
◆ The General Store ◆

Volume I, Issue I

Newsletter of the Ralston Historical Association

Spring 2000

The Ralston Water System

The village of Ralston, by no means a leader in community infrastructure, did for many years have a feature in common with much larger communities—a public water system. Edwin Thompson, a longtime Ralston resident, relates that the spring feeding the system was developed originally to serve the John Ralston manor house. Since the manor house also has a six foot diameter hand dug well, it is not clear if the spring water was piped to the manor house for drinking purposes or if it was used primarily for food refrigeration.

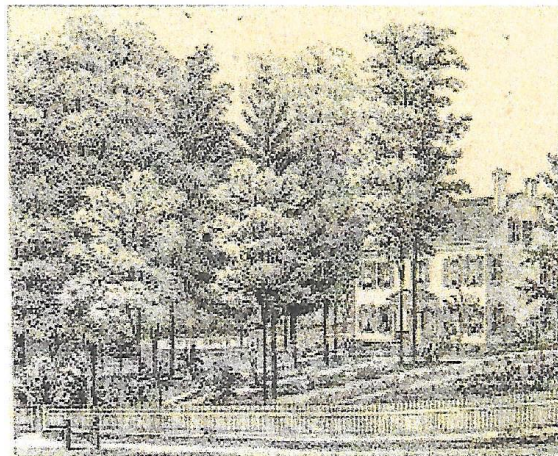
When Ed moved into the manor house in the mid-1950s there was a long trough in the basement floor which at one time received a continuing flow of cold spring water. Perishable foods were placed in crocks sitting in the trough for refrigeration. A shallow basin on the manor house grounds was also connected to the spring, Ed believes, for ice making in the winter.

The location of the spring on the hillside near the Ralston Curve on Route 24 made gravity flow of the water to the manor house and ultimately the village possible. At some time, perhaps in the mid-nineteenth century, the

spring water was piped to a fulling mill in a building on what is now the Southwest corner of Route 24 and Roxiticus Road. The fulling (or shrinking) of woolen cloth required large quantities of clean water and the perpetually flowing spring offered an ample supply. Over the years, the few residents in the village connected their homes to the line leading to the fulling mill resulting in a community water system.

While the water quality was excellent, the spring did support a thriving colony of salamanders. Water users were forced to tolerate the appearance of an occasional salamander that had traversed the distribution pipes from the spring to emerge in the unfamiliar environs of a housewife's water bucket or sink.

The abundant flow from the spring was, in general, adequate for the modest needs of the small community. "But," Ed said, "there were disputes and at least one lawsuit over the use of the water." In the early 1900s, the land on the Southeast corner of Rt. 24 and Roxiticus Road was occupied by a nursery devoted to growing roses. Mrs. Maria DeMott, owner of the manor house at the time sued the nursery owner (unsuccessfully) to restrain (continued on page 2)



An early sketch of the Ralston Manor House shows the mill pond on the left and a barely visible fountain in front of the house which was still flowing until a few years ago.

FLAX—From Seed to Shirts

Flax, one of the earliest cultivated crops and one of the first European plants cultivated in America is the subject of this year's display at the Ralston General Store.

"Flax" which means to plait or braid to make baskets, was widely used in the Ralston area in the 1800s. More than 10,000 years ago, the entire green stalk was used for making baskets, much like rye straw baskets today. Over winter, the stalks would rot and the long fibers that kept

the plant upright would be freed from the stalk and could be easily twisted between the fingers into a sewing thread for hides.

Following the invention of a basic loom, the lines of thread (or linen) were woven into linen cloth. It was not until the invention of the cotton gin, as well as spinning jennies and power looms, that machine produced cotton replaced the home production of linen.

The Museum display opens Memorial Weekend in May.

Water (cont'd)

him from using an excessive amount of the spring water.

While the water from the spring was abundant and of good quality, the means of conveyance was a weak point and ultimately resulted in the discontinuance of the system. Ed described a variety of types of pipe used in the system including bored logs, cast iron, lead and even pipe made on site by placing cement around a long pole in a trench and then carefully removing the pole as the cement began to set. The clogging and deterioration of the hodgepodge of pipes eventually led to the abandonment of the system in the mid-1900s. However, the manor house and Ed's home next door were served until very recently by the system.

The spring still flows abundantly, but Ralston residents now rely on private wells, preferring the convenience of water supplied by electric pumps to the uncertainties of the old community system. The salamanders continue to

RALSTON NOTES

ANNUAL MEETING

The Annual Meeting of the Ralston Historical Association will be held on May 21, 2000 at 4 p.m. at the home of Beirne Donaldson and Wood Huntley, 13 Roxiticus Road. All RHA members are invited to attend. Please RSVP 543-7834.

TRUSTEE NOMINATIONS

Rose Carlin, Catherine Emmons, Jeff Purcell, Elsa Buchner and Judy Craig have been nominated to serve as trustees for the class of 2000.

RALSTON POSTER

The Ralston Poster by local artist Lucille Hobbie is still available at Mendham Books for \$10.00. Framexperts across the way can provide help with framing.

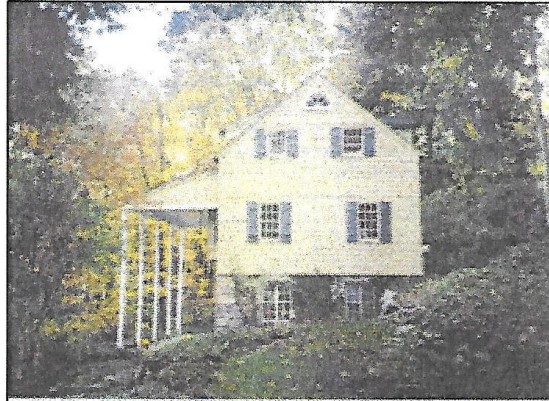
populate the spring, no longer subject to the hazards of an excursion into a Ralston kitchen.

WOVEN THROW

Single and multi-colored woven throws depicting various sites in the Mendhams are still available at Chester Country Furnishings. Cost is \$59.00.

FALL EVENT

The Ralston Historical Association will sponsor a special Fall event later in the year. Look for a mailing announcing the details in late Summer.



LOCAL VIEWS—George Washington may not have slept here, but according to a former resident of this Roxiticus Road home, it was at one time deeded to Benjamin Franklin. Dated around the mid-1700s according to the Morris County Heritage Commission, this property was owned by Nicholas Mueller who was Franklin's translator to the Pennsylvania Dutch. This bank-style home is of post and beam construction with carved wooden pins that hold the mortise and tenons together. The granite and fieldstone foundation was most likely pulled from India Brook. The bell and cupola on the barn next to the house once topped the old Ralston School House across the road.

Ralston bridge has undergone many changes over the years



The old stone toll bridge just west of the intersection of Roxiticus Road and Route 24 was replaced by this Bartley single span steel truss bridge (left) after a flood damaged the original bridge in the 1890s. This picture was taken around 1900. Bartley bridges were manufactured by Ireneaus P. Bartley at the Bartley works in 1887, and after his death in 1888, by his father William. Ralston residents still recall the characteristic hum automobile tires made on the steel floor of the bridge as they traveled along the Washington Turnpike (now Route 24), crossing over the north branch of the Raritan river. The bridge was replaced by its current concrete structure in the 1970s, but the original iron plaques from the bridge, listing the Bartley Works as manufacturer, and the Freeholders of Morris County, are on display at the Ralston General Store Museum.

COMBS HOLLOW SAGA

by
Wilma Lewis Sagurton

I am writing this in order that the citizens of Mendham Township will more fully understand and appreciate the significance of the tract of land referred to as Buttermilk Falls and India Brook Natural Areas in Combs Hollow that was purchased in 1997 through the Green Acres Program and the Morris County and Mendham Township open space funds. The opportunity to buy came about through serendipity—the chance bankruptcy of the developer who had bought it when the former watershed area was auctioned. The only ones with sufficient funds or credit to raise the large sums necessary were developers.

I can speak warmly of all this because I was born in Combs Hollow, which had been in our family since its occupation by the Indians and purchase from the Proprietor J. Kirkbride. William Penn was the owner of a large adjoining tract. In addition to the above, I spent two years in searching all of the available deeds in order to place the area on the State and National lists of Historic Places. Thankfully this effort succeeded. It is my desire that the Levi Lewis Forge be added to the list of other artifacts presently listed, but lying in Randolph Township.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE COMBS HOLLOW AREA

Beginning at the forge site on the eastern side of India(n) Brook, let us follow the brook upstream into Randolph Township. It crosses under Combs Hollow Road beneath two small bridges, one with stone and the other with cast iron railings. Going north on the road the first site we see contains the footings of Levi Lewis' grist and saw mill with walls, wheel seat, head and tail races clearly visible. His tan yard, according to the deed, lay below the dam, and had a bark mill and bark house, as well as the tanning vats. The head race, with embankments to hold in the water, runs along the road to the first dam. It has an arrangement of large stones to deflect the water to the now-gone wooden flume which poured water over the overshot mill wheel. The head race walls have been broken through by the Randolph Road Department for road drainage. Along the north wall of the mill runs a road paved with flat stones. It carried wagons with grist or timber for the mills. They progressed across the stream over a bridge whose abutments of stone are still standing. The stream is walled for a short distance probably to protect the bridge during high water times. The dam of the first mill pond will be repaired in the future. A developer owns the hillside below Tracy and Jamie Kinsel's property where the old road from the bridge once ran. The mill area cannot be developed since it is mostly stream and wetlands.

Moving on up the road, we see a flat, clear area above the

first pond. This marks the floor of the second mill pond, and was used in my time as a turn-out for the farm horses stabled where the embankment and walls of the old barn are seen. Along the road, across from the red barn lies a flat stone buried in the earth. It is a surveyor's marker, mentioned in old deeds.

Next is the stone frame of the spring house. Stone steps lead down to the two-tiered floor below. Shallow water cooled pans of milk waiting for the cream to rise. Forty-quart cans of milk cooled in the deep end and were delivered every day to hotels and boarding houses in Dover, and later to the Farmers' Cooperative Creamery on Park Avenue in the Ironia section of Randolph Township, near Bryant's Pond. A snow plow hit the chestnut-framed tin roof, which eventually slipped down the bank toward the brook and remains there.

Turning off the road at a nearby pole, we see a dam with enormous stones which the stream now bypasses. However, there is a spring-fed pond whose water is still impounded there. These stones were probably laid using the bulldozer power of Levi's oxen and perhaps a machine called a rock lifter which stood for years under one of the old sugar maples. Levi had a "battery" of three ponds to ensure a supply of water for busy times at the mill.

Several hundred feet up the road is a group of ancient sugar maples. There were 32 of them in recent memory. Formerly there were many more for it seems that Levi lined the road with them. Maple sugar may have been a source of extra income for the family. Most have gone down from old age and intolerance to road salt. To the right of the road is a broken circle of stones which was a lime kiln. Levi had an iron mine east of India Brook past the two small bridges. Lime quarried from fissures in the bed rock was heated here and turned into powdery lime used in iron smelting, sweetening acid soil, making whitewash, etc.

We are now in the cow pasture of my father's farm. He built his cow/hay barn, pig pens, and chicken coops in this area. Various concrete and iron artifacts strew the ground here.

At this point we cross the road and return by way of the western side of the road. My father, David Minard Lewis, and wife Nanna Mockridge, built their home in 1910 on the knoll here. They dug a well, and put up an outdoor "necessary," smoke house, meat house, chicken breeding and laying houses, and eventually in the early 1920s, a garage for their Model T. Ford. The kitchen garden was here, tended by the women—my mother, sister, and me. Dad plowed and harrowed it in the spring, and that was the end of his responsibility. He returned to the fields, tending his crops.

A short distance down the hill, sited above a steep em-

Combs Hollow Saga (continued)

bankment was the David Lewis Distillery building, now gone, but probably the only building in the area with a room large enough for public meetings. Here, the government of present Randolph Township was set up, after successful petitioning of Trenton to separate from Mendham in 1805. By 1806, it was done at this spot. A marker is planned.

Next is the W. J. Lewis site. The cellar hole is all that is left. My grandmother and grandfather Edward Beers and Phebe Merchant Lewis lived there after selling the inherited Merchant farm on Doby Road due to their age and infirmity.

The restored red barn belonging to the long white house is next. Some think it served as the bark house for the tannery across the street. The house, under private ownership, was built by Edward Lewis, ca 1760, and wife Mehitable Horton. He was the son of Levi, and inherited the mills with his brother Levi, Jr. upon the death of Levi Sr. in 1799. Their outhouse, between the barn and house was recently removed by the current owner.

The small house at the fork in the road was built by Moses Combs in 1807 for the use of his tanner. Edward Lewis and his brother Levi (sons of the original Levi), ran the business for only eight years and sold to Combs who eventually had 80 employees. Hence, unfortunately, the area became known as Combs Hollow, rather than the original "road to Levi Lewis's mills" designation.

There is a road sign reading "Combs Avenue" at this point. Directly at the foot of this sign is another surveyor's stone, buried in the ground, and mercifully not disturbed for nearly 300 years. It is mentioned in early deeds.

The house across Combs Avenue is beyond doubt that of Levi Lewis and is now the home of Karl and Cecile Wilder. It is of early timber frame construction, updated in the mid-nineteenth century. Deeds have not been found, and may never have existed, since it was passed down in our family for several generations. Levi also had a blacksmith shop at the point of this road. It shows as "BS" on old maps.

The adjoining lot contains the remnants of the banked house of Levi's brother Aaron who, with another brother, Eliphalet, were the first three industrialists in the area. The house wall, garden wall, and outbuilding foundation remain. There is a huge flat rock outside the kitchen door, at whose end is a dug well, a perfect circle of stones, and silted up. An officious developer breached the upper wall with a machine without permission. Looking to the right toward the top of the hill a low stone wall marks the path of the original mill road which crossed Combs Hollow road and continued past the end of the mill. After loading or unloading at the mill, the wagons then crossed India Brook on a plank bridge whose stone abutments are clearly in place. The bank of the brook is protected from storm washouts by a

wall of stones upstream. From this point, if we continue back downstream, we will wind up at the Lewis Forge site which was recently purchased by the Township of Mendham, back where we began.

It is to be noted that from 1730s on, the Lewis family owned these lands, and were finally evicted, in 1926, by a consortium of Mendham and Morristown, which proposed building a reservoir, which, of course, was never done. After holding it more than a half century, other water supplies were used, and the land auctioned to developers. They may further regret their foolish decisions, since we are now buying water which probably isn't of acceptable quality. Bottled water has become a booming business.

Levi Lewis was my great, great, great, great grandfather, in direct line of descent. The Lewises were in Combs Hollow five years before the Indians moved to South Jersey, and continued to live there until ousted 'for the public good'. We, the last generation to live there, left after an auction in 1926, during which people took more than they bought, according to my mother.

There is an historic marker containing a map and listing the above sites at the intersection of Combs Hollow Road and Doby Road. We hope this map will be used to direct a self-guided walking tour of our National Register Historic area. A further note of local interest, is that Levi's daughter married John Logan, who established the Roxiticus Road mill, manor house and general store on the same stream as his father's operation. Levi Senior's brother, Samuel, built the original frame mill building in Basking Ridge, now replaced by the impressive stone building across from the Old Mill Inn. His house stands just beyond the cemetery of the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church with the huge oak tree.

These mills provided necessary products and services for generations of the area's earliest citizens, and contributed significantly to the development of their neighborhoods.

Editor's Note: The attached map details the sites mentioned in Wilma's column. To begin a tour of the Buttermilk Falls area in Mendham Township, take Calais Road north and make a left onto Combs Hollow Road. Continue north on Combs Hollow Road over the bridge, and the entrance to Buttermilk Falls will be on your left. A parking area is located across the street. To tour the Combs Hollow Historic District in Randolph Township, continue north on Combs Hollow Road and look for the sign designating the Historic District on the left. A walking tour of the Combs Hollow section guided by Wilma Sagurton is planned for the near future. Details will be announced shortly.

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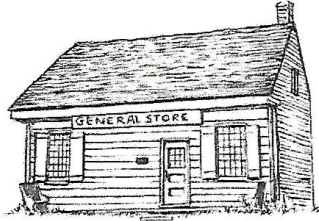
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The Ralston Historical Association is always looking for new volunteers to help in a variety of ways. If you'd like to be a host at the museum on a Sunday afternoon during our season, which runs from June through October, please include your name and phone number below.

Name: _____

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