



Newsletter of the Middletown Township Historical Society

Vol V No. 4

(issued with October, 1989)

August, 1989

NUT SWAMP A NAME ETCHED IN HISTORY

Nut Swamp is one of the oldest locality names in the Township. It was recorded as early as 1678 in a deed from original Monmouth patentee, Richard Gibbons, to Thomas Applegate.¹ The Applegate family would remain for two and one half centuries. Nut Swamp was once well-known, as evidenced by its prominence on the largest and most detailed map of the state of its time, Faden's of 1777 (figure 1). Other



Figure 1. 1777 Faden map of New Jersey

old, prominent families settled at Nut Swamp. The land is still there, of course, but the name remains only as a street and institution, Nut Swamp Road and Nut Swamp School. Perhaps the loss of Nut Swamp reflects fashion in names.² An authoritative origin of the Nut Swamp name does not exist. One theory is a translation of an Indian name. Another is a reference to plant life. The disappearance of agriculture, Nut Swamp's long time economic activity, may have contributed to a change of identity. But, other neighborhoods have been transformed without changing name. However, this area saw developer Jacob Lefferts borrow the name Oak Hill from a local farm and give it a carefully cultivated high-tone for a major part of former Nut Swamp turf. Nut Swamp's age and past prominence deserve more than mere relegation to a street and a school.

First, let us look at the old boundaries to appreciate Nut Swamp's vastness. Many Middletown neighborhood boundaries were not clearly drawn. Faden suggests that Nut Swamp encompassed most of central Middletown Township. Its "borders" can be inferred by references in documents and secondary sources. Nut Swamp on the north extended beyond Bamm Hollow and Oak Hill Roads. A cider mill there was a long-time landmark. It was known in its last decades as Walling's Nut Swamp Distillery (figure 2). The distillery was a seasonal operation following the apple harvest. It stood on the west side of Middletown-Lincroft Road, about fifty feet north of the intersection with Bamm Hollow Road. The foundation is still there. The buildings were taken down in the 1950s. "The Nut Swamp road" with a small "r" was the old identify of that section of Middletown-Lincroft Road. Roads were known by



Figure 2. The Nut Swamp distillery in the 1940s (with thanks to W. E. Kemble, photographer)

their destination, or by both starting and ending places, in the time prior to every street having an official name. The first destination from Middletown village was Nut Swamp. The "disappearance" of Nut Swamp permitted the road's renaming with present destinations, or Middletown (village) (to) Lincroft Road, with the official name now placing a capital "R" in road. Nut Swamp was so central a location that a second Nut Swamp road co-existed with the other. It is the Nut Swamp Road still so named that originates in River Plaza. Its origin near the western extension of Navesink River Road actually marked the approximate southeasterly part of Nut Swamp. The River Plaza name dates only from c. 1906.

Nut Swamp Road changes name west of the old village center at Middletown-Lincroft Road. There it is known as Dwight Road. Dwight changes direction about a mile past the intersection, near Pelican Road and close to the former Dwight home. It moves to the northwest near where its former course was bisected by the Garden State Parkway. A reminder of the old road exists west of the Parkway, West Nut Swamp Road. It runs only about one-half mile from Crawfords Corner-Everett Road, dead ending at the Parkway. The Dwights were prominent Nut Swamp residents in the 1930s and 1940s. Everett, or Morrisville as it was known when settled in the eighteenth century, borders Nut Swamp on the west. References to land near the border can be confusing. Some properties are alternately identified as Nut Swamp or Everett. The southern boundary with Lincroft is also moveable. Nut Swamp once extended to West Front Street. Now Lincroft is sometimes claimed to embrace land northward to the Garden State Parkway.

The Revolutionary War was felt in Nut Swamp. The Battle of Monmouth was fought in June 1778 when the planned march of General Clinton's army from Philadelphia to the Navesink Highlands was interrupted near Freehold by colonials led by General Washington. We shall not repeat the familiar

home settler from the 1930s. Popularly known as the "Little Red School House", it was painted that color and the white picket fence was erected in 1937.⁴

The School was founded in 1841. It is said its origin stemmed from local residents not wishing to be joined with Lincroft in a school district, with the school house to be located in Lincroft. So recalled Joseph S. Applegate in the Red Bank Register of January 31, 1937. He is the grandson of store-partner Joseph S. Applegate. Nut Swamp's school was earlier conducted in the home of a local named Ryder. Enrollment was about 15, which must have provided minimal pay. Mr. Ryder suffered "physical disfigurement" in a fight with a student past age 21. Aged students, a result of part-time education during farming's slow seasons, was not uncommon. Nor was teacher-student combat. Mr. Ryder left for a Middletown village position and Nut Swampites were left with the choice of consolidation or founding a new school.⁵



Figure 7. From the 1890 Wolverton Atlas of Monmouth County

The school's history was typical of its type and times. Poorly paid teachers boarded with nearby residents. Their income often depended on enrollment which peaked in winter, but fell sharply when farm labor was needed. Discipline could be a problem and some students were prone to practical jokes. Heating was via the irregularly warming wood stove. The student body ranged from the aforementioned low of about 15 to a peak of perhaps 45. Schools were used for community gatherings, even religious ones. For example, the Rev. E. J. Foote of the Middletown Baptist Church conducted a revival there in April 1877.⁶ His baptisms in the river the next month drew a crowd of hundreds.⁷

The Nut Swamp school was closed in 1906 during a Melvin Rice-led consolidation movement. The building was sold at auction to Major Joseph Field, a member of Nut Swamp's most prominent family.

The Field family dates from colonial times. Their holdings once spread over the corners of the village intersection totaled about 1,000 acres. Study of the Field family is aided by reappearances of first names, often not in direct lineal descension and without seniority or numerical designations. Examples will follow.

Robert Field was the first American of his family. He settled in Flushing, New York, and was a signer of the Flushing Charter.⁸ His great-great grandson was the first to leave an

accessible, detailed record of life in Nut Swamp. Thomas S. Field, 1810-1891, was born and died there. His long life was active and successful. He owned a 600 acre farm, Red Bank area real estate, stock of the First National Bank of Red Bank, half interest in the lumber business of Field & Burrows and a stone yard business.⁹ He was an organizer of the Fair View Cemetery Association. Conflicting secondary sources do not agree which Field house was the homestead, a house that appeared to have been in the family from the early 1700s. Both claimed sites were destroyed by fire early in this century. However, Thomas built around 1852 the house standing at the northeast corner of Nut Swamp and Middletown-Lincroft Roads.

A son of Thomas became one of Monmouth's most distinguished citizens. Edwin Field was born at Nut Swamp. His early education was in Middletown. He became a physician in New York, practiced in Red Bank and virtually single-handedly supervised the conquest of the 1889 Red Bank small pox epidemic. Dr. Field also kept a farm at Nut Swamp until the year before his 1922 death.

A second son, Civil War Veteran Major Joseph T. Field, also kept a Nut Swamp farm near his birthplace. He was killed in 1920 with his daughter Julia in a railroad grade crossing accident at Tramp Hollow, the present western extension of Navesink River Road. Henry, a third son, farmed at Nut Swamp, living in his father's home.

Two of Major Field's sons deserve mention. Thomas S. Field, 1869-1953, settled just to the southeast of Nut Swamp. He married Emeline Conover, daughter of Captain William W. Conover, and purchased his father-in-law's Hamiltonian Stock Farm. It includes the present site of the Apple Brook development, but extended to both sides of the Middletown-Red Bank Turnpike, today's Highway 35. The main house was destroyed by fire.

Walter Field symbolizes the start of the change of character of Nut Swamp from agriculture to residential. His farm was north of Middletown-Lincroft Road and west of Dwight Road. He sold it in 1936 to Hattie Carnegie Zanft, an internationally known fashion designer. Her interest was flowers, not crops. The old farm house was intended as a country home. Freehold architect J. Hallam Conover drafted the modernization, but the house was destroyed by fire in 1938. A replacement was built the next year "supervised" by Mr. Conover, who presumably designed the house, now the Cuozzo

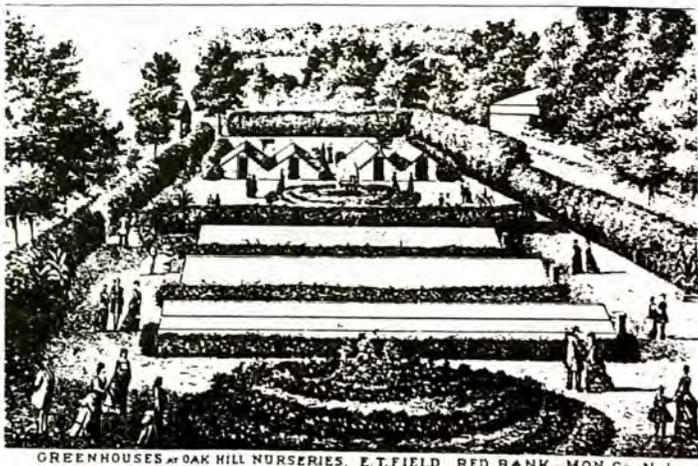


Figure 8. Oak Hill Nursery from Woolman & Rose

residence, at 911 Middletown-Lincroft Road.¹⁰

Ms. Carnegie saved the Nut Swamp school, purchasing it as part of the farm. Her husband, Major John Zanft, oversaw its renovation in 1937. She is remembered by two street names, Hattie and Carnegie Courts, near her former home.

A prominent Field 19th century business gave rise to a

name that "absorbed" much of Nut Swamp. It was Elnathan Field's Oak Hill Nursery (figure 8), located near the Oak Hill Road-Middletown-Lincroft Road intersection. The nursery was founded c. 1870 and provided stock for Mr. Field's Red Bank retail outlet. It also grew the unusual. One rarity was the night-blooming *Cereus*, which bloomed only at night and rarely at all. Elnathan the florist was the fourth Field so-named. He was a grower and also a developer in Florida. Elnathan and other local investors, notably Ezra Osborn, bought east coast Florida land in the Miami area. Some was purchased for as little as 75 cents per acre. The story of supplies floated from New Jersey, the import of a massive number of coconut plants and the difficulties of trying to turn a wilderness into a plantation will have the separate mention it deserves.¹¹ The coconuts failed, but the land is now pricy Biscayne Bay real estate.

Elnathan built an Italian Villa style house in the 1880s at the corner of the aforementioned roads. It remains as one of the County's finest examples of that style.

The first Applegate in Middletown Township was Bartholomew. He acquired land on Raritan Bay c. 1675 in a section of Leonardo known into the early years of the century as Applegate Landing. Although the aforementioned Thomas Applegate bought Nut Swamp land by 1678, early history of the family in the area is obscure. The Applegates, as did the Fields, produced one of Monmouth's leading citizens in the late 19th century.

Joseph S. Applegate, the great-great grandson of Bartholomew, bought a farm at Nut Swamp c. 1815 after marriage to Ann Bray.¹² He was the Mischeau store partner. The location was the present day Nut Swamp Road. Expansion bought family holdings to over 200 acres. The homestead was 392 Nut Swamp Road, a fine Italianate structure that appears of mid-19th century design. The Register of December 25, 1912 claimed the house was built c. 1760 and "virtually rebuilt" c. 1875.

John S. was Joseph's son, born on the farm in 1837. He attended local schools. He later graduated from Madison University in Hamilton New York, studied law with three lawyers, was licensed as attorney in 1861 and admitted as counsellor in 1865.¹³ John lived and practiced in Red Bank. He was active in many local affairs and was elected state senator in 1881. His contribution to local history includes Early Courts and Lawyers of Monmouth County, published in 1911.

The Applegate farm also symbolized the turn to gentleman farming prior to suburbanization. Edmund Wilson, one of New Jersey's leading lawyers and a former state attorney general, bought 108 acres in 1912.¹⁴ He viewed the farm as a change of pace in a hectic legal life, but enjoyed it only a few years prior to his death. This Wilson was the father of the more widely known writer of the same name. Part of this farm is still cultivated in the modern sense. It includes the site of the Brookside Nursery, directly opposite the homestead.

The John Cook thirteen acre homestead was also on Nut Swamp Road. The house is gone, but Cook deserves memory as the long-time publisher of the Red Bank Register. The

Register during the Cook years was one of the finest country weeklies in the nation. An earlier house on the site had been reduced to a pile of foundation stones. While the site was cleared for the Cook house's cellar, English coins and old bottles were found. Workers claimed they were still fine tasting. The house was replicated from a Bergen Co. farmhouse Mrs. Cook lived in as a girl. John Cook had a strong sense of local history. His paper often wrote detailed histories of local properties and families. They often appeared at the time of a sale, including the transfer of his homestead to Frank Bassanni in 1919.¹⁵

Patterson is another ancient Middletown family with a Nut Swamp connection. They are more often associated with the Navesink River area where they had large holdings. The break up of the Patterson farm provided the sites for several magnificent homes in Middletown's turn of the century country estate period. The Patterson Nut Swamp property included a family burying ground that stood on the site planned for Middletown South High School. Removing the graves to another Cemetery was the easiest proposed solution. However, local protests and the objections of Patterson decedents resulted in moving the graves to a protected site on the school premises. The Cemetery is readily seen from the Brasch Boulevard entrance to the school. Brasch is a name from the recent past with an important Nut Swamp tie. Charles Brasch bought the Thomas Field farm in 1917. His son Edwin continued the family farm, increasing its holdings to over 250 acres. He achieved his life-long ambition to become Middletown's potato king in 1943.¹⁶ He is a symbol that Monmouth County was a major potato producer until the early

Continued

1. New Jersey Archives, Volume XXI, p. 60, Paterson, NJ, 1899.
2. See M.T.H.S. Newsletter, June 1987 for an article on fashion in place names
3. Monmouth Press (Atlantic Highlands), Sept. 24, 1898.
4. Red Bank Register, Jan. 21, 1937. Most of the school information has been taken, unchecked, from an article, written at the time Hattie Carnegie Zanft purchased the part of the Walter Field farm that included the school.
5. *Ibid*
6. Monmouth Democrat, Freehold, April 4, 1877.
7. Monmouth Democrat, Freehold, May 24, 1877.
8. (Wm. Munsell & Co.) History of Queens County New York, New York 1882, p. 75 and Horner, William S., This Old Monmouth of Ours, Freehold, NJ, 1932, p. 350.
9. Red Bank Register, Feb. 18, 1891.
10. Red Bank Register, Feb. 2, 1939.
11. The story is covered in detail in a work in progress, Joan Blank's history of Biscayne Bay.
12. Red Bank Register, October 19, 1881.
13. *Ibid*
14. Red Bank Register, December 25, 1912.
15. Red Bank Register, January 15, 1919.
16. Red Bank Register, October 7, 1943.