

History of Basking Ridge, N. J.

Written by Nettie Allen, Mar. 1952.

HISTORY OF BASKING RIDGE, N.J.

Long before Bernards Twsp. was chartered, John Harrison of Rocky Hill, N.J. bought about 3000 acres of land embracing the area around Basking Ridge from an Indian called "Chief Nowenoik" for which he paid \$50. The Deed for the tract is dated Feb. 7, 1717. No Deed in the Twsp, is believed to run farther back.

This tract was bounded on the east by Passaic River, on the South by the Dead River, on the West by Green or Harrison's Brook, and on the North by Penn Brook, and a short line uniting it to the headwaters of Green or Harrison Brook. Penn Brook and Green Brook rise very near each other near St. Bernards Cemetery, a short distance back of Mrs. Willard Smith's home at Bernardsville. Penn Brook empties into the Passaic River and Harrison Brook flows into the Dead River below Liberty Corner. From the shape of the purchase, it was dubbed Harrison's Neck.

The original Deed of Chief Nowenoik and a map drawn at the same time are on file in the N.J. Historical Society at 230 Broadway, Newark, N.J. If there were settlers here prior to that time, they must have been what was termed "squatters", people occupying the land without any legal right. No doubt they bought land when it was divided into farms.

After the death of Harrison his son Benjamin sold the whole purchase to Daniel Hollingshead and George Rissearick, who in turn sold one half of their purchase to Col. John Parker of Amboy and James Alexander

of New York. These four had it surveyed in 1727 and laid out in farms of from 100 to 200 acres each. These were drawn for in lottery fashion by the four joint owners at the Spring term of the Supreme Court for 1728, held in Perth Amboy. The respective parties were then left to dispose of their lots on their own terms.

James Alexander (the father of Wm. Alexander Lord Stirling) seems to have drawn what has since been known as "the Stirling property" some six or eight hundred acres, in beauty and fertility unsurpassed by any other in the Township.

The name Basking Ridge, according to tradition, probably grew out of the fact that wild animals from the adjacent Swamp basked on this ridge. *The Swamp was the Indians' Sunbathing ground.*

Basking Ridge is the oldest persisting geographical designation in Bernards Township. It was used in 1731 to designate the Church and Congregation which became the first religious center of the neighborhood and community life.

Precisely when and where they first assembled for worship is not known. ~~Here~~ We are told this community was early settled by Scotch Irish and inasmuch as these people came to this country on account of religious persecution, it is quite probable it was not long before they met together to worship Almighty God.

The Rev. John Cross was our first Pastor some of whose descendants still live around here. Since the Rev. John Cross and the Fog Church we have had a Frame Building and our present Brick Structure; and Rev. Wm. Felmeth, our present Pastor is the fifteenth incumbent. It was the only Church for miles around until New Vernon, Liberty Corner, and Stirling Churches were formed between 1830 and 1850, all of which took some away from the parent Church.

Although before the Revolution there were probably Catholic families living in the neighborhood and were visited by a travelling Missionary whose circuit extended from Northern N.J. to Philadelphia, as there is on record a couple of baptisms in 1766 and 1767. The building which is now St. James Church was formerly a carpenter shop and stood parallel with the public road, The property was purchased in 1859 and remodeled a year or two later, as it is today with pews and Altar added. Besides the Pres. and the Catholic Churches we now have the St. Marks Episcopal, organized about 1850, and the Methodist Episcopal dedicated 1854 in Basking Ridge, and several others throughout the area once served by the Pres. Church.

The oldest stone in our Graveyard is dated 1736. Rev. Chas. McKnight and
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Rev. Joseph Lamb succeeded Rev. John Cross. Rev. Joseph Lamb dying in 1749. Tradition tells us that Rev. Lamb died on the day our Frame Church was raised and is buried beneath the Oak, as is also Dr. Sam'l. Kennedy and Rev. John C. Rankin, later Pastors.

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Dr. Kennedy, a Pastor and Physician, followed in 1751 and established a classical School which was carried on by Dr. Robt. Finley, his successor. Dr. Kennedy was here during the Revolutionary period, dying in 1787. This community figured quite extensively in the War, more so than you read in history books. Quite a few men from here served in the War and a goodly number are buried in our Old Yard. History does tell us that Gen. Lee was captured here at Widow White's Tavern or Brewster's Tabern as it was then called, and Lord Sterling's residence was located near here.

But the New Jersey Archives tells us that a Revolutionary Hospital was but a short distance below our Presbyterian Church. Quoting from the N.J. Archives an extract from the N.J. Gazette dated Nov. 24, 1779 "We hear that the grand Army are marching toward Basking Ridge, where it is said they are to go into winter quarters"--end of quote. Did they winter here?

Also an extract from a letter from Basking Ridge dated Dec. 18, 1779.

"I rode out today on purpose to take a view of our encampments. I found it excessively cold but was glad to see most of our poor soldiers were under good roofs. The encampments are exceedingly neat, the huts are all of a size, and placed in more exact order than Phila. You would be surprised to see how well built they are without nails. Headquarters are at Morristown and the Army extends from thence along the hills nearly to this place".--end of quote.

We are told they extended almost to Van Doren's Mill. These extracts were not signed. While no battles were fought on Bernards Soil, excitement must have run high with armies marching and counter marching through the Township/

In 1767 Right Hon. Ball, Grand Master of Penn. granted a warrant for a Masonic Lodge at Basking Ridge, Bernards Township, Somerset Co, N.J. Evidently it was not active during the Revolution but appears to have been the first Lodge in N.J. to resume labors after peace was declared.

After Dr. Kennedy's death in 1787 our Pres. Church was without a settled pastor until 1795, when Rev. Robt. Finley came and carried on Dr. Kennedy's Classical School until 1817 when he left to accept the Presidency of the University of Georgia at Athens, Ga. It was through Rev. Finley's efforts that the Old Academy, our present Twsp. Hall was built. Many of his pupils became distinguished men of our country, of whom maybe mentioned David

Kirkpatrick, Sam'l L. Southard, Wm. L. Dayton, Theo. Frelinghuysen, Commodore Stockton and others. *Lawyer, Sec. of Navy, Justice of Supreme Court.*
U.S. Senator *U.S. Senator.*
Trustee of Princeton *Attorney Gen. of State*
Gov. of the State *Ambassador to France*

At the close of Dr. Finley's pastorate, Dr. W. C. Brownlee came.

In 1818 and 1819 he made a survey of the Congregation with the result that he had 264 families comprising 1700 individuals under his care of whom 117 were slaves. The very early records of our church are missing. The oldest book extant is a Trustee Book of 1763. Among other interesting things it contains a floor plan of the Frame Church prior to our present Brick Ch. containing the names of the Pew-Holders, the seat they occupied, the price they paid for it and the amount they gave toward the Ministers Salary. Our earliest records of baptisms and marriages begin with Dr. Finley's pastorate in 1795. From then on our records are more or less complete including the Book of Families of 1818.

My earliest recollection of our Sanctuary was one large, almost square room with two aisles, the Organ and Choir in the gallery, there were doors on the pews, ^{pews} on either side of the Pulpit, shutters on the inside of the windows and the offering boxes were on poles about three Ft. long.

The Basking Ridge Post Office was opened Sept. 18th, 1803. Previous to that date mail was carried from Phila. to Morristown by ~~water~~ way of Princeton and Basking Ridge on horse back, sulky, or stage and was called "The Post". At the coming of the R.R. from Summit to Basking Ridge in 1872 mail service over the Road went into effect. The Rural delivery service was launched at Basking Ridge in Dec. 1st. 1905. March 1, 1916 it became a Third Class Office.

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Basking Ridge had a printing press from 1876-1879.
and the Basking Ridge Advertiser, a four page
paper was published by Francis Peppard.

During a heavy storm in July 1869 the tin roof
blew off the Presbyterian Church. The Trustees were
called together the next morning and decided to
replace it with a slate roof.

July 1, 1945 it became a Second Class Office. At present it is serving 1125 families. The R.R. was electrified in 1931.

In 1826 Basking Ridge had a Young Men's Temperance Society of 100 members.

The Basking Ridge Loan and Building Association was approved Feb. 28, 1849 to assist people in buying and building their homes.

A Basking Ridge Library Co took out letters of Incorporation in 1809, Our present Library was incorporated May 25, 1898. ^{erected abt 1850.} The brick Session House, which was our Sunday School, was a one room building facing Cerino's store, on the site of our present Library, ~~which was erected around 1850.~~ It was demolished in 1887 when a frame building with three rooms superceded it. This frame building was afterward converted into our present Library when the Chapel was added to the rear of the Church 1907-8.

Around the beginning of the twentieth century Basking Ridge boasted a Druggist, Telegraph Office, Men's Clothing Store, Fancy Goods and Millinery stores. Harness Shop, Bakery, three shoemakers, Butcher shop, three Blacksmith's two General Stores, Tin Shop and even a Brass Band and a Town Hall.

In later years the coming of our good roads and the auto made it unnecessary to have these as now we go to Bernardsville, Morristown and Plainfield for most of these things.

The first hard or concrete road ~~in Basking Ridge~~ in Maple Ave. was laid in 1928 as was also our concrete sidewalks the same year. In 1903 a citizen of B.R. had the misfortune to have his large barn and contents including four horses burn, and the town people were helpless to stop it.

The following winter there was a great deal of agitation about organizing a Fire Co. Accordingly, on June 24, 1904 a meeting was called and 23 men joined as charter members. On July 4th of that year the B.R. Improvement Society presented the Co. with a Hose Cart and 500 ft. of hose, this being the first apparatus owned by the Co.

^{An} undertaker donated the running gears of an old hearse, a blacksmith gave the material for making it into a truck for conveying ladders, a lumberman gave lumber for the ladders and ~~members~~ of the Co. made and painted the ladders. That same month another gentleman gave the first cash donation. Thus the beginning of our well equipped Fire Co of today of which we are very proud every time the siren sounds.

Bernards Twp of 25000 acres was chartered in 1760 and remained intact until 1921 when Far Hills withdrew to form a Boro taking one eighth of the area of the Twp and in 1924 one third of the remaining area formed the Boro of Bernardsville leaving Basking Ridge and Liberty Corner and their environs as the Twp. The Twp now is approximately 7 miles long and 3 miles wide containing about 13,440 acres. In 1844 the population of the Twp was ²⁰⁵⁹ 2059 with 11 schools and 251 pupils. The population in 1948 without the two Boroughs was 3940. We have two elementary schools at Basking Ridge and one at Liberty Corner with a total of 1024 scholars, 800 elementary, 224ⁱⁿ High School. Prior to 1903 the public school was held in the Brick Academy when the growth of population outgrew it and the Maple Ave school was erected. ^{Second story built 1910.} In 1938 and 1939 the Oak St. School was built.

In 1929 the U.S. Gov. established at Lyons the only Veterans Hosp. in the state. The original land purchase was 274 acres. In 1948 it consisted of 847 acres with 149 Buildings, 2500 beds for patients and employs 1500 persons. The present population at the Veterans Hospital is 3233 and the total in the Township 7487.

Thus one can trace the growth of this ~~xxx~~ community from a small hamlet in the midst of a flourishing farming district to a residential section due to its close proximity to our large centers.