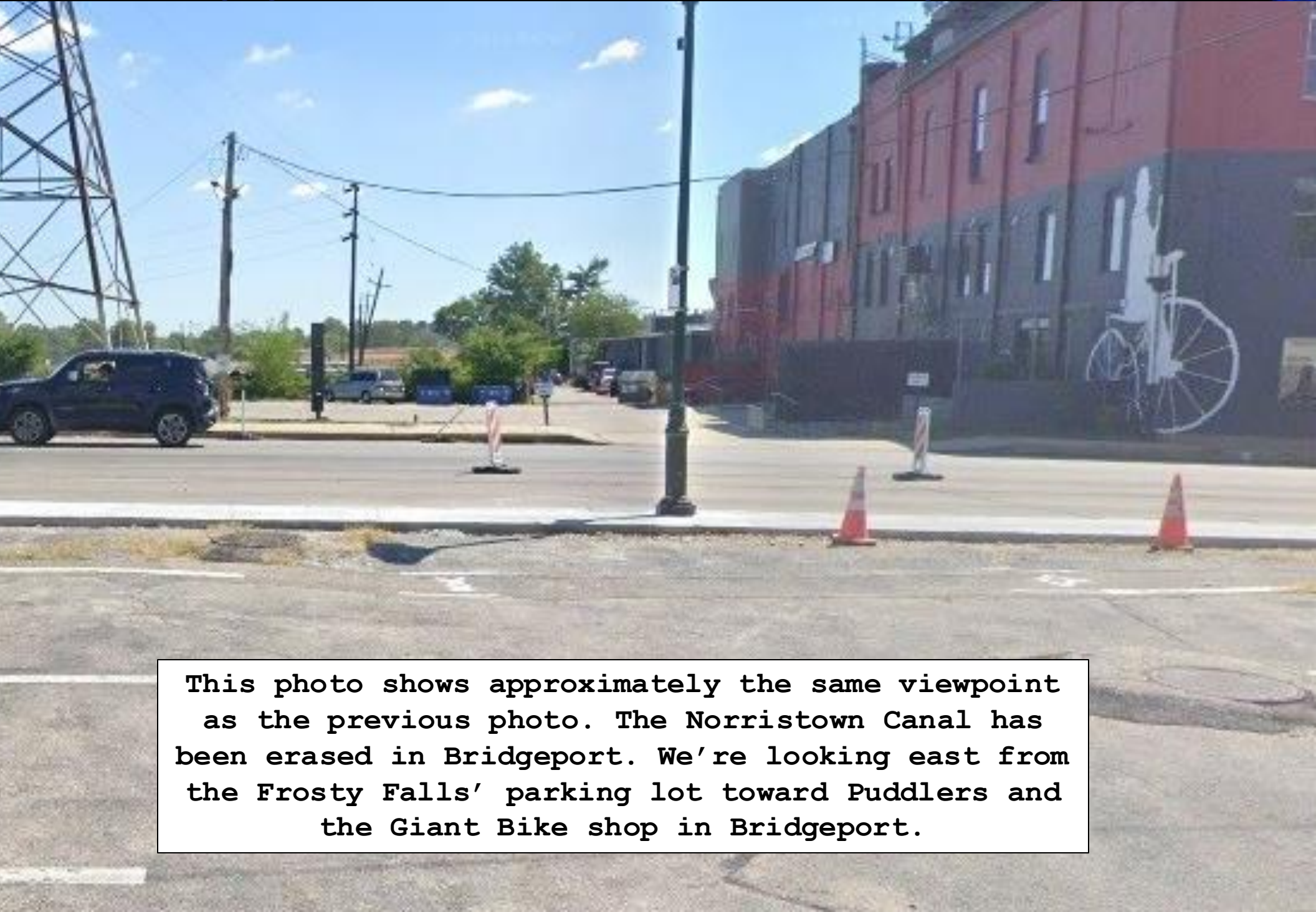
Upper Merion History Signs

Norristown Canal

This photo shows the Dekalb Pike crossing over the Norristown Canal in Bridgeport.

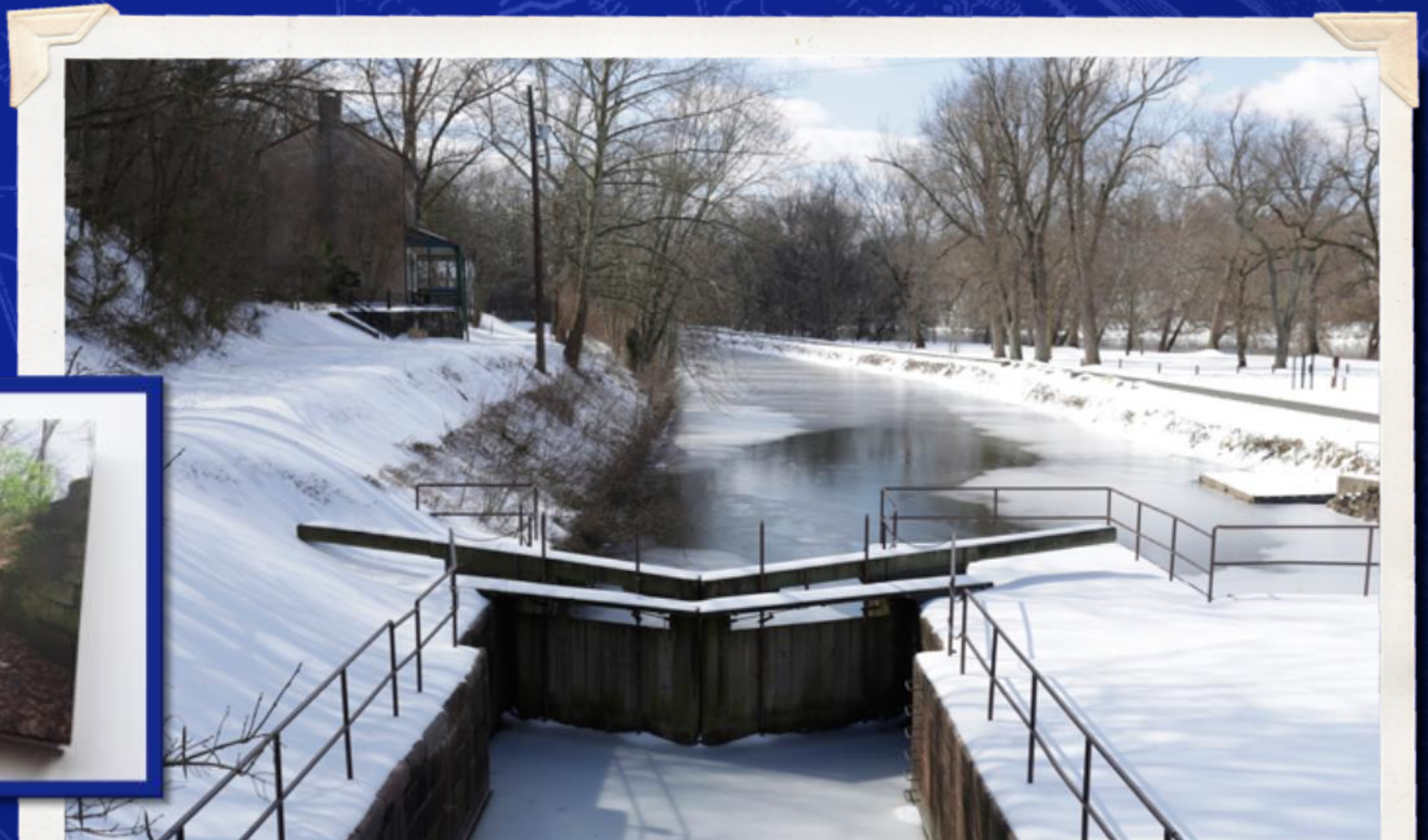


Upper Merion History Signs



This photo shows approximately the same viewpoint as the previous photo. The Norristown Canal has been erased in Bridgeport. We're looking east from the Frosty Falls' parking lot toward Puddlers and the Giant Bike shop in Bridgeport.

Upper Merion History Signs



The Trail Sign Project was conceived and directed by Upper Merion resident Neil Sardiñas, who also created the design for each of the signs.

Neil would like to thank Sandy Sorlien who was a major contributor to this sign. She wrote the book Inland about the Schuylkill Navigation Company. If you are interested in this topic, we recommend joining the "Schuylkill Navigation" Facebook group.