



# Newsletter of the Middletown Township Historical Society

SPECIAL EDITION - PRIDE IN MIDDLETOWN WEEK - NOVEMBER 10 - 16, 1985

## Middletown Township History. Varied, Vital and Vigorous.

Middletown Township's history is old, varied and rich. So much has happened here to forebearers with such different backgrounds giving our history an interest wider than most. Middletown's history is vital because familiarity with it can increase our municipal pride, help us understand how this great township is made up and how all parts fit together. These pages are only a brief introduction, but it is hoped they will encourage greater exploration of the history that surrounds us.

The area that became Middletown Township in 1693 was settled on land surrounding a coastal bay. The hills of the Navesink Highlands surrounded the shore. The sea was essential for transportation and a natural source for food and commerce. The land behind the hills and bay was attractive and fertile. The first white settlers came in the 1660's, settling inland in the Middletown Village area and by the shore. The history of man, though, started much earlier. The region was populated by native Americans centuries earlier. The story of Penelope Stout and the Indians is legendary here. The buried legacy of the Indian has been continually uncovered for many years. Our history has the depth of time.

The settlers prospered and their numbers increased. The political climate of the revolutionary era produced yearnings of freedom for many, but the ties to the mother country were strong in the midst of prosperity. The forces clashed during the war for independence with neighbor against neighbor strife common. It seems fitting now that homes of both a loyalist to England, Edward Taylor (Marlpit Hall) and a patriot of the revolution, Joseph Murray (Murray Farm in Poricy Park) are restored house museums.

Time healed the wounds of war, although many loyalists lost their property and left the area. The century turned, with much remaining to be learned about the early 1800's in Middletown. Times were simpler. Some Township concerns were building and maintaining roads, establishing an educational system and controlling farm and domestic animals. Development differed following the nature of the land and the inclination of the settlers. Water and agrarian business flourished. Municipality development also flourished and several were formed from Middletown Township including Raritan Township (a name changed to Hazlet) in 1848, Atlantic Highlands in 1887 and Highlands in 1900. Others were formed from Raritan Township making Middletown the 'fatherland' of Keyport, Keansburg, Union Beach and Matawan. The latter was once known as Middletown Point, when the region including Matawan Creek, was a shipping point for Middletown Township.

Diverse sections took different characters. A brief description by neighborhood follows:

**Belford** has a long maritime background with its residents having worked the sea for generations for a variety of marine life. A commercial fishing fleet now makes its

home port in Belford, the successor of this long tradition. Belford was once part of Port Marmouth. A post office opened in 1891, helping to create a separate Belford identity.

**Chapel Hill** was known in the 1700's as High Point. British soldiers camped on this high ground in 1778 following the Battle of Marmouth. The chapel was built in the early 1800's as a Baptist meeting house. It was later used by several other denominations until 1960, but was demolished several years afterwards. An 1850 lighthouse was built with a green lighted navigational beacon now erected on a tower.

**East Keansburg** is the Township's beach community on the bay shore. It was developed in the early 20th century, taking its name from Keansburg, then a very popular resort town to its west. Keansburg was named for John Kean, great-uncle of the Governor.

**Everett** is now a small, quiet residential section on the Holmdel border. It was named for the local school teacher when a post office was opened in 1901. The section was known as Morrisville and was a well-known farming area dating back to Colonial times.

**Fairview**, once known as Headdens Corners, may have taken its name from the Fair View Cemetary Association. The Cemetary was organized in 1855 and was an early example of park-type cemetary design. This residential neighborhood is in the vicinity of Route 35 and Chapel Hill Road.

**Leonardo's** past includes farms, a shipping dock, dairies and location of the Township's first high school. Named for the Leonard family, today Leonardo is the home of a State marina, but is primarily residential.

**Lincroft's** late 17th century settlers included Scots who called the area Sandy New for Walter Scott's ancestral home. Leedsville is another earlier name, for William Leeds. D. D. Withers, nationally known racing figure assembled the vast Brookdale Farm for horse breeding. The tradition was carried on by Colonel William Payne Thompson and his family.

**Locust** once had resort hotels on Claypit Creek. Large estates were established in the 19th century with early prominent settlers including Hazlett McKim and Mrs. Sylvanus Reed, founder of the Monmouth Historical Association.

**Middletown Village** was established around 1664 in the Kings Highway vicinity. Numerous landmark buildings are here including Old First, Christ and the Reformed churches and several houses including Marlpit Hall.

**Monmouth Hills** is a quiet residential section with parts identified as Locust or Navesink. It includes the 17th century homestead of Richard Hartshorne. His name is remembered and open space is preserved in Hartshorne

Woods Park.

Navesink is an Indian name with several meanings claimed. Navesink was known as Riceville earlier in the 19th century and is the site of the Township's earliest black settlement, oldest fire company, many fine, old homes and some of its oldest churches.

New Monmouth was old farm country, dating from prior to the Revolution, owned by the Morford family. It was called Chanceville at least by 1838 after an early settler. The most prominent 19th century organization, the New Monmouth Baptist Church was organized in 1854 followed by St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church about 22 years later.

Oak Hill was the site of E. T. Field's Oak Hill Nurseries. Oak Hill "moved" a short distance to the west to an area known as Nut Swamp, when the McLean farm was developed as housing in the 1950's.

Port Monmouth has a marine heritage for fishing and shipping. Its watermen took a variety of sea food from the bay and ocean and its docks were an important port during the steamboat era. The region was known as Shoal Harbor before taking the Port Monmouth name around 1850. A Shoal Harbor Historic District was organized, but is not now recognized by the Township's Landmarks Commission. The character of its ties to the water are preserved in the Shoal Harbor Marine Museum.

Red Hill is the smallest area described here, chosen as a typical old, small village. One might consist only of several houses, a business and a community facility. Red Hill is located southwest of Middletown village and dates from the latter half of the 19th century. It was settled by blacks. The business was a general store, which is planned to be re-opened, and two churches have been active since the 1890s.

River Plaza was a farming area by the early 1800s. Known earlier as Hubbards Point and Smocks Point, the origin of the present name is not definite. It obviously stems from the neighborhoods location on the Navesink River and is known to have been in use by 1910. Residential development started in the late 1800s.

Middletown Township's area is the third largest in Monmouth County. However, it was still a series of small villages as recently as 1950 when the population was barely over 16,000. The event that brought the region's greatest change in generations was the 1954 opening of the Garden State Parkway. The Township also became a suburban, bedroom community as development soared and as 50,000 additional residents made Middletown their home.

Understanding each section's historic background may help us grasp current issues. Understanding the long maritime tradition helps us realize the importance of the fishing industry to Belford and why it should be preserved. Understanding that Lincroft was horse farm country within the memory of older residents helps us realize that paving over Lincroft could be more an act of destruction than development. Understanding that Locust grew as a region of fine, large estates helps us appreciate the value of neighborhood character. Understanding the value and meaning of historic districts helps us realize the need to regulate their growth and appearance. Thirty years ago the street maps of Middletown Township were largely "blank space" because the land was covered with nature's green. That helps us realize that Middletown Township would not be the place we came to love without ample preservation of open space.

Middletown Township history is vigorous because several organizations cultivate its preservation, four with museums. They are the Middletown Township Historical Society with its museum at Croydon Hall, the Monmouth County Historical Association, the owner of Marlpit Hall, the Poricy Park Citizens Committee, restorer of the Murray Farm House and the Shoal Harbor Marine Museum.

A visit to any of the sites will be educational and enjoyable. Each seeks and deserves your support.

The new museum at Croydon Hall features temporary exhibits, and is building a permanent collection. It will include a Middletown reference library. It is located on Leonardville Road in Leonardo, address P. O. Box 434, Middletown, NJ 07748.

Marlpit Hall was begun in the late 1600's as a small Dutch house. It was enlarged in the Georgian style in the mid-1700's. Today life from both eras is displayed magnificently. Marlpit Hall is located on Kings Highway, although Monmouth County Historical Association is headquartered in Freehold at 70 Court Street, 07728.

The Murray Farm House is an 18th century structure rescued from deterioration in recent years by the Poricy Park Citizens Committee. Colonial craft activities make this a living museum. The adjacent Nature Center gives Poricy Park a dual cultural-educational role. Contact them at Box 36, Middletown, 07748.

The Shoal Harbor Marine Museum is located in the Whitlock-Seabrook-Wilson House, one of the bayshore's most historic buildings. It contains period rooms and an extensive collection of marine memorabilia, telling the history of the area's watermen. This folk museum of the bayshore people has long attracted a wide audience and is a leading advocate of area tourism. See it at 119 Port Monmouth Road, Port Monmouth, 07758.

These brief notes can hardly do justice to this vast subject. Our history is really a chain of ongoing events linked to current affairs, giving it a vitality affecting all of us. Middletown Township's history is where you find it and it can be found in a great number of places - Township buildings, organizations, streets and fields. The Pride in Middletown Committee, sponsor of this special issue, and the Historical Society, preparer of this article, hope these comments lead to a greater appreciation of the Township's varied, vital and vigorous history. We also hope you keep in touch with Middletown's heritage through the organizations, museums and published works that cultivate and display it.

A brief bibliography follows:

Jelliffe, Thelma K., "Achter Coll to Zoning", 1982 - \$10.00. This dictionary type collection of historical notes is informative on numerous subjects. Available from the author at 53 Kings Highway, Middletown, 07748 or at the Society's museum.

Leonard, Thomas H., - "From Indian Trail to Electric Rail", 1923 - \$31.80. Although written as a history of Atlantic Highlands, much of the book is about the Township's bayshore area and Chapel Hill. Reprints are available from the Atlantic Highlands Historical Society, P. O. Box 108, Atlantic Highlands, 07716.

Mandeville, Ernest W. - "The Story of Middletown", 1927 - out of print. A good basic book, although limited in scope and time. Available in many libraries.

Northern Monmouth County Branch of the AAUW - "A Triangle of Land" 1978 - \$2.98. This history on the site and founding of Brookdale Community College includes material on Lincroft.

Toop, Marion, - "Iron Kettles, Home Brew and Epitaphs - A History of Lincroft", 1980 - \$4.00. Lore, legend and historical fact on this section. Available from Suzanne Farley, 3 Deer Lane, Lincroft, 07738.

Several County and State histories include references to Middletown Township. In addition, several churches and community organizations have published books or booklets with useful historical material.

## Community Organization - A Heritage of Service.

People helping people for the betterment of the group is an old concept. Children learn of the early mutual help efforts of the cavemen and pioneers. The same concept has thrived in Middletown through civic associations, using the power of numbers to solve common problems. The earliest local groups were organized in the 1950's to solve home construction problems. The members found that joint action could also influence local government. Collective action, a unified voice and publicity in the press produced results. The civic association concept grew, resulting in twenty-six homeowner groups today. The civic association is a covenant in the deed in some areas. Dues are incorporated in the mortgage and by-laws, the election of officers and meetings at specified times are mandated.

Some associations are active only during times of problems, but others have continued for many years. Social activity and friendships developed. Participants have become knowledgeable about Middletown's master plan, zoning and land use laws and related subjects. Some members have held elected or appointed Township posts.

John Karlin conceived the idea of linking the many associations for inter-group contact. The result was the forming of the Middletown Council of Civic Associations in the 1960's. The Council, known informally as the C.C.A., consists of one representative from each neighborhood group, who choose their officers and directors. The C.C.A. acts when a problem has Township-wide implications, when invited by a local group or the Township. A key example of C.C.A. action might be combating inappropriate construction, for example, a commercial structure is a residential zone, by the use of legal and other hired professional help.

Civic associations offer many reasons for joining. The principal ones are protecting homeowners' rights and preserving the character of our

neighborhoods and Township. Their aim is to preserve greenery, maintain small-town values and help make a better Township for all.

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### LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF MIDDLETOWN TOWNSHIP

The League of Women Voters is a non-partisan, national, state, county and local organization dedicated to active, informed participation of citizens in government. Membership is open to any citizen over 18 who subscribes to the purpose and policy of the League.

The Middletown LWV has been actively involved in the Township since 1956. Our current local programs include, voter registration, candidate forums, in-depth study of school districting looking to revision of the 1974 publication "Seventeen Schools and Counting", study of the recently released Bayshore Development Plan and ongoing monitoring of local government bodies. At the county level, we are very active with the water quality and supply issues. At the state and national levels, we are studying items such as Mount Laurel II and the budget deficit. The state and national LWV provide at a nominal price many fine publications that cover a wide range of subjects.

For additional information feel free to call the State LWV at 1-800-792-VOTE, or Jane Pecsvaradi at 671-6194.

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### SPECIAL MUSEUM HOURS

Four museums will have special open hours on Friday, November 15th, History and Heritage Day in Pride of Middletown Week. Marlpit Hall, 137 Kings Highway, is open from 10:00 AM - 4:00 PM with regular admission in effect. The following museums in Township owned buildings are open from 3:30 - 9:00 PM; Middletown Township Historical Society Museum at Croydon Hall, Leonardville Road, Leonardo; Murray Farm House in Poricy Park, Oak Hill Road and Shoal Harbor Marine Museum (Spy House) Port Monmouth Road, Port Monmouth.

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# Protecting Landmarks

MEETING: 2nd WEDNESDAY  
7:00 P.M.  
LIBRARY

In 1974 MAP (Middletown Advisors on Planning) advocated a Landmarks Commission. The result was Chapter 16A of the Township Ordinances, authored by that citizens' group. Its purpose is "to promote the educational, cultural and general welfare of the Township by the preservation and protection of historic buildings, places and districts...imparting..a distinct aspect of the Township, the State and the Nation."

The Commission consists of seven Township Committee appointees serving without pay. The Commission must include an attorney, an architect and an archivist. No Commissioner is permitted to serve longer than two full terms. A full term is four years.

The Commission's duties are to review and classify buildings, places and structures individually and collectively for merit as to association with historic events, architectural merit, persons of note associated therewith and significance in the development of the Township, County, State or Nation. The "Historic" designation may apply both within and outside Historic Districts, for all or any of the above merits, if of a degree deserving such distinction. When so classified, a Certificate of Appropriateness from the Commission is required for any exterior change. Sixty-

nine buildings and four districts are presently classified "Historic". The buildings still requiring research for consideration of the "Historic" designation, number several hundred.

The Landmarks Commission invites interested residents to help research properties with the potential for "Historic" designation, using its mini-library in a room ordinarily locked at the Middletown Public Library. Access to it is gained through the reference librarian who will sign you "in" and "out". Available here is a collection of accepted historical reference volumes and guides for restorations. And if one of the Commissioners is present you may even peruse their "classification" files.

The present Commissioners are:

Marie Davenport  
Robert De Santis  
Suzanne Farley  
Janet Hurd  
Thelma Jelliffe  
William Strong  
Richard Thompson

A few of the buildings from the Landmarks Commission's "Classified List":

Marlpit Hall, Middletown Village  
The "Spy" House, Port Monmouth  
Tracy House Tavern, Chapel Hill  
The Little Red Schoolhouse, Lincroft  
General Store, Locust  
Thompson House, Brookdale  
Portland Place, Hartshorne Woods



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.