

# Village Improvement Association



In 1909 a group of women decided that there were needs in Rehoboth Beach that were not being addressed and so the Village Improvement Association, also known as the VIA, was created. Over one hundred years later this club is still identifying critical needs and have invested their time and their money to that end.

**Imagine if you will 1909 – 1919.** Imagine a woman walking into the Atlantic Ocean with a one-piece wool bathing suit that would soon weigh at least thirty pounds when wet and trying desperately to return back to land. The VIA installed life lines marked “VIA” from floats to the shore to help women, weighed down by their bathing suits, escape the surf. One of the floats can still be seen today in the Rehoboth Museum. Over the years the VIA has so enriched the Rehoboth area and the following are just a few examples:

- Financed the purchase and installation of sidewalks and curbs at a time when streets were unpaved
- Financed the purchase of street lights and street signs
- Began the Rehoboth Beach Public Library
- Held the first Art Show which eventually would become the Rehoboth Art League
- Placed drinking fountains at Baltimore and Delaware avenues on the Boardwalk
- Provided boardwalk benches and trash cans
- Paid to have public bathrooms installed
- Created a nursing scholarship that still exists today
- Purchased Christmas decorations for the town
- Started a fund for the Convention Center

- Helped establish the Cape Henlopen Senior Center
- Worked out a two-year plan to establish the Rehoboth Day Care Center
- Donated to the Railroad Station renovation
- Established a successful mosquito extermination campaign that resulted in Rehoboth being the Delaware location with the fewest mosquitoes and a side benefit was employing hundreds of men during the Depression to drain marshlands
- Helped fund construction of the bandstand
- Began volunteering with the Main Street Kiosk, The Rehoboth Beach Public Library, the Rehoboth Beach Museum, the Rehoboth Art League and the Chocolate Festival

**As the years turned into a new century the VIA became aware of many more needs and as a result ...**

- Started a new fundraiser, the St. Nicholas Tea
- Collected items for the Stockings for Soldiers project
- Sent children's books to the Georgetown Crisis Center
- Began our two-year homeless project funding a family in their efforts to obtain a home, furnishings, job and fresh start
- Partnered with Tunnell Cancer Center and the Rehoboth Art League in cancer prevention and awareness programs such as the Courage Unmasked Program
- Focused volunteer efforts in support of the Cancer Community through Pillowcases for Hope and Caring Stitchers who provide lap robes, chemo caps and prayer shawls to Tunnell Cancer Center

**The VIA has just begun.** Their objective to “improve and increase the intellectual culture, educational advancement and moral development of its members, to further and promote the interests, improvements and progress of Rehoboth Beach, DE; to do and perform whatever charitable and civic work at Rehoboth Beach, Delaware and elsewhere as may from time to time be decided upon by our members” is a wonderful challenge.

Not only did they accomplish these and many other projects, the VIA also joined in the Delaware Federation of Women's Clubs where they would send one or two delegates to the annual convention to hear about what other clubs around the state were doing and used their combined strength to push for the woman's right to vote. At the time, Delaware was the only state in the country that did not have a college for women. That soon changed when this group became involved. Not only that, delegates of the Delaware Federation would attend National Federation to exchange ideas. As a side benefit, the local group hosted the state convention here which was an economic boost for the area.

In the first years of the organization, newspapers would report that the VIA would “entertain” at one of the homes of the ladies always reporting their names as Mrs. (husband's name). Researching to find the maiden names of this group has been yet enlightening. Many had passports. They were married to doctors, professors, ministers, executives of Fortune 500

companies or owned their own business. Some were married to the Rehoboth Mayor. Quite a few were members of the Daughters of the American Revolution or their spouses qualified for the Sons of the American Revolution. Some of their fathers fought in the Civil War and some spouses served in World War I. The women also made an impact in other ways, as they held important jobs with charitable institutions or formed the local Chamber of Commerce. They may not have endorsed candidates for Rehoboth Mayor as an organization, but members would announce their endorsement of a particular candidate. These were doers. They got things done. When the infamous Northeaster of 1962 tore up sections of the boardwalk, they used the planks from the boardwalk to create a fishing pier on one of the town ponds. Talk about making lemonade from lemons!

Please see the list of about 100 woman who were members in the first 20 years of the organization on the Newsletter supplement which is attached. These were illustrious women who deserve to be honored and their work continues as they celebrate their 115<sup>th</sup> anniversary. They were truly civic, industrious, charitable women, motivated by their love of Rehoboth and their desire to make things better.

You can support their efforts by attending some of their fundraisers (like a Happy Hour or Wine Tasting event, the Art of Accessorizing Show). You could also rent their Clubhouse located on the Boardwalk for a special occasion or becoming a member yourself by contacting Mary Jane Deats at