

# Inside THE BRICK ACADEMY

The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills

May 2009



## What's Inside...

- Charter Day – May 16
- New Members
- Historic Schoolhouse Summit & Symposium
- Old Acken Store
- 1780 Soldier's Letter
- THSSH & METC Partnership
- Flag Day Revives Betsy Ross Mystery
- Educational Awakening
- Early 20<sup>th</sup> C. Postcards at Bernards Library

## BRICK ACADEMY 200<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

By June O. Kennedy

The Brick Academy, built in 1809, is celebrating its bicentennial anniversary with a series of special events! At the February 11, 2009 meeting of the Bernards Township Committee, a resolution was passed noting the observance.

*A framed copy of the Bicentennial Resolution presented by Mayor Carolyn Kelly to the Society's Board of Trustees is on display at the Brick Academy*



Throughout the year, the Academy will display a commemorative bicentennial logo banner on its front entrance. Within the building on the main floor, a visual timeline denoting its historical events will be a focal point. The Academy will hold 'Open House' on Charter Day, May 16; Weekend Journey through the Past, October 10-11; in addition to Sunday visiting hours from 2-4 PM and the Research Center open every first and third Wednesday from 9:30 AM to Noon and by appointment.

Photographic images of the Brick Academy and an art display of the building by local artists will be on view. In addition, there is an exhibit of artifacts from the recently restored top floor to its authentic 1890s schoolroom appearance, pot-belly stove and all! The Brick Academy has over its history been used as a boys' private school, a public school, two union halls and the Bernards Township's Municipal Building.

The Society's expanded public relations include feature stories in local newspapers and an updated Brick Academy booklet. There will be an *Early American Schoolhouse* lecture in September and an enhanced education program in conjunction with the *Museum of Early Trades and Crafts* of Madison.

The Brick Academy is the only Federal-style public building in Bernards Township and is headquarters of The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills. It is located at 15 West Oak Street in Basking Ridge.

*For more information: [www.brickacademy.org](http://www.brickacademy.org)*

## CHARTER DAY MAY 16 EVENT WILL PREVIEW 250<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY PLANS

By June O. Kennedy

*Get ready for a double dose of celebrations!* With Bernards Township's annual Charter Day set for Saturday, May 16, the street fair committee will share its tent with an eager group of citizens gearing up for next year's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary!

Charter Day celebrates the granting of a charter by King George II on May 24, 1760, establishing the Township of Bernardston,



named for a revered Provincial Governor, Francis Bernard (*left portrait*), an Englishman, who served just two years but who accomplished much.

Bernard helped negotiate a treaty at Easton, PA with the Indians to end the French and Indian War and also established the first Indian reservation at Brotherton, also known as Indian Mills, in South Jersey. He left New Jersey to become Governor of Massachusetts (a town there was also named for him – Bernardston, MA).

There are many events planned for May 16, when there will be businesses, community groups, service organizations, food vendors, a crafters' market, rides and attractions for children of all ages. The fair will be held from 11 AM to 5 PM, with the official kickoff being the Town Crier announcing the formal opening of festivities at Noon, with the introduction of distinguished guests.

Entertainment will be from 11 AM to 10 PM; the main stage will showcase performances, demonstrations and live music from school groups and others throughout the day and into the evening. The Henry Street stage will feature the Teen Battle of the Bands. At 5 PM, the entertainment continues on the main stage with food vendors available for the evening festivities.

At the Brick Academy will be a Bicentennial art and photography exhibit, history displays and public opening of the recently restored 1890s schoolroom. On the lower level, Friends of the Kennedy Farmstead will exhibit a model of the historic property, site artifacts, historic preservation photographs and literature.

In Westminster Hall of the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church there will be a student art show.

Sharing space with the Charter Day committee will be the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee, gearing up for the 2010 celebration of Bernards Township. Chaired by David Becker, members have been conducting regional meetings within the Township to "spread the word" and get feedback from the residents. The committee plans a year of celebrations, with an event each month. Being considered are a picnic with fireworks, formal dinner, soapbox derby, oral history program, Township-wide planting of daffodils, and new logo for the anniversary banners in Basking Ridge and Liberty Corner.

*(Charter Day continued...)*

A highlight of the 250<sup>th</sup> booth will be the replica of the Bernards Township charter, made for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1960, which is on view at the Municipal Building's Conference Room. Copies of the Charter and also the history of the Township will be available.

Members of the History Club of Ridge High School will host the "250" section of the booth and exhibit historical displays, vintage photographs, and memorabilia from the 1960 Bernards Township's 200<sup>th</sup> celebration.

## Calling Cards



If a calling card has one corner turned down, that means the person whose calling card it is left the card in person.

Addendum to article by Ruth Hill Thomson (*Inside the Brick Academy*, February 2009)

### *Welcome New Members*

Constance Kearns-Doughty  
*Basking Ridge*

Patricia Duncan  
*Bernardsville*



*Inaugural New Jersey*

# Historic Schoolhouse Summit & Symposium

Saturday, April 4, 2009 – Basking Ridge, New Jersey

As part of the year-long Brick Academy bicentennial celebration, THSSH sponsored the first statewide Historic Schoolhouse Summit and Symposium on Saturday, April 4. The teacher’s bell was ringing once again as over forty participants met to network and share ideas on the challenges facing programming, exhibits, and financial stability.

“It looked like the seventeen schoolhouses and organizations representing nine New Jersey counties and Philadelphia walked away inspired and energized with new ideas to take back to their respective schoolhouses,” stated Brooks Betz, event coordinator.

The idea of gathering other historic school leaders came about after the Historical Society completed a restoration of its circa 1890 school room, when the Brick Academy was a District 12 schoolhouse. “There are so many other curators of successful exhibit and educational programs, and we wanted to invite them here to see and learn about what we’ve done, and to also get some new ideas as well,” stated Betz.

The attendees were fully engaged in networking and sharing ideas throughout the event. “I feel energized and motivated to enhance our museum and offer more programs,” said Shelley Heretyk from the 1809 German Valley School. “These historic schoolhouses are not limited to schooling only,” noted one operator. “Some of the buildings are now youth centers, women’s clubs, farmsteads, cultural arts centers, and yes - historic schoolhouses.”

Programming ideas quickly shifted from traditional schoolhouse visits and period educational programs, to programs ranging from antique road shows, to holiday house tours, and pig roasts; events not typically associated with historic schoolhouses. Maureen O’Connor Leach from the 1759 schoolhouse in Mt. Holly presented a valuable “Fundraising Nine Basic Truths” program along with financial tips for success on how to create programs that speak to the importance of tying financial goals and mission statements.



*Bob Craig, from the NJ Historic Preservation Office, clarifies grant applications*

Operators are learning that in order to survive, programming, exhibits, and fundraising efforts will need to change with the times as well. “The target audience will need to broaden themselves and the ideas will need to be more creative to better compete for attendance and shrinking free time,” added Betz. “Boards will need to revisit their mission statements and make sure their boards have the creative talent with the ability to carry out the mission,” stated Bob Craig, from the New Jersey Preservation Office which provides grants for historic preservation efforts.

At the conclusion, it was noted that additional information will be shared and networked on the internet using a newsgroup. “I created the New Jersey Historic Schoolhouse Network newsgroup to allow the dialogue to continue”, stated Brooks Betz. The site covers events, messages, polls, idea sharing, and a host of other features. Visit [www.brickacademy.org](http://www.brickacademy.org) and click on the red schoolhouse icon or go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/historicschoolhouses/>.



*Kevin Heller of the Newark Museum's 1701 schoolhouse co-hosts the Programs session*

## *From the Archives: Liberty Corner's Old Acken Store*

Reprinted from "Our Liberty Corner," by William McFadden Jr.

By Ann Parsekian

It's a plot of ground between that fine, gently flowing stream and Valley Road, just opposite the village green. For years a two-story frame building stood there, complete with pillared porch. In its later years, the porch sagged. But in its heyday, as a village store and the village post office, it was the center of village life.



You can take the word of the late Charles C. Acken for that. Then a strapping lad of 22, he bought the store in 1892. He ran it until well into 1948, the year of his death at the age of 89. In 1893, President Cleveland named him the village postmaster. He lost out at the end of Cleveland's term. But he returned as postmaster under President Wilson and served successively under four more presidents - Harding, Coolidge, Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

During the daytime, the store was the focal point for village housewives, replenishing their supplies. Politicians made a habit of dropping in, to sound out village sentiment. And evenings, according to an account in *The Bernardsville News*, "scrubbed young farmhands walked or drove to the store to gossip or play checkers."

In his later years, Mr. Acken mostly spent the day sunning himself on the porch. When a customer would come, he would direct him inside to get the goods he wanted. Then he would leave his chair and slowly make his way to his flat, wooden cash box to make change. He liked the old days better. He once, in 1948, told a visitor: "Nowadays, most of the young people move away to the cities. That is not the good life, not with a village like Liberty Corner to live in." In 1963, the old Acken Store was demolished and replaced by a bank, which was itself recently demolished and replaced by a new building that was designed with input from the Historical Society to suggest the original general store.

## SOLDIER IN 1780 WRITES FROM BASKING RIDGE HOSPITAL

By June O. Kennedy

In a Winter, 2009 edition of *Military Magazine* appeared a personal letter written by a Revolutionary War soldier, a patient at the military hospital in Basking Ridge. This letter is a rare find for several reasons: writing paper was scarce; there was no reliable postal service; and many of the American troops were barely literate. A private from NJ named Henry Johnson was, however, able to send the following to his parents on June 13, 1780, after being wounded in May. (Transcribed as written with only a minor commentary: "Etacted" is believed to mean attacked)

### *Bascon Ridge Ospitreal*

*Honoured parents: I have taken this oportunyty to let you know what misfortue I met with on the seventh Ult A party of the Enemy Came to Elisebeth town (and) ma(r)ched to the Conecticut Farms\* We lay at Newark Mountain ABout twelve oclock at Night we was Alarmed and Marched to the farms and about Sun Rise We Etacted them the Jersey Berguade and there was a Bout five thousand of them we kept up a hot fire about fore hours and in the atact was wounded Col Ogden of the forth Regt and a number of Soldiers kild and wounded and I got a Wound in the head very Bad But I am in hopes With the Assistance of god that I Shall git wel again....Sonomore at preseant*

*But Remain your Loving Son*

*Henery Johnson But I desir to Be Remembered to all Enquirering friends*

Johnson survived the war and eventually became a shoemaker.

\* Former name for Union, NJ

Along the east side of North Maple Avenue, en route to Madisonville Road, is a blue and white historical sign which reads: "A log hospital for Continental Army soldiers was located on the slope of this ravine. A frame Presbyterian Church stood at the top of the hill near the famous oak and burial ground". During excavation for the construction of Ridge Oak Senior Housing in the late 1970s, metal objects, shards, military buttons and other items were uncovered, substantiating the existence of a military hospital in the vicinity.

## THSSH & METC Partnership

The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills and the Museum of Early Trades & Crafts has formed a new partnership to enhance the highly regarded education program established by June Kennedy at the Brick Academy. Margaret Skelly, THSSH member and METC Educator, has joined Kennedy as co-chair of the Education Committee. "The alliance with METC provides an exceptional opportunity to align our school program to the NJ Core Content and Standards", states Skelly a retired school teacher of 20 years.



Margaret (*standing in photo*) and METC Educator Laura Schneider were recently invited by Kristen Fox, Social Studies Supervisor of Bernards Township, to give two presentations at a Team Leaders Workshop.

In the morning, grade level K-3 teachers took part in the *Early American Toys and Tales* program. The elementary school teachers learned that the source of early toys (e.g. Jacob's ladder) was often based on a child's developmental needs.

In the afternoon, grade levels 4-6 teachers experienced the *Early American School House* program. Twenty-five Team Leader teachers held and analyzed artifacts common to school children in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The teachers recited math rhymes from Marmaduke Multiplies, discussed the uses of various writing tools, and learned that some of the "homework" in the Early American schoolhouse consisted of bringing firewood to school. THSSH and METC look forward to welcoming children to the recently completed top floor of the Brick Academy, which has been restored to its 1890s schoolroom appearance.

*Educators are needed to join the fun working with students!  
Lesson plans are already set up for the occasional class trips  
Contact Margaret Skelly: 766-2053*

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### Flag Day Revives Ross Mystery

By June O. Kennedy

June 14 commemorates the birthday of the first U.S. flag, made by Betsy Ross at the request of George Washington. Mrs. Ross, a seamstress, did not design the flag, but apparently came up with the idea of five-pointed stars. Born in Philadelphia on January 1, 1752, she died there at the age of 84 on January 30, 1836. Today her officially listed grave is at the Betsy Ross House on Arch Street in the city.

Accounts that Ross was buried in Basking Ridge were prevalent in the early 1900s. When doing research for a book about the Bernards Township Library in 1995, this writer found scrapbooks compiled by the late Dr. William Pennington which revealed clippings about the Ross burial.

The earliest mention, however, was in a July 4, 1876 speech given by E.M. Pennington (relationship to Dr. Pennington not known). He states "Here lies the woman who made the first banner containing the stars and stripes after that honored old ensign had

been adopted, June 14, 1776." The speech was made in the vicinity of the revered old oak tree. The second reference in Dr. Pennington's scrapbooks was a June, 1901 news clipping: "Oak Marks Grave of Betsey Ross"; "Maker of the First American Flag Buried Under a Giant Tree in Basking Ridge"; "Her Headstone Has Been Stolen".

In a newspaper, the Philadelphia North American in 1902, the headlines read: "Betsy Ross Supposed Grave to be Remarkd"; "Under the Oak Shown Here Lies the Supposed Body of Betsy Ross".

In 1942, a book about the revered oak in Basking Ridge, The Revolutionary Scene in New Jersey includes: "The tradition persists that Betsy Ross, who made the first American flag, is buried in the yard."

Authorities in Philadelphia deny any truth to the above-mentioned references however; Betsy Ross was married three times: John Ross, Joseph Ashburn and John Claypoole. Presumably, she would have been listed as Elizabeth Claypoole at her death. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, there were Claypoole families residing in the Morristown area.

## Educational Awakening

By Ann Parsekian

The Progressive Era was a period of reform in America at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with Progressives advocating for a wide range of economic, political, and social changes, including a campaign to replace one-room country schools with consolidated schools and add high school to the curriculum. Locally, this campaign would have a long-lasting impact.

In 1903, a small group of progressives in Bernards Township organized the Basking Ridge Improvement Society, with the modernization of the local school system as a major concern. During its first year, the Society worked to have men sympathetic with progressive ideas, including William Childs, elected to the local school board. Childs, who was by then a successful New York City restaurant entrepreneur, attended the local public grammar school, but then had to travel to Morristown to attend high school. In 1905, he would lead an effort by the Board of Education to establish a high school in the township, one of the first high school departments in the county.

Between 1903 and 1905, three new multi-room schools were constructed in Bernards Township, a remarkable accomplishment for a rural community that resulted in the closure of five outdated one-room schoolhouses. New four-room schools financed by local school taxes were built in Basking Ridge (1903) and in Liberty Corner (1904) for \$8,500 and \$8,000, respectively. In his 1904 School Report, Somerset County Superintendent H.C. Krebs singled out Bernards Township for taking the lead – through its ambitious school construction program – in a movement toward “an awakening and an enterprise that augur well for the educational future of the county.”

Remarkably, in 1905 the number of grammar school graduates was only 65 in Somerset County, and no high school graduates were reported in the entire county that year or the following year.

In 1905, a handsome new school building designed by renowned architect Henry Janeway Hardenbergh was constructed in Bernardsville by wealthy financier Frederic P. Olcott at a cost exceeding \$100,000. Olcott then donated the building and twenty-six acres to the Bernards Township Board of Education. The new school provided space – consisting of two classrooms – for the first public high school in the Township.

Prior to that year, the nearest one would have been eight to ten miles away in Morristown or Summit. The year 1907 witnessed the first graduating class from Bernards High School, comprising two students, Effie Beekman and Florence Rowell.

The favorable response to the improvements to local education was made evident at the 1906 annual school meeting, when a large crowd unanimously approved doubling the local school tax. From a modern perspective, this was an astonishing action for the rural community. County Superintendent Krebs remarked at the time, “The people of that township were gratified with the progress of the schools and were perfectly willing to bear the expense of the improvement.”

*Adapted from the Olcott Avenue Historic District National Register Nomination.*

## *New Archives Exhibit at Bernards Library*



THSSH has made arrangements with Reference Librarian Ruth Lufkin to use the existing display case located by the Local History Room for regular exhibits from the THSSH Archives.

This is an exciting opportunity to make more of our archives collections available to the public. We have many items – maps, photos, documents, and other ephemera – that have rarely if ever been displayed. The current exhibit features early 20<sup>th</sup> century postcards of Basking Ridge subjects. And watch for a new exhibit being planned for the fall as a prelude to Bernards Township’s 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year.