

A Brief History of Bernards Township

Bernards Township is where the following events occurred:

- The Rev. George Whitefield, English evangelist, preached to 3,000 people under the white oak tree of the Presbyterian Church, during the Great Awakening of 1740.
- Lord Stirling (William Alexander) built his palatial estate, Stirling Manor, here. Local people called it The Buildings, because of its size, the road called Building Lane.
- Washington and Lafayette picnicked and colonial troops rested under the old oak tree in Basking Ridge Presbyterian Churchyard.
- Uniforms were sewn for the Northern soldiers during the Civil War and four years after the war, the Chief Surgeon of the Union Army built a home two blocks away. Also, axles for the mess wagons onto the battlefields were made in a hub and spoke factory here.
- Liberty Corner was a popular summer resort, with vacationers staying at local homesteads and dairy farms. A carriage would meet guests at the Lyons depot.
- Governor Woodrow Wilson made a speech during World War I on the village green in Basking Ridge.
- Colonel John Jacob Astor IV donated stones to build the Methodist Church, 14 years before he perished in the sinking of the Titanic in 1912.
- Samuel Owen of Newark, a pharmaceutical magnate, built his English Tudor mansion in 1912, now Township Hall.

The Lenni-Lenape Indians, a branch of the Delawares (part of the Algonquin Nation) were the first known inhabitants of the Bernards Township area. Scattered throughout are traces of these people: arrowheads, tomahawks, hearthstones, hammerheads and camp rubble, which indicate long occupation. One of the most widely used Indian areas was near Madisonville Road--a major camp site was the present AT&T location on North Maple Avenue. A burial ground is known to have existed on the east side of Childs Road on the hillside across from the Indian Graves Brook.

The area was purchased by John Harrison, agent of King James III of England, from Chief Nowenoik of the Lenapes in 1717, a real estate package of 3,000 acres for \$50. The remainder of the Township's land was bought later that year by William Penn. Early settlers were Scotch, Irish and English. Harrison's Purchase or Harrison's Neck was the property's designation. In 1733 the name Basking Ridge first appeared in ecclesiastic records of the Presbyterian Church and is recorded as being derived from the fact that "the wild animals of the adjacent lowlands were accustomed to bask in the warm sun of this beautiful ridge." Baskeridge and Baskenridge were commonly used.

By 1740 a list of settlers included names as Alward, Annin, Conkling, Cross, Dayton, and Lewis. At the time of the American Revolution, as many as 100 men

from Bernards answered the call to arms. Revolutionary troops came from Bound Brook through Annin's Corner and Basking Ridge en route to Morristown. During this time, a liberty pole was placed on the village green, with Annin's Corner renamed Liberty Corner. Basking Ridge was thought to be a secure place from the British Army as it was only seven miles away from the center of Washington's army at Jockey Hollow. General Charles Lee, second in command, was captured by British forces at the Widow White's Tavern in December, 1776. (This is at the corner of Colonial Drive and South Finley Avenue.) A local street, Old Army Road, was so named because it was the path trod through the country from Jockey Hollow to the Vealtown Tavern in Bernardsville by American troops.

In 1750 a classical school, designed to prepare young men for college, was established in Basking Ridge by Dr. Samuel Kennedy, fourth pastor of the Presbyterian Church, and later run by Dr. Robert Finley. The school, known as the Basking Ridge Classical School for almost 50 years, was conducted in the ministers' homes. Through contributions and partly at Dr. Finley's expense, the Brick Academy was built in 1809. Pupils came from many other states, as well as New Jersey; residents provided lodgings. The Academy was known as having contributed more men "to the bench, the bar and the pulpit". Students entered their junior year at the College of New Jersey (Princeton University). Among the Academy students were Samuel Southard, governor of New Jersey, U.S. Senate president and acting vice-president under President Tyler; William Lewis Dayton, vice-presidential candidate with John C. Fremont in 1856, and President Lincoln's Minister to France during the Civil War; Robert Field Stockton, hero of the Mexican War; Theodore Frelinghuysen, president of Rutgers College and vice-presidential candidate with Henry Clay in 1844.

There are twelve Houses of Worship of nine denominations. The Township has two historic districts: Franklin Corners and Liberty Corner. There are eight listings on the State and National Registers: The Brick Academy, Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church, Van Dorn Mill, Coffee House Corners (Turner Homestead), Chimney Ash Farm (Alward Homestead), Lord Stirling Estate out-buildings, and the two historic districts.

Two transportation-related events changed Bernards Township. In 1872 the railroad came through town, opening the area to those who wished to live in the country and work in the metropolitan environment. Almost 100 years later, construction of Route 287 and later Route 78, two Interstate Highways, made commuting much easier for those seeking to live in residential climate.

Liberty Corner, settled since 1722, still maintains its gentle rural atmosphere. In the later part of the 19th Century it was famous for its summer resorts.

*For further information on the history of Bernards Township contact
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Bernards Township Town Hall

Collyer Lane, Basking Ridge, New Jersey



High on the ridge encircled on three sides by public roads stands an English Tudor style mansion. Built in 1912, this Basking Ridge landmark was the home of four wealthy families--Owen, Lee, Bissell and Astor, before it was purchased by Bernards Township in 1968. Commonly called the Astor Mansion after its last owner, this is the Bernards Township seat of government. The original choice 100 acres have a commanding view of Collyer Lane, South Finley Avenue and South

Maple Avenue. The entire tract extended to the northern boundary of Homestead Village and included what is now War Memorial Field, plus the properties of Cedar Hill School and Ridge High School.

This residence, built of brick laid in Flemish bond, was the dream of Samuel Owen of Newark, a pharmaceutical manufacturer and gentleman farmer. The manor house contained 20 rooms, had an attached servants' quarters for the head outside man, an unfinished third floor storage and servants' quarters, an attached three stall garage and a small building for garden equipment. There also were two auxiliary structures on the grounds--a gate or carriage house on South Finley Avenue and the estate manager's cottage on South Maple Avenue.

The Owens named their new home, "Cedar Hill" and spent six months there and the remainder in Newark. Alice Burford Owen was related to Sir James Horlick, president of Horlick Malted Milk Products. To reflect his wife's British ancestry, Mr. Owen attempted to reproduce an English country home with beautiful brick-walled formal gardens, a rambler rose-covered arbor and a rose garden. A handsome native stone wall surrounded the entire acreage.

Features of the house include a red tiled roof, French and pocket doors, mahogany and birdseye maple paneling, etched crystal and brass wall sconces, unique moldings, green and rare red marble fireplaces with large marble hearths. The Owen family crest appears on the fireplace wall in the crystal chandeliered dining room. Townspeople were invited to picnic in Owen's woods; 35 acres were planted with 5,000 peach and 1,500 apple trees. Cedar Hill Farm provided summer jobs for local students and at harvest time, for residents.

Trustees of the Owen estate sold the property to Mr. and Mrs. George Ludlow Lee Sr. in 1940. Mr. Lee was owner/treasurer of the Red Devil Tool Company of Irvington, 1937-1950; he later became chairman of the board, renamed Red Devil, Inc., now at Union, N.J. Mr. Lee served on the Bernards Township Planning Board and was its vice-chairman in 1944. He and his wife, Dulcinea Harrison Smith Lee,

continued operation of the flourishing fruit farm, where local markets and roadside stands were supplied with the produce.

In 1946, 28 acres were divided into two tracts: 11.3 acres Lee retained in its natural state; 17 acres including the house were sold to Eugene V.N. Bissell and Zita Gatlin Bissell. John Jacob Astor VI bought the smaller tract of 11.3 acres from Lee in 1947. In the mid-50s, Lee donated 60 acres of land to Bernards Township Board of Education to build Cedar Hill School and Ridge High School with their associated athletic fields. An additional 12 acres were donated to the Neill Card Post #114, American Legion, War Memorial Foundation, for its field on South Maple Avenue.

Mr. and Mrs. Bissell renamed the estate "Maple Way" and lived there from 1946-1950. Mr. Bissell was executive vice-president of the Continental Grain Company in New York City. They sold the property to John Jacob Astor VI in 1950. Mr. Astor acquired an additional 17 acres from the Bissells, adding to his original 11.3 from the Lees. He lived in the mansion infrequently, but employed a staff to run it. Vacated in 1960, it remained unoccupied for eight years before Bernards Township purchased the hilltop house and 28 acres for \$140,000 in 1968. (Mr. Astor was the son born posthumously to Colonel John Jacob Astor IV, who perished in the sinking of the Titanic in 1912.)

An addition to the mansion (a new police wing in 1974) and further remodeling paved the way for the relocation of Bernards Township's government, which had been housed in an 1809 Federal style school house on West Oak Street. In 1975 for the first time Township offices were in a centralized location.

This picturesque real estate is almost entirely surrounded by public and semi-public lands. To the rear is the Board of Education property; across Collyer Lane is the St. James Church and School; and on the opposite side of South Maple Avenue is Lord Stirling Park, which includes the Somerset County Environmental Education Center and Riding Stables, covering 900 acres.

The Bernards Township Committee invites you to tour the house and the grounds.