



Newsletter of the Middletown Township Historical Society

VOL. IV NO. 3

JUNE, 1988



FORMING A FIRE DEPARTMENT

The Township's first fire company was the Navesink Hook and Ladder Company, organized in 1886. It was a private, volunteer organization and raised its own funds. Several others followed and municipal assistance was sought. The state's constitution forbade municipal financial aid to private corporations. However, an exception existed for fire companies organized pursuant to statute.

The Township passed its first fire company ordinance in 1926. The certificate signifies a company's appropriate organization. An original is in the museum exhibit. Proper structure of the company was necessary for seven-year veteran fireman gaining exemption from jury duty and service in peace time militia. The fire ordinance and organization of the companies marked an advance in Township fire fighting.

FIRE EXHIBIT OPENS

The Society's exhibition on fire fighting opens Saturday July 16 and will run through November. The exhibition displays memorabilia and pictorial material outlining the history of fire fighting. The focal point is a hand-drawn 19th century engine on loan from Middletown Township Fire Company Number 1. Regular museum hours are Saturday and Sunday from 1:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.

THE JOHN M. PILLSBURY GIFT

The Society received its most important gift from John M. Pillsbury, a Middletown-resident lawyer, who has practiced in Atlantic Highlands for over fifty years. He plans to sell his office, the Snyder & Roberts Building on First Avenue, and continue his practice there in smaller quarters. Reducing space and thinning files resulted in the disposal of selected old papers and legal documents. Many were given to the Society. Although the legal papers were documents of public record, their accessibility in one place makes them a treasure trove and time saver for the historian. Descriptive highlights follow.

Many maps are included. One of great rarity and eye-appeal is the 1938 Dolph and Stewart wall map of Monmouth County. There may be fewer in existence than the famed 1851 Lightfoot map. Although the Lightfoot is more important, the Dolph and Stewart is significant for including the names and acreages of large estates at a time just prior to the breaking-up of many of them. The Society's site is indicated as "M.A. Rice Estate, 188 acres". Old real estate developments are mapped in individual lot detail. Various transactions are outlined by maps, including the opening of a street through an unused railroad right-of-way.

The Pillsbury firm originated with the practice of Charles W. Snyder. He was admitted to the bar in 1892 and opened an Atlantic Highlands office when growing rail and steamer traffic was increasing bayshore real estate demand from Cliffwood Beach eastward to Highlands, then still part of Middletown

Township. Snyder specialized in real estate and title work. The Society's material includes numerous title searches. These documents have no intrinsic value and many are boring and insignificant. However, some illuminate the succession of ownership of important tracts of land. Some reproduce old deeds and wills verbatim, obvious benefits. Many others refer to the volume and page numbers of the County's deed records, which facilitate research by pointing out the place of the needed document. Snyder formalized his practice's frequent title involvement by forming a separate entity, the Snyder and Roberts Title Company. They not only oversaw the mapping of new subdivisions, but at times retained the maps, drafting reference to their map holdings in the deed's property description. That procedure was, of course, terminated.

John M. Pillsbury was employed by the firm at his 1930 admission to the bar and joined as a partner in 1935. He developed expertise in the firm's real estate specialty, but also added a new dimension to the firm, a litigation practice. Real estate litigation can produce documents with historical trails comparable to title searches. One example involves the Society's home, the former residence of Melvin A. Rice. His widow, Harriet B. Rice, had a dispute in the late forties for which each deed in the assemblage of their great estate was reproduced. They pre-date Rice, as Mrs. Rice was earlier Mrs. Donald W. MacLeod. The property is important in the county estate movement. It is an early example of a New Yorker building a large, seasonal home on property assembled from long-time natives. It also reflects the checkered success of such ventures as some of the land was purchased by MacLeod from the Highland Park Improvement Company. Their ambitious aims to sell to builders of large homes was minimally successful. A few houses from the period still stand adjacent to the Beacon Hills Country Club golf course.

The Honorable Lawrence A. Carton, Jr, was another distinguished partner. He became the first mayor of Middletown. Actually, he was the first chairman of the township committee to use that title, but that is a subject for a future article. His litigation practice included appellate work. Lawrence Carton defended the Township in one of the most important litigations in the State in this century, *Olivia Writson Switz vs. Township of Middletown, et al.* The efforts of that case can be observed now as the Township is engaged in a property reevaluation to assure equitable real estate taxation. Our files now contain several briefs and decisions on the case. Mr. Carton was later appointed a judge.

These notes skip the sequential order of the firm's celebrated partners to conclude with Howard W. Robert's. He was employed by Charles Snyder in a clerical capacity after high school graduation as his class valedictorian. He studied law with Mr. Snyder and was admitted to the bar in 1909 at age 21, without having gone to law school. Roberts was Township Clerk for over fifty years and long-time chairman of the Township's Republican party. He held extraordinary power during his long tenure and is undoubtedly the most important figure in twentieth century Middletown history. The Pillsbury gift contains Roberts papers from varying time periods. They will aid understanding of this great man's career.

As a mark of the Society's great esteem and appreciation for this magnificent gift, John and Louanne Pillsbury were elected honorary life members at the Society's May 23, 1988 meeting.

The Society appreciates and extends its warmest thanks to Richard Hughes and member Bob Roth for their assistance in bringing together donor and recipient.

M.T.H.S. NEWS

Elections at the June 27 meeting voted the following into office:

President	Randall Gabrielan
Vice President	Peg Jordan
Secretary	Barbara Gabrielan
Treasurer	Gail Nelsen

Trustees were also elected. The full roster follows:

Class of 1989	Ellen Broandor Joan Feigus Irwin Kappes
Class of 1990	Julius Coppola Peg Jordan Gail Nelsen
Class of 1991	Barbara Gabrielan Randall Gabrielan Robert Pelligrini

These are the activists who keep the Society going. If you would like to become more involved and know one of them, please feel free to raise the issue.

The Society unveiled at its May 23rd meeting the Julius Coppola replica of the Gay Coblens mural of Kings Highway that was part of the Middletown Township Public Library when it was located at 78 Kings Highway prior to 1971. The painting depicts in a flat, folk style, notable buildings, events and folklore connected with Middletown village. The Society possesses the original mural, which was damaged in removal. The replica provides a reminder of the need, the wherewithal to restore Mrs. Coblens' work.

Our Newsletter has a new look. The colored masthead was eliminated with the April issue, the first printed by Minuteman Press. They use a brighter paper which increases readability. This issue is the first procured with computer-set type. The print is slightly smaller, a necessary choice in order to continue the same content. However, the choice of typeface, brighter paper, and justified margins actually make it easier to read.



The destruction of Red Bank's opera house (theatre) was another of that town's notable fires.



The absence of much industry resulted in few factory fires in Middletown. See the story of this one at the exhibit.



Wreck of the WILSON Burned June 23 1907

Photo by P P Y

The burning of the S.S. William V. Wilson was a famous township fire. It was obsolescent, doing poorly and burned at the dock with its records aboard with no apparent cause.

CHARMING SCENERY

An article so titled appeared in the Matawan Journal of November 3, 1877. It is reprinted in quotes by the italic type lettering, interspersed with current commentary. It may surprise that so much of the route is still charming, despite the proximity to modern development. Most of the trip of the Journal's editor was within the original boundaries of Middletown Township, although a part of it is Holmdel today. The route touches briefly the Pleasant Valley region of Marlboro Township, once part of Freehold Township.

"On Wednesday (October 24, 1877) afternoon of last week, by previous engagement with Col. Chas. D. Hendrickson, we took the 1 o'clock train for Middletown, and were there met by the above gentlemen in his carriage, for a ride over the roads leading through that charming section of Monmouth.

"We drove up the Middletown and Red Bank turnpike to the residence of Col. Elias Conover, accepted his invitation to alight, and went back to inspect his excellent stable arrangement and look at some of his handsome colts. Col. Conover has some thoroughbred stock and one of the finest fruit farms in the township, through the fire-blight has played havoc among his pear trees."

The turnpike is today's Highway 35. Conovers once owned vast tracts around and in Middletown village. This one was the Hambletonian Farm, one of the finest horse farms in the state. The locale was around today's Applebrook housing development on both sides of the highway. The farm is illustrated on pages 164 and 165 of Woolman and Rose. The main house burned, but the colonel's son's house still stands on Apple Farm Road. Several Applebrook streets are named for farm horses. Fire blight is the first plant disease proved to be caused by a bacterium. It struck apple and pear trees, among others. Treatment was removal of affected parts and application of antibiotic sprays. The trees looked as if scorched by fire.

"Thence we drove on to Fairview Cemetery, Red Bank's 'city of the dead'. It is a most beautiful spot and rendered increasingly attractive by very fine specimens of monumental work and an abundance of evergreen shrubbery. Among the monuments we saw the fine granite shaft erected to the memory of the gallant Lieut. George Arrowsmith, who fell in the late civil war by a shot from a sharpshooter while leading forward his regiment."

The cemetery was founded in 1855. The period was early in the public cemetery movement when many were designed to be places of personal relaxation and contemplation. Fair View Cemetery is still among the most beautiful and peaceful places in the Township. The Arrowsmith obelisk is near the Oak Hill Road entrance, but it does not stand out from the larger ones surrounding it. More prominent is the memorial to the Civil War's 29th New Jersey Volunteers. This statue of a soldier stands near the Highway 35 entrance.

"Then we turned and took the road to the Highlands by the way of Chapel Hill, and a short distance from the toll gate we tied our horse and climbed to a bald summit where a charming view is gained of the surrounding country, with Port Monmouth, New Monmouth, Middletown, Sandy Hook and the bay in the distance."

They probably took Chapel Hill road, but one wonders where they stopped as a toll gate near Chapel Hill is not indicated on contemporary maps. Today the closest to "bald summits" with a view are some of the streets on the north

side of Kings Highway East. The best harbor view is likely from the top of Beacon Hill Road, just west of Portland Road.

"Returning through Middletown, we enjoyed a pleasant call at the Reformed parsonage, in the society of Rev. Mr. Buck, whose pastorate at Middletown began about six months since; paid our greetings to Senator Hendrickson and his estimable wife, and 'struck the old Indian trail' as we bent our course to the southeast, ascending the narrow defile that gives room for only one carriage and leads to the summit or summits known in the days of our grandmothers as 'Red Hill' - now 'Bay View'. Here indeed was a grand and picturesque scene. No wonder the native Indians loved such a pathway from Sandy Hook across New Jersey to the Delaware. From hill to hill and from vale to vale the eye reaches on in the north and easterly directions toward the bay, the Narrows, the ocean in the distance, with the long belt of Sandy Hook separating the ocean from the horseshoe or the mouth of the historic Shrewsbury. We looked from this height down on the spots familiar to the author of the Water Witch and through him familiarized to every reader of Cooper's novels, and then turned our eyes inland and took in the charming landscape to the southeast, south and west.

They traveled west on Kings Highway East, passing several notable farms on the way to the village. The narrow defile is the foot of Red Hill Road, then also known as the Deep Cut. The view of the bay can be seen from the edge of the woods behind the activity center in Tatum Park's Red Hill section. The old name of Bay View has been forgotten. A rare reminder is the 1873 Beers Atlas. The township had two Bay Views in that era. The other was around the Leonardo-Hillside hills. Atlantic Highlands interests were borrowing the name. They were reminded that Bay View was a broader area, took their current name, with this Bay View also falling from use.

"Then we drove by the rich and fertile fields that seemed fairly to laugh at the pleasure of wearing their emerald garment of growing wheat, while all about them were the evidence of autumnal change, by the farm once owned by 'Riny' Hendrickson as those who knew him familiarly called him. By the homestead of the late Dr. Cook, still kept so homelike by the Doctor junior, and through the hamlet of Holmdel down to the rural and now half-weird spot known as 'Ely's mill'. It must be charming here in summer, the pond reflected on the surface the great trees under whose shade one might laugh at summer's heat, but just now it is a scene of destruction. The driving storm and swollen streams surged against the embankment, rising higher each moment, until with a roar the dam gave way and the seething waters left devastation and ruin in their wake. Mr. Wm. Ely is a pleasant gentleman, a type of old fashioned hospitality, and he takes his calamities on a spirit of Platonic philosophy."

They proceeded up Red Hill Road, continuing on Holmdel's Middletown Road. The Dr. Cook home is on the east side at the juncture of a street named for a later owner, Theron McCampbell. The house looks good after a recent restoration. They turned west on today's County Road 520 to the Holmdel-Matawan Road, now Highway 34. A turn to the northwest on Pleasant Valley Road brings the old Ely Mill in view on the left (west) side. Why was it "half-weird", perhaps for the tendency to flood? The charm still remains following a restoration by Carl Zellers.

"And now we drive through a section of the fertile Pleasant Valley, by the rich farms of George Schanck, Chrineyonce and Joseph H. Holmes, and others"; strike the Holmdel and Keyport turnpike, take in the grand view of the beautiful valleys on either side; turn off and take the road through the 'Crawford neighborhood', and on by the residence of Senator Hendrickson, almost hidden behind symmetrical evergreens, and in a few moments alight at the 'home on the summit', to enjoy the hospilities of our guide of the afternoon, his esteemed wife, and the pet of the house who told us her name was May, and that she was eight years old on Monday."

Pleasant Valley envelopes one in a quiet, rural atmosphere seemingly distant from the modern development only hundreds of yards away. An exploratory detour is justified, but bear east on Schanck Road to follow the early route. Cross Highway 34, continue to Holmdel Road, turn left (north) there and right at the Crawford's Corner intersection where the Holmdel municipal complex and Garden State Parkway facility dominate the old Crawford neighborhood. Turn left (north) at South Holland Road to proceed to the Senator Hendrickson house, on the hill to the left just prior to Laurel Avenue. It is one of two great houses in old Middletown's Holland neighborhood, which was split by new municipal lines. The other is the Lyster House, also on Holland Road, the Middletown side east of Laurel.

"And no more fitting place could we find that from the observatory of Col. Hendrickson's commanding residence, to close this sketch of scenery. It is beautiful in all directions. We can here retrospect many of the views of the afternoon, and as the evening shades close in upon us the 'lights along the shore' mark for us the Highlands, Sandy Hook, etc., and even the far off 'red bank' light on Staten Island. "It was a pastime of an afternoon and evening; but many years will come and go ere we forget its pleasure as we mentally revelled in the scenery of landscape, foliage, orchard and field."

Only the orchards are gone today. The pleasant landscape and charm remain, even in face of recent development.

One hopes reproducing an old route will encourage the viewer to appreciate the beauty around us. The route is about twenty-five miles. Allow one and one-half hours for a leisurely trip which stops at the highlights.



The first Navesink fire house on Monmouth Avenue. It still stands opposite the present firehouse.

OSBORN AND FIELD

Ezra Osborn and Elnathan Field were two successful well-known nineteenth century Middletownites. The former was very wealthy and had many interests, including investments in woodland. The latter owned the Oak Hill Nursery. The two were key investors among several locals who purchased for speculation land in the Miami area in the 1870s and 1880s. An aim was growing coconuts. They are important figures in the history of Miami, Coconut Grove and Key Biscayne. Joan Blank of Key Biscayne is writing a history of that town. She seeks pictures of Osborn and Field. Does a reader have them and are you willing to help? The Society has assisted assembly of information, but does not have access to the needed illustrations. Contact the editor.

BRIEFLY NOTED

Comparative history gives rise to these notes.

The League of Historical Societies of New Jersey met at Woodbridge June 18, 1988. That township has several similarities with Middletown. Both are large and sprawling, straining from development, with numerous neighborhoods (and Post Offices) that identify with the locality rather than the municipality. Both have waterside sites of former resorts where settlement once included many seasonal homes. Woodbridge's resort was Boynton Beach in the Sewaren section on the Arthur Kill. The beach has been replaced by an oil refinery. The hosts made several ironic "that's progress?" comments while explaining and showing pictures of the transformation. Actually, it is progress, depending on perspective. The refinery can make aviation fuel to send New Jerseyites to distant locales since the Arthur Kill and the Raritan Bay shore have lost vacation appeal. Woodbridge Township is more than highway junctures and a shopping mall. Its history is worth knowing.

The North Jersey Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society recently published The Union Trolley Line, a pictorial history of a primarily Union County street car line. It was part of Public Service's system that connected northern and central New Jersey suburbs. The illustrations are superb and give a feeling of presence. The Union Line terminated north of Jersey Central Traction's Perth Amboy terminus, but a comparison is invited. Both had horse drawn streetcar predecessors, but the spread of electric service spurred development along the right of way. Both were superseded by motor transport.

Jersey Central Traction succumbed sooner, lasting little more than twenty years. The Union was a Public Service line with several short private line antecedents, with most originating in the early years of this century. The Union trolleys lasted longer than most. All-electric service was maintained until 1935. Then a marriage of electric and gasoline power ran for another twelve years. All service vehicles with rubber tires powered by either overhead electric wires or engines plied the streets until 1947. This unusual operation is well-documented by the pictures. The book costs \$11.00 and is available from the Chapter at P.O. Box 394, Highlands, NJ 07732, or, at the Atlantic Highlands Historical Society's house museum at Mount and Prospect Avenues. It is well worth a visit as the Society is capturing the glamor of the Straus era through a restoration that sparkles this year.

THE OLD FIRE GONGS

The chance discovery of a copy of an indignant letter of protest at the removal of two fire gongs gives a picture of fire notification over fifty years ago. Amelia F. Knapp wrote the Town Committee in 1939 objecting to removal of the gongs at Roosevelt Park and Lincoln Park, East Keansburg. She was responsible for their erection following "a terrible fire at a time of year when few telephones were available", having organized a committee and raised funds. The date of erection was not specified.

Mrs. Knapp purchased rims and rails from the Jersey Central Railroad and paid a Mr. Ackermann to cart them from an unspecified station to the sites. Edward Hahn and a Mr. Schmartz each donated a hammer. The devices were mounted on locust posts cut on Pat Keelen's Keansburg property. Permission was obtained from the Ideal Beach Land Company for their erection and four men were hired for the job.

Changes in alerting firemen is an important aspect of fire fighting history. An improvement must have been made by 1939, but Mrs. Knapp's comments are useful for describing the device. Her indignation was over a lack of advice to the gong's responsible party and, perhaps, a lack of a voice in the distribution of the proceeds of the sale of "scrap". The sarcasm of her post script still sounds loud, "They left the 4 locust posts standing, what's the matter, couldn't they sell them?"

Doing Local History: LIBRARIAN

The Society's collecting books and printed material pre-dates the opening of the museum. Books about Middletown or by Middletownites are relatively few. The collection is manageable, with about half of them school yearbooks. Clippings and documents (see article on the Pillsbury Gift) now require the attention of a worker who will organize and file both and catalog the documents. Will a professional librarian volunteer? If not, the work can be performed by a non-librarian familiar with printed materials and able to follow guidelines. A simplified filing system is being organized, one that should facilitate both organization and access to materials.

Most historical information does not exist between the covers of books. Access to information is a vital requisite for writing and understanding. The Society has an opportunity has an opportunity to increase considerably available material on our Township. Who will help? Contact the editor.

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DEDICATED TO RESEARCHING, COLLECTING AND EXHIBITING THE HISTORY OF MIDDLETOWN TOWNSHIP.

Museum: In the main building at Croydon Hall on Leonardville Rd. between Chamone and Bellevue Aves. in the township's Leonardo section. Open Saturdays & Sundays.

Meetings: 8:00 PM at the museum, generally on the fourth Monday with occasional exceptions for major holidays.

Donations of historical materials: Please see a museum guide or write to the Society.



MEMBERSHIP DUES
PER CALENDAR YR.

Individual — \$5.00

Family — \$10.00

Dues for new members joining after Oct. 1 include following year.