



Newsletter of the Middletown Township Historical Society

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THE NORTHERN MONMOUTH COUNTY COUNTRY HOUSE

Patron and Architect 1891 - 1935

Continued

convey to the public a sense of the age of grandeur. Preserving these houses has often been difficult and is an ongoing struggle. Many of our great homes stand, but some significant ones have been destroyed. One, not previously mentioned, stands out as a notable example, the Theodore C. Blanchard house. It overlooked the Navesink River at the foot of the present Northover Place. A later owner was J. Howard Smith. His heirs did not wish to maintain the large estate in the 1950s. They did not or could not find a residential buyer, or the property was more valuable as building lots. Exception was sought to the area's zoning to permit housing development. The Township realized it was at a critical planning juncture. The loss of the character of the Navesink River Road area was threatened. A variance to permit twelve houses on the site was granted. Their lot size was small for the neighborhood, but larger than tract housing. This loss did not begin a trend, despite fears to the contrary. The struggle continues, however, as land use proposals are often for over-built, congestion-attracting developments.

The estate area pioneered local land use regulation and planning in Middletown. The Township's first zoning law in 1935 governed primarily the country house region. It was passed at the behest of its residents who sought minimum lot size requirements. The rest of the Township desired no restrictions. Effective, broadly-applied land use ordinances were not approved until the 1950s. Their acceptance was influenced by wide-spread revulsion over look-alike houses on small lots.

Woodrow Wilson Hall of Monmouth College, the Parson house, is an outstanding institutional building that still reflects the splendor of its country house origins. College employees work and students study in surroundings which feel like a palatial home. Building preservation often saves the structure while compromising the interior. Woodrow Wilson Hall has preserved both.

The choices are more complex than small building lots or massive mansions. Times change and both personal and community needs differ. Some palaces built in an age of opulence are hardly viable in contemporary tax and domestic help environments. Some were modified to meet current lifestyle needs. A continued demand for better, older, artfully designed housing is crucial for the retention of these grand structures as private residences. Protecting houses of our century has been embraced by the preservation movement.

Although New Jersey's house museums focus on the state's colonial origins, ongoing study and historic register eligibility will broaden public appreciation of these grand structures. This study and appreciation are well-deserved as the public has benefited from the architectural heritage and well-designed communities left it by the country house era.

R.G.

N.B. This article is also the script of a slide talk, available at the discretion of the writer to public showings in and near Middletown. It includes illustrations of many of the other works cited.

PHOTO CREDITS

- Figure 1, Gail Hunton.
Figures 9, 10, copy prints from originals lent by Paul and Mary Angela Doherty.
Figure 11, From Shopsin, Wm. C., et al, *The Villard Houses*, New York, 1980.
Figures 17, 18, copy prints from originals lent by Anne Haskell Ellis.
Figure 21, from Anderson, Edwina W., Ed., *Attractive Homes of New Jersey*, Baltimore, N.D.
Figure 28, copy print from an original lent by Bayard and Ruth Stout.
Figure 38, a 1940 Kodachrome by W. Edmund Kemble;
Others, including copy prints, by Randall Gabrielan.

MIDDLETOWN QUIZ

57. What is this object?



58. When and where was there a meeting of a type that became the Hunt Meet?
59. What Middletownite was a sheriff in California gold

rush territory?

- 60. What Middletownite from the Hillside section was an officer of the Confederate Army?
- 61. What Middletownite (and M.T.H.S. member) was an all-state football tackle in 1939.
- 62. What Middletownite owned Ellis Island?

CHAPEL HILL The First Re-Designated Historic District

Chapel Hill was the first of the Township's historic districts to be re-designated in the fall of 1989. The Middletown Township Landmarks Commission also plans to re-examine the Locust, Kings Highway and Navesink districts under the revised Landmarks Ordinance. The latter two places also have districts listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Chapel Hill presents a good case for preservation. It has lost most of its old village atmosphere. Celebrating the re-districting creates an opportunity for a brief look at what is gone and what is left. (Figure 1)

Sara Comstock's 1915 book, *Old Roads from the Heart of New York*, describes numerous excursions to old, interesting sites near the City. She called Chapel Hill "... perhaps the quaintest spot within thirty miles of New York ... this curious, changeless village of thirteen houses ... calling up not historic events, but historic times". (Editors note: What is a historic time, anyway? To me, the period for Ms. Comstock's book is a historic time.) The village witnessed a small slice of history, British soldiers departing after the Battle of Monmouth in 1778. The Comstock revolutionary era recollections received a wider audience when the same sentiments of a timeless village were published in the *New York Sun* on July 30, 1919.

Chapel Hill is much changed since then and it probably is no longer recognizable to the passerby as a former village. Chapel Hill is centered on Kings Highway East between Chapel Hill Road and Stillwell Road. It can be approached from four directions, but two travel patterns changed since Comstock's time. She urged readers arriving via Leonardo to proceed south on Chapel Hill Road. This route is now blocked by the Chapel Hill section of the Earle Naval Weapons Station. One wonders how Chapel Hill may have changed if there were no Earle and the many lot owners, initially concentrated near Leonardville Road spread



Figures 2, 3. Daniel W. Irwin

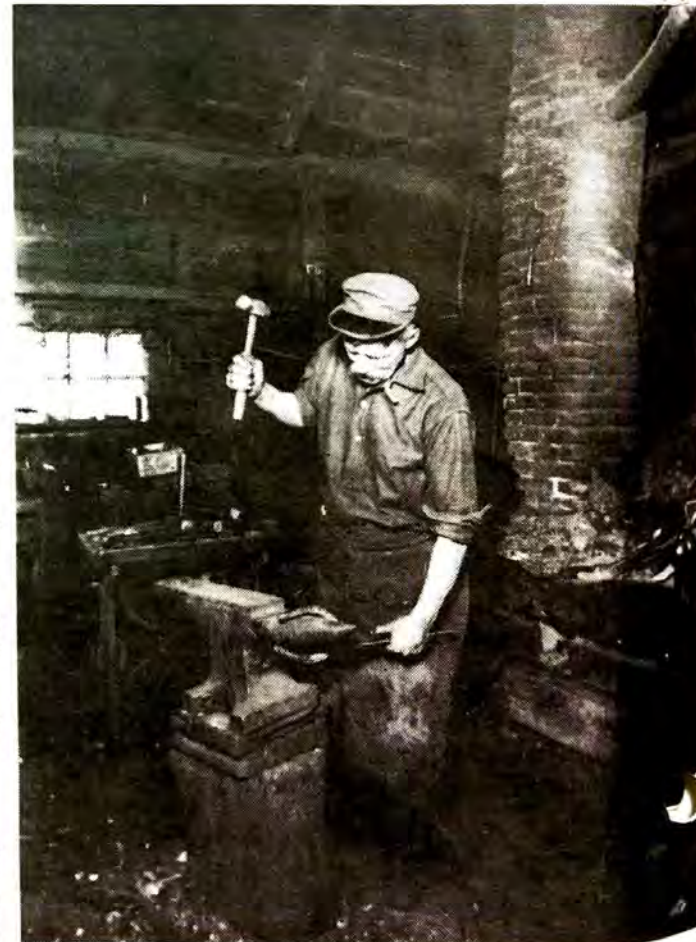


Figure 1. 1889 Wolverton Atlas, part of plate 30

throughout and built in the area. Kings Highway was once a major thoroughfare. Its two sections were broken by the present layout of Highway 35, impeding travel from the west and attaching the qualifier "East" to its segment east of Highway 35.

Public buildings gave a neighborhood character. The chapel and blacksmith shop are gone. Chapel Hill's store and taverns are now private residences.

The blacksmith shop once stood on the southeast corner of Chapel Hill Road and Kings Highway East (Figures 2, 3). Daniel W. Irwin was the village smithy for forty-three years from 1877 to his death in his shop in 1920 (Figure 4). He gained a minor fame in his role, likely for looking the part so well, in a long tenure through the era of the passing of the blacksmith.

Irwin was a Civil War veteran. His business continued well into the automobile age by taking business from surrounding towns as other blacksmiths died or retired.

Not every Chapel Hill institution was ancient. A notable one began and ended in about fifty years. The Eunice Home, occupied twenty acres on the south side of Kings Highway East opposite Stillwell Road (Figure 5, 6). Its organization was founded by Caroline Reed in 1889 as the Reed Alumnae League, with the name later changed to the Chapel Hill Fresh Air Mission of the Reed Alumnae League. Mrs. Reed also founded a highly-regarded girls school in New York. Most home guests were New York City children sent their for brief summer vacations by the Tribune Fresh Air Fund. The



Figure 4. Chapel Hill Blacksmith Shop (Destroyed)

home operated until 1943, when it was taken over by the Office of Civilian Defense. It was destroyed by fire in 1944.¹ The Mission's assets of \$2,672.50 were turned over to the Tribune Fresh Air Fund in 1946.²

Chapel Hill's largest and finest house was created during the early years of the country estate era. New Yorker Isaac B. Hosford bought the Downes farm in 1903, paying \$20,000 for eighty acres.³ It was adjacent to the Chapel Hill lighthouse, its locale remembered by the present Hosford Road. Hosford was a wealthy paper manufacturer and spent generously in expanding the house to thirty-nine rooms, one of the largest in the Township. He was reported to have paid \$15,000 for an electric pipe organ.⁴ The house was three stories and had three connected roof gardens. Its upper level commanded a view of Sandy Hook and New York City.

Hosford's holdings eventually exceeded 150 acres. He spent much money beautifying the grounds and built a network of private roads. The rose gardens were outstanding. The property was one of the show places of the Township.

The Hosfords left the area in 1925, relocating to Pasadena, California.⁵ The house's history has unanswered questions for the next several years. Vernon Bugg announced plans to open a hotel in 1928.⁶ Rumors in 1929 about occupancy by blacks from Harlem, New York City, created a community stir and led to formation of the Chapel Hill Civic League.⁷ A housing colony for a black congregation of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in New York was planned, but not built.⁸ The house was converted to the Red Oaks Hotel. It opened in 1932, managed by Mrs. Albert Strumsky, an experienced New York hotel administrator.⁹ The hotel was notable for attracting entertainers and musical figures.



Figure 5, 6. Eunice Home (Destroyed)

The depression likely impaired the hotel's business. The Hosford property was purchased by George Rosette who planned a housing development. Local opposition formed and sought a restrictive zoning change. The property was characterized by Rosette's lawyer as a continuous headache to the Township and the first opportunity in years to develop tax revenue.¹⁰ The ordinance passed, thwarting Rosette's plan. The place was destroyed by fire around 1941.

Destruction by neglect of the Chapel Hill church building (Figure 7) may be that neighborhood's greatest loss.



Various dates have been attributed to its origin, a matter verified by new research. The chapel was dated from the first decade of the nineteenth century. The year most often cited was 1809, perhaps taken from Ellis' statement that, "The Baptist Church at what was soon afterwards known as Chapel Hill was organized as the Independent Baptist Society and congregation at High Point, Middletown, June 17, 1809, the

following-named trustees were elected: Rev. John Cooper, John Stillwell, Henry Johnson, Job Layton, William Norris and John Johnson. A meeting-house was erected which was known as High Point Chapel."¹¹



Figure 7. The Chapel (Destroyed)

The daily work journal of William Murray for 15 May, 1803 - 31 December, 1805 reveals who designed the chapel, when it was built and by which denomination. The editor has not seen the work which is in an anonymous private collection. Joseph W. Hammond, the distinguished scholar of silver and colonial America, has had access to it and has shared notations of relevant entries. His notes include excerpts from 20 August, 1803 when Murray drew a draft for a meeting house. Murray worked at the foundation on 20 October, 1803, and was at the raising of the new Methodist meeting house 25 October, 1803. Finally, on Christmas Day, 1803, Murray was to hear John Cooper in the meeting house, noting he gave it the name of High Point Chapel.¹²

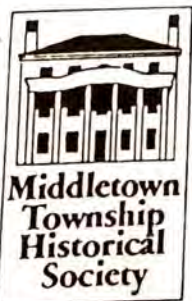
The Chapel had been occupied by several denominations over the years. The site was also used for social events and temperance activities. It was converted to a stable but had a second life as a church. It was used by spiritualists in the middle of this century. The chapel had been moved once and last stood on the north side of Kings Highway East in the village center between house numbers 155 and 153A. The property was sold to the adjoining landowners with the chapel straddling the boundary. The owners could not agree on what to do with the chapel. Maintenance was neglected. Extensive water damage from a leaky roof eventually caused the building to collapse.

To be continued

1. *Red Bank Register*, June 27, 1946.
2. *Red Bank Register*, June 20, 1946
3. *Red Bank Register*, October 14, 1903
4. *Red Bank Register*, May 16, 1928.
5. Conversation with Catherine Payne, January 19, 1992. The May 16, 1928 *Register* noted the Hosfords died three years earlier, an apparent error.
6. *Red Bank Register*, May 16, 1928
7. *Red Bank Register*, October 23, 1929
8. *Red Bank Register*, December 18, 1929
9. *Red Bank Register*, June 8, 1932
10. *Red Bank Register*, September 19, 1940
11. Ellis, Franklin, *History of Mounmouth County*, Philadelphia, 1885.
12. Conversation with Joseph W. Hammond, July 13, 1991.

QUIZ ANSWERS

57. One side of a Sid Martin Fiberglass Sculpture "Comedy and Tragedy. It is in his sculpture garden at 1 White Oak Ridge Road at its northeast corner with Crawfords Corner-Everett Road on the Township's border with Holmdel.
58. On October 14, 1911 at the Robert J. Collier estate in Wickatunk, Marlboro Township. The event was an entertainment for local farmers as thanks for consenting to drag hunts through their farms, the same as the origin of the hunt meet in Middletown. The Collier event featured a polo match and airplanes. Many saw an airplane for the first time. A smaller number took their first flights. (*Red Bank Register*, October 18, 1911.)
59. William Hopping, as reported in the *Register's* February 26, 1913 obituary of his deputy, Joseph Burrowes, another Monmouthite.
60. William Fletcher Sorey, a Norfolk, Va. native, enlisted at the outbreak of the war, serving throughout, attaining the rank of captain in General Wheeler's division. He was a charter member of the New York produce and cotton exchanges and was wealthy at his death in 1914. (*Red Bank Register*, May 27, 1914.)
61. Albert J. Loux, who played for Peddie in Hightstown. He was also on their basketball and hockey teams. (*Red Bank Register*, December 21, 1939.)
62. Samuel Hunt and his wife Isabella sold the island, then known as Oyster Island, to John Beekman for 10 shillings on November 27, 1767. (Per an exhibit label in the history of Ellis Island exhibit at that place.)



P.O. BOX 434

MIDDLETOWN, NJ 07748

PHONE: 291-8739 during museum hours.

EDITOR: RANDALL GABRIELAN

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.