

THE WASHINGTON VILLAGE PRESS

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE SOUTH RIVER HISTORICAL & PRESERVATION SOCIETY, INC.

S P R I N G 1 9 9 2

THE OLD SCHOOL BAPTIST CHURCH MAKES IT'S MARK ON THE HISTORIC REGISTER.

The Old School Baptist Church, the first church organized in what was then the village of Washington, is the oldest existing religious building in the Borough of South River. A small congregation of Baptists gathered in South River by about 1785, and by 1786, deacons of the Hightstown Baptist Church were preaching once a month. Around 1804, the congregation joined the Philadelphia Baptist Association. In 1922, the remaining trustees of the congregation sold the building to the South River War Memorial Free Public Library Association, which established the first free public library in South River. In 1979, a new library building was built and the church was purchased by the Borough of South River for municipal offices.

Although the building has been changed with the addition of the front portico, the alteration reflects the changing focus of the town, from its concentration on navigation and water related industries, to Main Street, the main thoroughfare to the surrounding communities and main artery for its newly developing clay industries.

Plain in design and plan, the



The 186 year old War Memorial Building has been named to the New Jersey and National Register of Historic Places.

unornamented structure serves as a lasting reminder of the simplicity of the earlier Baptist congregation who built the meeting house. The building has been in continual public use, from at least 1805 to the present.

In addition, the cemetery behind the building exhibits a marble urn crafted by nationally recognized 19th century sculptor John Frazee, who is credited as the first American sculptor to cut portraits from rough marble.

1992 MEETING CALENDAR

The South River Historic and Preservation Society will meet on the following dates:

February 26, 1992

April 22, 1992

June 24, 1992

September 23, 1992

November 18, 1992

Our meetings are open to the public and are held at the South River Library on Appleby Ave, at 7:30 PM.. **All are Welcome!**

A NEW HISTORIC COMMITTEE IS BORN.

The South River Historic Sites and Industries Committee was formed to recognize and bring to light the many original buildings in town, and to record its industrial past. The committee plans on gathering volunteers who will drive or walk around South River, surveying houses built before 1935 that have original details, such as porches, siding, doors and windows. The houses will be marked on a map of South River and the committee will then research the history of each house to try and determine an exact age and its past. The committee hopes to expand its research to include interior details and other sites of historical significance. The final goal of the committee is to compile a driving or walking tour of South River and to assist the owners of these "original" homes with information on preserving and restoring their historic homes.

In compiling information on the Industrial features of South River, one factory has stood out from all the rest. That is the Hermann-Aukman Handkerchief Factory on Herman Street. It is one of the boroughs most architecturally interesting industrial buildings, with its towers and cream colored pressed bricks that outline the windows and decorate the tower's arches. The building is the oldest example of the textile Industry in South River, and the ten workers houses directly across the street, make it representative of the strong industrial history of the borough. The factory was built in 1877 for Schofield and Harvey, English carpet manufacturers who operated a mill in New Brunswick. It was taken over in 1878 by Snedeker,

Continued on page 4

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Welcome, to our first newsletter. This is our way of keeping you informed of the happenings, plans, and accomplishments of our society.

The South River Historical & Preservation Society was organized in 1988 by Florence Clayton and Ann Rafano in an effort to purchase two mid-19th century portraits of "The Willett Sisters of South River." This was accomplished in a few short months through the generosity of many interested people. The portraits are now on display at the South River Public Library.

Since its beginning, the Society has made some great strides as it has gradually gained recognition by South River residents. While maintaining a yearly membership of no less than 100 people, the Society has sponsored special events such

as antiques appraisals and a slide presentation on ghosts and hauntings in New Jersey. Speakers at our general membership meetings have discussed topics such as Civil War Veterans buried in our area and the Lindbergs and their ties to East Brunswick.

Our purpose is to be a source of information and education and to promote the awareness of South River's rich history. With the fast pace of life these days it is so easy to let progress take over and let our history slip through our fingers unnoticed until it is too late. With your help we can preserve what our ancestors worked for and make South River a town to be proud of for another three hundred and fifty years.

KEN ROGINSKI
PRESIDENT

SOUTH RIVER HISTORICAL & PRESERVATION SOCIETY 1992 OFFICERS AND TRUSTEES

OFFICERS

President - Ken Roginski
Vice President - Joann Smith-Goepfert
Secretary - Earl Wenger
Treasurer - May Weck

TRUSTEES

Woodis Booraem
Warren Booraem
Ann Rafano
Robert Rafano

Craig Currie
Gladys Benn
Doris Miller
Sandy Palacio
Corine Cebula

New 1992 Trustees
Anne Sivess
Doris Wenger
Emily Miller

HONORARY TRUSTEES

Harold Armsrtong
Florence Clayton

FASCINATING FAMILIES OF SOUTH RIVER

THE WILLETT FAMILY

The progenitor of the Willett Family in South River was Samuel Willett, who, in 1720 sailed from the Flatlands (New Amsterdam), New York into the intercoastal waters of New Jersey looking for a suitable location in which to settle. The spot he chose, which was occupied by friendly Lenni Lenape Indians, was an ideal location for trading by water. The area became known as Willettstown. In 1870 in honor of George Washington, it was changed to (Little) Washington, later to be called South River.

Samuel Willett built his home near the water, somewhere between Jackson Street and Klauser Lane. Nothing is known of his family life -- not even his place of burial.

The Willett family owned property from Rhode Hall to South River (Willettstown) and historians tell us that he and his children were buried on the family plot on the Smith Farm. However, records indicate that the Samuel Willett buried there was born in 1740 and was probably the son or even the grandson of the founder, whose birth date is unknown.

We do know, however, that Samuel Willett was the grandson of Sir Thomas Willett, the first English-speaking Mayor of New York City, born in 1605 in Barley, England. His father was Rev. Andrew Willett and his grandfather, born in 1501, was Rev. Thomas Willett, both Episcopal ministers.

In pursuit of other religious

beliefs, he left England for Leyden, Holland, between the ages of 16 and 18 and became an active member of the Leyden Congregation. The congregation had been established by the Pilgrims who went to Holland before coming to America in 1620. He sailed on the "Lion" to the Pilgrim Colony in 1629.

His knowledge of the Dutch language and customs brought him to New York City at the time the English conquered the Dutch at New Amsterdam. He was the only Englishman they would agree to negotiate with, and he managed to persuade Governor Peter Stuyvesant to surrender. Two years later, the Dutch retook New Amsterdam and Willett returned to Rhode Island where he died in 1674. He is buried in Bullock's cove Cemetery at Swanson, RI., alongside of his first wife. Among his 13 children, four sons are James, Hezekiah, Andrew and Samuel. Perhaps one of those mentioned is the father of our founder.

Descendants of Samuel Willett still residing in South River are Gladys Booraem Benn, son Charles; Georgeanne June; Janet Booraem Fairweather, daughter Laurie Conger, grandchildren Carrie and Casey Conger; Woodis Booraem and Warren Booraem. With the assistance of the Historical Societies of New York City and Rhode Island, and the Morman Church Library we are hoping to fill the gaps as we work towards the completion of the genealogy of our famous ancestors.



REPORT FROM THE COMMITTEES

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE Chairperson - Joann Smith-Goepfert

Oral history, the eyewitness accounts of the way things happened as viewed by ordinary people is as important as any "professional historical" accounts. Today we can have everyday events recorded for posterity thanks to video recorders. We cannot see what it was like in South River for our older residents, but if we act now we can still ask them what it was like, and "see" life in town through their experiences. Their stories in conjunction with the actual events will provide us with a wonderful view of South River's history. If you are interested in becoming involved please contact Jonann Smith-Goepfert.

CEMETERY COMMITTEE Chairman - Kenny Roginski

This committee of 26 members meets at the Washington Monumental Cemetery on Hillside Ave. One team plots the tombstones for each cemetery plot on graph paper. The next team completes a survey form and sketches each tombstone documenting the information on the stone and its condition, then all information is entered into a computer database. The next phase will be to research those families contributing to South River history in preparation for a public tour of the cemetery. Join us this summer on Saturdays, as we continue our cemetery research.

HOSPITALITY Chairperson - Ann Rafano

This committee supplies all the wonderful desserts and beverages that we all enjoy at our general meetings and special events. At the present time we are looking for volunteers for this year's meetings. If you are interested please contact Ann Rafano.

HISTORIC SITES AND INDUSTRIES COMMITTEE Chairman - Mark Nonestied

As mentioned in the previous article we are looking for volunteers to help map out historic homes and buildings of South River. If you are interested please contact Mark Nonestied.

DID YOU KNOW THAT... the Washington Monument sinks approximately six inches every year.

AND THAT... the "Star Spangled Banner" did not become the official anthem of the United States until 1931.

A NEW COMMITTEE...

Whitehead and Levinson who manufactured carpets under contract to W&T Sloan in New York City . In 1882 the Hermann-Aukman Co. bought the building and produced plain and fancy handkerchiefs for men and women. Although most of the work was done at the factory some piece-work was sent out in bundles to be done by workers at home. In 1891 a group of Swiss embroiderers was hired. It was probably at this time that a large addition was built to the east of the original building. In 1918 production was halted by a strike, during which two workers were killed by the plant security force. The owners ended negotiations and closed the plant that same year. Several manufacturers have occupied the building since that time, until 1969 when a fire destroyed a section of the building.

LOCAL HISTORIC EVENTS

HOME FRONT USA: NEW JERSEY 1940 -1945

Since December 8, 1991 the exhibit, **Home Front USA**, has been open to the public at the Cornelius Low House/ Middlesex County Museum . This exhibit is a wonderful collection of photographs, personal items and illustrations produced by local artists who depict one of our nations most interesting moments prior to the war, during the American involvement and in the post war years. The exhibit runs through July 12, 1992. For more information call (908) 745-4489/4177.

A LIVING LEGACY: FOLK ARTS IN MIDDLESEX COUNTY

Beginning in February and continuing through April 1992 the Cultural and Heritage Commission will present four evenings of traditional music and dance from ethnic groups prevalent in the Middlesex County Area. The Folklife Project began in 1990 to broaden the appreciation and availability of folk art, folk lore and folk life. For more information on the free programs available call (908) 745-4489.

A SPECIAL CONGRATULATIONS... to Mark Nonestied, of East Brunswick, who has been selected to serve as Museum Outreach Coordinator at the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission. Prior to this appointment he has devoted many hours to the East Brunswick Museum, where he developed displays and assisted with restoration projects.



**SOUTH RIVER
HISTORICAL &
PRESERVATION
SOCIETY
I N C.**

129 Main Street, South River, New Jersey 08882