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# ◆ The General Store ◆

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Newsletter of the Ralston Historical Association

Spring 1998

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## Historic Sites Can Be Saved

### *The Story of the Wills Family Cemetery*

About one quarter mile west of the Ralston General Store at the intersection of Route 24 and Oak Knoll Road, there is a cemetery which belonged to the Wills Family. The land on which the burial ground lies was originally part of a large tract of land deeded to John Wills by the New Jersey Probate Court in 1713. Local historians date the stone wall around the plot of ground at about 1852. The oldest legible tombstone bears the inscription "S.W."-1798. There is also a marker for Rebecca Wills with a date of 1817.

In 1969, the cemetery was in danger of being bulldozed by a housing developer. Through legal means, the Ralston Historical Association was able to save the site. At that time, they also located two descendants of the Wills family, a Mrs. Dorothy Wills Patten of Chatham, NJ and her son John Wills Patten of England.

Marge Davidson was instrumental in leading the battle to save the historic cemetery. Through her efforts, an agreement was reached with the developer to relocate what is now the first house on Oak Knoll Road. Additionally, the 50 square feet of burial ground with a small strip of land for access was given to Mendham Township.

John Wills became part of early New Jersey history when he traded with the Hinnammol Indians in 1703 and bought 150,000 acres of land from them for the West Jersey Corporation.

This territory was bounded on the east

by India Brook (North Branch of the Raritan River) and the Delaw are River on the west, and became known as West Jersey. In 1713-14, this land was surveyed and John Wills bought 826 acres for himself, running north from what was the Whitney property.

Although Wills owned this land for a number of years he never lived on it; but his son, James, built a house in 1724 that was the first authentic settlement of Ralston and may now be one of the oldest pre-Revolutionary houses in the area. It was a small and unremarkable house for its time, but in 1740, the family who were Quakers enlarged the house after a plan by their leader, William Penn. He wanted to ensure that there would be space for meetings among settlers of the province. County records verify that a tavern license was granted to Samuel Wills for 1746-47. At some point, a section of the house was removed and relocated to the opposite side of Route 24 at the entrance to Oak Knoll. It is now the house of Gail Lingerman.

A barn, which was another part of the Wills Homestead, was demolished in recent years but its heavy stone foundation has been retained for posterity. During 1958, the central section of the house with its original 1724 wing was moved back 1800 feet from Route 24 to a hill surrounded by pine trees. At that time, it was totally restored adding only those necessary current day conveniences. It was acquired in 1966 by its current owners, Mr. & Mrs. Russell C. Buchanan who later arranged for access to their home via Valley View Drive.

## Annual Meeting at General Store

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The 57th annual meeting of the Ralston Historical Association will be held at the Ralston General Store on Route 24 and Roxiticus Road in Mendham on Sunday, May 31st from 2-5 pm. An exhibit of decoys will be on display as well as exhibits of local antiques and photos. A cookie sale will take place to raise money for the Association. We welcome all our members as well as the general public to attend. The General Store will be open from 2-5 pm on Sundays and holidays from June through October.

### Trustee Nominations

The following members have been nominated to serve as trustees for a three year term: Russell Buchanan, Marjorie Davidson, Samuel Fornaro, Lucille Heimrod and Wilma Sagurton.

### Building Fund At Work

The eastern side of the Ralston General Store has been resided, and in keeping with tradition, rough sawn oak was used. Local carpenter Bob Hendershot completed the work in early April. Special netting was also installed along with tar paper to remedy a persistent honey bee problem. Bob also is responsible for the new benches on both sides of the front porch. Some minor electrical work was also done to update the old switch box. The maintenance committee has been trying to work out a solution to the occasional problem of dampness in the basement.

## Ralston Notes

### MEMBERSHIP INCREASES

Our recent Township mailings have greatly increased our membership. We are happy to have so many old and new residents among our contributors. Our annual dues are our primary means of support and we greatly appreciate your generosity.

### COOPER COLLECTION

For many years, Mr. and Mrs. Lewis C. Cooper of Chester have had antiques on loan to the General Store. Recently, they relocated to South Jersey and offered to sell the items to the Association. As part of our continuing effort to expand the collection, we gladly accepted their offer. Visitors to the store will recognize the redware, pewter and large blue willow dish as enhancements to our other fine collectibles.

### NEW JERSEY HISTORIC TRUST

In 1997, thirty sites in New Jersey received \$11.5 million dollars for historic preservation. The grants, which were announced last December in Madison, will fund the restoration and stabilization of historic sites throughout the state. Those receiving grants in Morris County are the Obadoah LaTourette Grist and Sawmill in Washington Township and St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Wharton.

### MENDHAM WOVEN THROWS

A special thanks to Carol Eshc of Chester County Furnishings for her donation from the sales of many woven throws depicting the Mendhams. Carol will soon have a new multi-colored version of the original throw. Chester Country Furnishing is located at 60 East Main Street in Chester.

## THE WPA IN RALSTON

During the 1930s, the Federal Writers' Project of the New Deal Works Progress Administration employed thousands of people to write travel guides for each of the forty-eight states and Alaska. The guide for New Jersey was published in 1939 and contained the following article written about Ralston, NJ.

*RALSTON, is little more than a one-story Post Office. That post office building, however, is the oldest in continuous use in the United States. It was erected in 1775 as a store by John Ralston, and ever since 1792 has served as a post office. Ralston built for permanence; the frame is made of hand-hewn oak, held together by mortised beams and wooden dowels, and the roof juts out a good yard past the front. Gray-brown color is the building's only sign of submission to time's slow fire. The post office has fourth-class rating, and people in its district have to come to it for their mail, though the regular route of the*

*Mendham delivery service passes its very door. The government has paid rent for the use of the building only since 1931. Adjoining it is Ralston's Home, built in 1771.*

In addition to the state guide book, other members of the WPA participated in the Historic American Buildings Survey which detailed many of the historic buildings throughout the nation. Twenty-two detailed architectural drawings were made of the General Store and Manor House.

The drawings describe the exterior and interior of each building in detail. The interior of the post office is illustrated showing the location of the post office boxes, partition walls and counters down to the smallest piece of hardware on the shutters. Similar drawings were also made of the Ralston Mill illustrating the mill machinery that still existed at the time. Copies of the post office drawings may be viewed at the General Store.

### 250th Anniversary

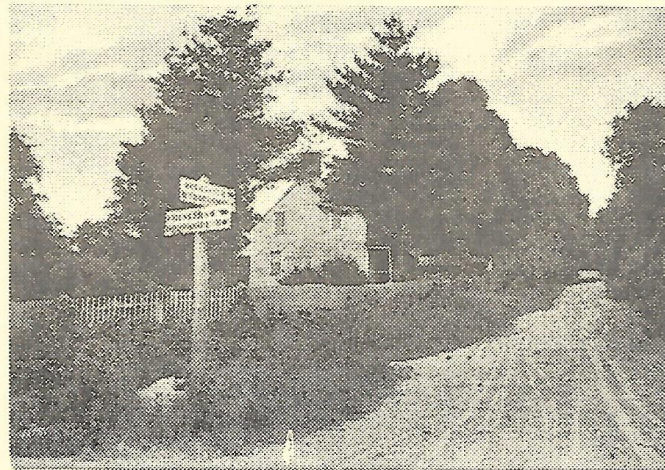
Roxanna Wagner will represent the Ralston Historical Association on the 250th Anniversary Committee. The Association is in the process of developing a variety of events to mark the occasion in 1999.

### Coming Soon

RHA member, Bill Wilke, plans to give a slide show presentation on the Rockabye Railroad and local industries of the 1900s later this year. Look for an announcement.

### Photos Needed

The Association is looking for old photos, postcards, maps, etc., of Ralston. Copies will be made and the originals returned to the donor.



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### CONTEST

*This photo of the Babbitt Estate was taken in the early 1900s. The first person to correctly identify the Township cross streets in the photo will win a copy of the book "The Mendhams". Send your answer to: RHA, 313 Mendham Road West, Mendham, NJ 07945*

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\*Building Fund Contributor

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Check the appropriate Membership:

<input type="checkbox"/> Regular Membership	\$10.00 per year	<input type="checkbox"/> New Member
<input type="checkbox"/> Patron Membership	\$20.00 per year	<input type="checkbox"/> Renewal
<input type="checkbox"/> Life Membership	\$150.00 one time	<input type="checkbox"/> Corporate Matching Gift
<input type="checkbox"/> Building Fund		

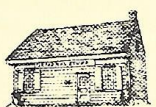
Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

If you would like to serve one Sunday afternoon at the store, please include your phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Please make your check payable to the Ralston Historical Association  
 313 Mendham Road West  
 Mendham, NJ 07945



**Ralston Historical Association**  
**313 Mendham Rd West**  
**Mendham NJ 07945**

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 Mendham, NJ  
 07945

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 Marge Davidson - *Vice President*  
 Jeff Purcell - *Treasurer*  
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 Russell Buchanan  
 Lucille Heimrod  
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