

The Titusville Fruit and Vegetable Canning Company

By Larry Kidder

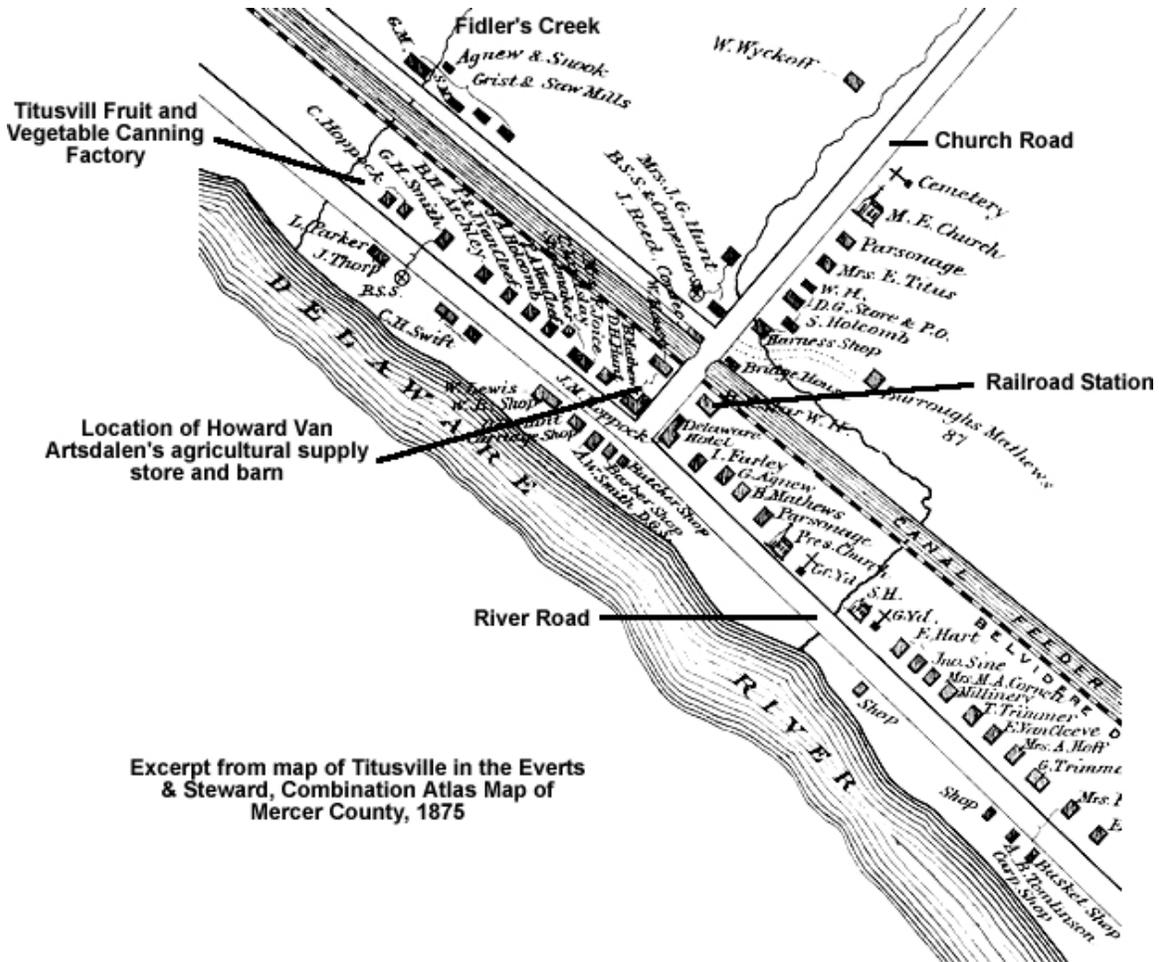
In her September 10, 1895 article for the *Hopewell Herald* on happenings in Pleasant Valley, Rachel Williamson noted, "Picking and carting tomatoes to the canning factory seems to be the order now. The crop is very fine in this vicinity at present, but without rain it will be short." While farmers routinely canned tomatoes and other produce for their families, in the 1890s the Pleasant Valley farmers were encouraged to grow tomatoes for the commercial canning market. Commercial canning was a growing aspect of farming in New Jersey and Pleasant Valley was no exception. The first canning factory in the area was established at Titusville on the Belvidere-Delaware line of the Pennsylvania Railroad and from 1889 to 1903 the farmers of Pleasant Valley made trips each summer to Titusville to deliver their tomatoes to the cannery.



An original stock certificate for George Agnew, President of the company.

On February 21, 1889 the *Herald* reported in Titusville news on page one that, "There is a movement on foot to start a canning factory here. We wish it success, as we think it is just what has been needed by the farmers in this vicinity for years, and would no doubt prove very advantageous to them." On March 30 the first meeting of the Titusville Fruit and Vegetable Canning Company took place and officers were elected. The President was George Agnew and Vice President was J. Warren Fleming. The Secretary and Treasurer was William Fleming and the three Directors were H.N. Burroughs, Smith T. Brewer, and Pierson B. Hunt. Work on the factory began in May and it opened for business in late August. In addition to farmers bringing produce, there were several Pleasant Valley connections with the company. At the end of 1892 John Vannoy was re-elected as a director at the annual meeting of the Titusville Fruit and Vegetable Canning Company. His daughter married Augustus Hunt of Pleasant Valley and like other officers in the company he was well known in the Valley. In September 1899 H.A. Phillips of Pleasant Valley was noted as employed at the Titusville canning factory as weight master.

The factory was a large, converted dwelling located at the north end of Titusville on the canal side of River Road next to the railroad track. A small, swift stream ran through the property and carried off all the refuse and residue from the canning process. An addition was built in 1893 for greater storage capacity and the factory was improved with a new capping machine and steam engine for the filling machine. In 1899 the smoke stack was replaced with a new one.



Each June and July, and sometimes as early as April, the company received shipments of cans and shipping cases and prepared for the upcoming canning season. The canning season began in mid to late August and lasted until about the third week of October with weather conditions determining the exact dates each year. Shipping continued into December. The weather conditions, crop yields, and getting the crop from the farmers to the factory were all chronicled in the *Herald*.

By mid-October 1889, the first year of operation, the *Herald* reported, "The tomato season is about over, and although it has been a poor one, the Canning Company have put up over fifty thousand cans. They will put up a few more yet, and also a few thousand cans of pumpkins before closing up for the season." In mid-tomato season in September 1889 the writer from Titusville for the *Herald* gave an interesting account of activity at the new cannery here quoted in full.

The yield of tomatoes in this section will not be more than half a crop and probably not that. The bad weather blasted the bloom, and later in the season caused them to rot, and for some time back the cool, cloudy weather has prevented them from ripening. But notwithstanding all this, the canning factory here has been running nearly steady for the last month, and part of the time has

been overstocked. Occasionally there would be a day when the supply would run short. Such a day as this occurred last week. Tomatoes were getting low and all hands were expecting the factory to shut down before night, when all at once their eyes were gladdened by the sight of a man – who lives not very far from the place where a certain other man got lost in the garret while repairing a chimney – driving up to the factory with a fine team of mules, and, of course, a load of tomatoes. Their spirits rose visibly at the sight, and immediately all was hustle and activity again. But it was of short duration, for when the tomatoes were unloaded and weighed and it was found that there were just thirty-six pounds of them, their hopes of finishing out the day were dashed and their spirits went far below zero at one tumble. But what these tomatoes lacked in quantity they made up in quality. The English language fails us in our attempt to express our admiration of the sample shown us; so beautifully variegated in color – green and white, with an occasional small spot of red. Whew! But weren't they beauties, though; and then the size of them. One of the men at the factory told us that they had to be carried in a tight box as they would run through a tomato crate like beans through an oats riddle; but this we believe to be an exaggeration. There are others who have brought some the same variety to the factory, and we would like to say to them all: Don't do it again – keep them for seed. The interests of the company demand it. They are undoubtedly a new variety and altogether too valuable to be lost.

In August of 1892 a letter to the *Herald* noted some of the problems encountered by the factory in getting quality produce from farmers because they could get a better price selling them for the local fresh market in Trenton.

The canning factory only ran parts of two days last week. Tomatoes are coming in slowly, and to make the matter worse, they are scarce and the price is high in Trenton, and some of the growers are said to be carting their best fruit there, and will no doubt bring their culls to the factory, as some of them have done heretofore. This thing should be stopped, and if necessary extreme measures should be taken to do it. They should be docked and that heavily on every crate brought here that is not plump up to the standard, and if they don't like that let them take their whole crop to Trenton and see how that suits them. If tomatoes should become plenty in the market and the price go so low that it paid as well, or better, to bring them to the cannery, they would then rush in everything they could rake and scrape that had the least resemblance to a tomato, good, bad and indifferent, ripe, green and rotten, and would be highly indignant if they did not take them at full price. They never stop to think that if it was not for the cannery they could have no market for them at all, and consequently would have to quit growing them: and also that whenever they manage to get a load of tomatoes accepted at the factory at a higher price than they are worth, which it seems to be the aim of some of them to do, they are robbing every other member of the company. But it seems all some people care about is the almighty dollar in their own pockets, and they are not over-particular how it gets there. We do not wish to be understood as including all the members of the company. Far from it, as a large majority are men who can see at least a couple of inches beyond the end of their noses, and withal are fair, square men and would scorn to do anything of the kind.

B.H. Atchley

In September 1895 the Titusville writer for the *Herald* admonished farmers, saying, "some of the growers seem to need reminding every time they go to the field to pick a load of tomatoes that it is a cannery they are picking for and not a chow-chow establishment." Getting the tomatoes to the factory in good condition over the dirt roads using carts was not always easy, but that was the only way that farmers had to transport them. Annie T. Phillips, later Mrs. Elijah Jones, recalled in later years that "farmers 'from all around' joined the procession of tomato-loaded wagons which sometimes extended almost through the town," and among the farmers was, "a Mr. Schenck who always brought his tomatoes behind a team of oxen." She also recalled that her future husband "Lije" Jones, "had the reputation of raising the best tomatoes anywhere around." She noted that he always seemed to have more tomatoes than he had baskets to hold them. Annie described how, "we could see him coming over the canal bridge and everybody would get

in a great flurry because he always asked us to run off eight or nine crates so he could go home and get another load.”



A label for tomato cans sold under the label of the company. Tomatoes were also sold under the labels of other compaies.

Descriptions of the work in the canning factory have come down to us through oral history statements and family stories. Descendants of Mary Chedister recall her saying that she was a tomato peeler and was paid 2 1/2 cents per 7 1/2 gallon bucket of tomatoes. The tomatoes were cold packed and to loosen the skins they were first put in hot water and then in cold water. At one point the peelers went on strike for higher wages and got a nickel. However, Mr. Hoppock, the superintendent, would come around and refill their buckets before they got empty so the raise didn't really amount to much. Annie Phillips was head of one of the canning tables when she worked at the factory. She noted in an interview that the automatic canning machine did not completely fill the cans. It was Annie's responsibility, along with her assistants, to use one finger to press the air out from each can and add tomatoes to bring the can up to the correct weight. This work was hard on the worker's hands since the cans were sharp on the top edges. Annie recalled that, "I wore out more finger stalls, had to make a new one every evening so I could work the next day." After filling, the cans were sealed by other workers. In 1901 fifteen men and forty women were employed for the three month canning season. Annie Phillips recalled that there were about fifty workers when she worked there. There were thirty to thirty five peelers, about ten people working the canning tables, and about three people capping. There were two tables for canning. One was for the prime produce and the other was for the second grade - not completely ripe or in some way imperfect fruit. Local people from Titusville and nearby worked in the factory and they would be called in to work depending on the quantity of produce that had to be processed. Since the harvest was often irregular due to weather the work hours could be irregular.



Logo on the ends of crates used for shipping the cans of tomatoes.

Stories of Pleasant Valley

The factory canned more than just tomatoes. Pumpkin was also canned and most years Keiffer and Bartlett pears were put up in glass jars. Raspberries are also mentioned at least one year. The chart below gives known quantities and prices and shows the variability year to year. Crops were not good in the early 1900s and 1903 was described as a really bad year, one reason the cannery closed.

Year	Cans of Tomatoes	Other Product	Amount paid farmers
1889	50,000+	Few thousand cans pumpkin	
1890			
1891			
1892			August, \$7.50; September, \$7.00; October, \$6.50
1893	140,000	6,400 cans pumpkin 2,000 quart jars Bartlett pears	\$6.37 per ton tomatoes
1894	237,000	4,400 cans raspberries 2,600 glass jars pears	\$6.50 per ton tomatoes
1895	207,000	17,000 cans pumpkin	
1896	167,000 3lb cans	6,000 3lb cans pumpkin	
1897			
1898	142,000+		
1899	217,496		
1900			
1901			
1902			
1903	83,500 No. 3 cans		

After canning, the unlabeled cans were put into storage in the warehouse. When a batch of cans was purchased, labels sent by the purchasing company were put on the cans. They were then put in wooden crates and taken to the Titusville railroad station just down the road where they were put on the platform of Howard Van Artsdalen's agricultural supply store and barn just across Church Road from the train station where they could be loaded onto rail cars and shipped out. Labeling and shipping could extend into the following April. Workers were called back for a day or so to do the labeling and shipping as needed.

A meeting of the stockholders of the Titusville Fruit and Vegetable Canning Company was held on Saturday, April 30, 1904 at 2:30pm "for the purpose of determining whether they will continue or discontinue to operate" the cannery. At this time John Hoppock was superintendent and J. Warren Fleming was Secretary. In August the newspaper noted that the canning factory would not open that year and was advertised for sale. The factory was sold at public auction in April 1905 and was purchased by Dr. C.B. Turner and Edward G. Trimmer. In March 1906 representatives of the Hopewell Valley Canning Company went to Titusville to inspect the capper and other machinery of the closed Titusville company and subsequently purchased it for seventy-five dollars.

For fourteen years the Titusville Fruit and Vegetable Canning Company had provided a market for local farmers, including those in Pleasant Valley, and seasonal employment for members of farm families. Later, the building was the home of the Otto Niederer Sons company and today, the building still exists and has been converted into a family home.



Photo of the canning factory building after its use as the home of the firm of Otto Niederer Sons who manufactured the first successful automatic egg grading machine - the Egg O Matic.

Sources:

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Canning Factory images courtesy of Bob and Carol Meszaros.