



Newsletter of the Middletown Township Historical Society

VOL. IV NO. 5

OCTOBER, 1988

MIDDLETOWN THEN AND NOW

Looking at Highway structures often reveals much about the road's history. Perhaps the most interesting are the United States highways overtaken by parallel Interstates. Many remain histories of second quarter of the century roadside architecture. This glimpse of Highway 35 looking east from New Monmouth Road gives a telling view of a growing town.

The new section of Highway 35 from Harmony Road to Five Corners had been built only in 1928. Thus, the 1957 "then" was taken at about the halfway point of the roads present existence. The Middletown Shopping Center barely visible on the left opened that year. The dairy bar today would be considered a marginal use of the land. Much of the former farmland was wooded. The tree filled plots are becoming fewer. The intersection was still controlled by a stop sign, but is one of the busiest today.

Marine View Savings and Loan Association replaced the dairy bar. It reflects change beyond the erection of an edifice. It was founded in 1887 as the Atlantic Highlands Building and Loan Association and located at the focal point of 1890s real estate activity. The local boom in the nineteen fifties was in the Township. This institution moved its headquarters and took a site neutral name.

(Thanks to John M. Pillsbury, Esq. for the "then" photograph.)



Highway 35, view east from New Monmouth Road



NINETEENTH CENTURY HISTORY OF THE CROYDON HALL REGION

Nineteenth century changes in our museum's region reflect a typical Middletown growth pattern, the selling of the family farms for development. This land is a section of Leonardville Road extending west from Beacon Hill Road to Hosford Avenue and south for several hundred yards. It saw the failure of an early high-class summer home colony, timed well from a transportation standpoint, but poorly from economic factors. It saw the rise of a fine country estate and the growth of an enduring American institution, the golf course.

Nathaniel Leonard was commissioned in the Middletown Middle Company in 1739. His son, Thomas, born in 1753, followed dual careers of merchant sailing and agriculture, purchasing a farm that became part of the Croydon Hall area. This family homestead farm passed to Richard A. Leonard, whose biographical sketch in Ellis gives an early account of the Leonard family. (1) His farm is shown on the 1851 Lightfoot Monmouth County map. (Figure 1)

The earliest American Burdge was a Jonathan, who was settled in Hempstead, New York by 1673. His son David, a carpenter, moved to Monmouth County on May 20, 1715 and bought 685 acres by the Navesink River and



Croydon Hall



Figure 1. 1851 Lightfoot

Clay Pit Creek. It became known as Burdge Point.(2) Several generations and various land transactions resulted in a smaller family farm on Leonardville Road. The presence of Edward T. Burdge is shown by the 1860 Beers Monmouth County map. (Figure 2)

Edward T. Burdge was born March 23, 1821, in Leonardo. He inherited the family farm and added to it, purchasing seventy-five acres from Susannah Tilton in 1851.(3) He married Elizabeth A. Burdge November 30, 1853. They had ten children. The eldest, Edward T. Jr., died at home after contracting



Figure 2. 1860 Beers

typhoid fever at Camp Vredenburg near Freehold, shortly after enlisting in the 29th regiment of New Jersey Volunteers. Edward Sr. was a founder of the Navesink Methodist Church,(4) was active in it until his death and was buried from that church following his passing April 1, 1904.(5)

Burdge was prosperous and well-respected. Three sons survived, but he sold the family farm when he retired. The Highland Park Improvement Company paid \$60,000.00 for 116.731 acres on August 31, 1892.(6) The purchasers planned to divide the property into building lots of at least one-half acre for the erection of high class private residences costing at least \$3,500.00. Grading and mapping the tract began immediately.

The Monmouth Press was a substantial weekly newspaper, arguably the best on the bayshore. It had recently emerged from receivership guided by Charles R. Snyder, Atlantic Highlands' leading real estate lawyer. William J. Leonard was its articulate, civic-minded editor. He was also a lawyer and scion of the Leonard family, the one to whom had evolved the Leonardville family farm.(7)

It was a likely time for a real estate boom. The United States Government had expelled the Central Railroad from its Sandy Hook steamer dock in 1891. The next year the CRR expanded docking facilities in Atlantic Highlands and extended a rail connection to the shore. The Leonard Avenue station on the Atlantic Highlands branch was a few blocks from Highland Park. The sale at over \$500.00 per acre was a hefty figure. Editor Leonard's land adjoined Highland Park, giving him a personal interest in its success. His Monmouth Press reported early activity in detail and with enthusiasm. Early reports were weekly starting September 10, 1892, with a lengthy account of the sale, noting the real estate boom was moving westward. By the following week, bids were accepted for grading and removal of about 25,000 cubic yards of earth. The September 24 edition reviewed progress of surveying and mapping. By October 1 the grading job had been won by D. L. Conover, who was planning two north/south "highways" through the grounds while adjusting the land's contours. October 8 reported many men and teams were at work grading. An early sale of lots was contemplated.

Leonard's October 22, 1892 account reads as a real estate promotion describing plans of drives strikingly adapted to the relief of the tract of majestic hills, gentle slopes and undulating plains. George Cooper drew a large scale 100 feet to the inch map. The Figure 3 reduction shows highlights, despite unreadable fine print. The avenue to the left survives as Beacon Hill Road. The black spot in front of the large plot in the lower right corner was the Burdge



Figure 3. Highland Park development map

house, which would be rebuilt by Donald W. MacLeod. Burdge built two houses on the north side of Leonardville Road, then Valley Drive, for himself and son Theodore. Part of Bryant Avenue is now open and is the rear access to today's parking lot.

The development aimed at the New York City market. The Monmouth Press announced December 31, 1892 that the sale of lots to stockholders would be January 5, 1893 at New York's St. Cloud Hotel. The January 28 paper



Figure 4. The MacLeod-Rice home

reported a sale total of \$31,000.00. A companion article titled "Vigorous Enterprise" waxed enthusiastic, describing plots as ranging from one-half acre to two acres with prices varying from \$1,000.00 to \$5,000.00. The highest prices were on the west side of Windsor Terrace, an extant street in the Beacon Hill Country Club house area. Two streets, Bryant and Milton, were noted as named for the poets.

Cooper's map conveys the flavor of the promoters' less than truthful claim on locale. The Figure 3 reduction was made from a smaller scale edition. It locates Highland Park as Middletown Township. The original labels it as



Figure 5. Golf at Highland park

Atlantic Highlands. It stated, "This property can be reached from Pier 8 North (Hudson) River, one hour's delightful sail down the Bay and through the Narrows, by the magnificent steamers of the New Jersey Southern (Central) Railroad Company. Atlantic Highlands is now the terminus of the Central Railroad of New Jersey and the New Jersey Southern Railroad and its growth within the past two years has been marvelous. The town has SEWERAGE, WATER AND GAS...."

Enhancing the Park's beauty and physical appeal continued. By May 6 work of curbing avenues and sidewalks was progressing as fast as weather permitted. A large flagstaff erected on the Park's highest point flew the stars and stripes in June. A Highland Park banner was added by July. Flower beds decorated the entrance. Carriage rides often stopped under the flag for a matchless view, while the traveling on the Leonardville Road border was made easier by changing the location of a stream, eliminating a roadside ditch and erection of an iron bridge.(8)

Timing was as poor as the plots were attractive. The politics of gold and foreign trade balances and resultant bank failures and tight money of the Panic of 1893 depressed the expensive country home market. Few houses were built.



Figure 6. N.J. topographical map

Mr. Leonard editorialized June 24, 1894, that only hard times retard a real estate boom in Middletown Township. He was likely right. The next year would see a new luxury summer home colony, east of Highland Park.

One buyer with money was Donald W. MacLeod, New York linen merchant and shareholder of the Highland Park Association. That summer he bought for \$4,000.00 two plots including the old Burdge mansion. It was adjacent to William J. Leonard's farm and fronted on Reyem and Bryant avenues.(9) He planned major alterations and their progress was regularly reported in the press. Construction of two handsome cottages was probable September 1. Work had begun by September 8. By October 13 the transformations of the Burdge farm house into an elegant villa had rapidly progressed and construction of a barn southwest of the house had begun. No known picture of the Burdge house is extant. Figure 4 is the earliest view of the MacLeod house.

Highland Park values fell. Its founding president, Isaac T. Meyers,

purchased land immediately to the south and began Monmouth Heights, presumably competitive. By January 1895 prices of 100 x 200 foot lots were lower than 50 x 100 foot plots on nearby crowded avenues. No prices were specified, but since they were at the proportionate rate of \$160.00 per 25 x 100 foot lot, a cost of \$1,280.00 can be inferred.(10) The Water Witch Club was formed that year for a colony of high class summer homes in the hills to the east. It endures as Monmouth Hills. The Club reached a new high of seasonal elegance. Its presence probably did not help Highland Park.

Donald MacLeod prospered. He purchased three lots between his home and Leonardville Road and planned to enclose his several property acquisitions.(11) He had a young wife, "an exceedingly attractive woman."(12) She was less than half his age when they married around 1889, her twenty-five to his fifty-two. His physical conditions deteriorated. The press reported on January 5, 1901, that he had been sick at his New York home for several weeks, but was expected to visit New Jersey that day. Apparently his marriage deteriorated, too. Mrs. MacLeod was named correspondent in a divorce suit on April 24, 1901.(13) The complainant was Mrs. Melvin Rice. The MacLeod-Rice marital dispute was a bizarre, publicly aired event. Mrs. Rice amended her complaint deleting Mrs. MacLeod as correspondent. However, no one was permitted to see Mr. MacLeod from the date of the first suit until his death December 8, 1901, at age 64.(14) Melvin Rice and Harriet MacLeod married not long thereafter. The Highland Park house had a new master, but the same mistress.

The Highland Park Association received a boost from an unexpected source by permitting cottage owners to use the grounds for golf links. They organized a club, electing Richard C. Veit president and Isaac T. Meyers secretary. The membership fee was \$35.00 and an additional \$25.00 seasonal grounds fee was charged. The parts of various avenues served as course hazards in lieu of artificial barriers.(15) Some later press accounts have erroneously stated an eighteen hole course was first built. Perhaps this was inferred from eighteen hole tournaments, which were typically nine holes played morning and afternoon on a nine hole course. The course was lengthy for the region, with the holes measuring 350, 390, 190, 480, 185, 400, 425, 300 and 309 yards for a total distance of 3,029 yards.(16)

Golf's popularity increased the next year. It was often front page news. The Monmouth Press reported the frequent tournaments in detail, including scores. Golf was shaping leisure fashion. Men wore white duck pants and outing shirts and the women were attired in white duck skirts and white shirt waists at a season closing golf dance. They agreed their costumes were the coolest and most comfortable they ever danced in.(17)

Golf's success spurred the Association to plan during the winter of 1900-1901 for the construction of ten houses. Figure 5 reflects the closeness of the course and housing. Ambitions exceeded achievements. Local contractor W. W. Leonard signed to build ten houses, but fewer were completed. The venture



Figure 7. Chamber of Commerce map

faltered, in part due to illness and death among the promoters. Melvin Rice bought the remainder of the tract in April 1912. Golfers were given permission to stay for that season.(18)

The Rice's holdings extended beyond the Highland Park Improvement Company's lands. Melvin Rice had a successful career as president of the Donald MacLeod Company, as operator of a model daily farm and as a state and local education leader. He made major alterations in the house around 1911 or 1912, giving it today's familiar appearance which appears to embody various stylistic elements of the period revivals popular from the turn of the century. A lengthy account of Rice's life should follow. However, details are slow to emerge and it is beyond the ambit of this article.

The golfers remain. The Beacon Hill Country Club claims its origin as the Highland Park group and lists a club champion for each year since then.(19) The Monmouth County Country Club was a corporate predecessor, incorporated November 18, 1915. The Beacon Hill Country Club was organized four years later. However, in 1937 the club advertised it was open for its 30th season.(20) There exists a numerical inconsistency or a change in its historical line.

Today the area is part of the Leonardo section. The municipal facility known as Croydon Hall retains the name of a mid-century owner, the Croydon Hall Academy. The private school opened in 1947 and closed in 1975. It, too, merits a lengthier look later. Few, if anyone, remember the name Highland Park. It did, however, appear on a map. Figure 6 is an excerpt from New Jersey's Department of Conservation and Development's Atlas Sheet No. 29, the 1938 edition. Highland Park is not listed in the New Jersey volume of the National Gazetteer. However, appearance on that map will likely preserve its memory as a "place". In all, the activity was active and varied with the old Burdge farm becoming one of the most prominent places on the bay shore. The current map (Figure 7) still reflects a reminder of its Highland Park phase and retains the school name thirteen years after it closed.

R.G.

- (1) Ellis, Franklin, "History of Monmouth County," Philadelphia, 1885, p 556-8.
- (2) Burdge, Howard Griffith, "Burdge and Allied Families" (A typescript). n.d., apparently compiled in the 1930s.
- (3) Monmouth County Deeds, Vol R5, p 471.
- (4) Monmouth County Deeds, Vol 170, pps 209-213.
- (5) Red Bank Register, April 6, 1904.
- (6) Monmouth County Deeds, Vol 505, p 103. The sale was erroneously reported in at least two newspapers as \$45,000.00 for 120 acres, Red Bank Register Sept. 7, 1892 and Monmouth Inquirer, October 13, 1892.
- (7) Monmouth County Deeds, Vol 344, p 268.
- (8) Monmouth Press, July 29, 1893.
- (9) Monmouth Press, August 25, 1894.
- (10) Monmouth Press Illustrated Edition, January 1895.
- (11) Monmouth Press, May 7, 1898.
- (12) Brooklyn Daily Eagle, April 25, 1901. The dates of birth of Mr. and Mrs. MacLeod are not known. Age and data calculations may be misstated by one year.
- (13) Eagle, Ibid.
- (14) Eagle, Ibid. and December 10, 1901
- (15) Monmouth Press, April 29, 1899.
- (16) Monmouth Press, July 1, 1899.
- (17) Monmouth Press, September 8, 1900.
- (18) Red Bank Register, May 1, 1912.
- (19) O'Mara, Beth. Beacon Hill Country Club - an Informal History, N.P., 1987?, p 3-4.
- (20) Red Bank Register, April 15, 1937.

OUR UNGODLY GOOF

Divine guidance was not with us as we labeled the August, 1988 "then" picture as the Middletown Reformed Church prior to its 1899 alteration. Joseph W. Hammond, distinguished Monmouth historian and scholar of the Middletown Reformed Churches' history, analyzed the picture and demonstrated why it could not be the Reformed Church. The site figures prominently. The church was not far back enough from the road to match its pre 1920 Kings Highway re-alignment position and the hill behind the church was not steep enough. There was never a basement entrance and the basement was not usable space at all until the late 1920s. The present steeple was added in 1856, replacing the original square tower was not part of the 1899 work. In addition, the size appears different, with the illustrated church smaller than the Reformed. The lesson is an old one: if you are not sure of something, do not commit it to writing.

There are two unanswered questions. Firstly, which church was pictured? The long ago demolished Harmony Methodist Church is a possibility. A Society member formerly residing in Harmony has indicated it possibly is that church. However, the attribution was not definite. Secondly, where are the 19th century needle and art work illustrating the old church? We would like to see an example and photograph it. History will be served and future similar mistakes avoided.

DUES

A separate notice will be mailed soon. However, you may pay now if you wish. The categories are \$5.00 individual, \$10.00 family, and \$25.00 sustaining. Sample newsletter recipients may also subscribe to the newsletter for \$5.00 annually, in the event "membership" appears intimidating. Courtesy copies will continue to be sent to those so designated. The computer issued label tells your status.

DOING LOCAL HISTORY People

Doing local history requires the skills of many hands. Most of them require neither knowledge nor training in history. The majority of current Society activists possess no special historical background. But all care for the prospering of the organization, each contributes in some particular way and all need help.

Our need is greatest in people oriented, rather than history oriented positions. The first is a publicity director. The accomplishments of the society should be better known, a condition directly related to the publicity obtained. The membership desires programs at meetings. Arranging them is a challenging job that puts one in touch with many interesting figures. Help is needed in planning exhibitions and caring for collections. Cataloging and sorting library materials can be done by an organized person who can follow directions. Finding new members and cultivating people is another worthy, needed calling.

This message is directed to you, not the history majors or scholars. They, too, are welcome. What would you like to do? Call Randy Gabrielan, the Society's president at 671-2645, or write him at home, 71 Fish Hawk Drive, or the Society at PO Box 434, both Middletown, NJ 07748. Or, see a museum guide.

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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 in-
clude following year.