
◆ The General Store ◆

John Ralston Papers to be donated at RHA Annual Meeting in June

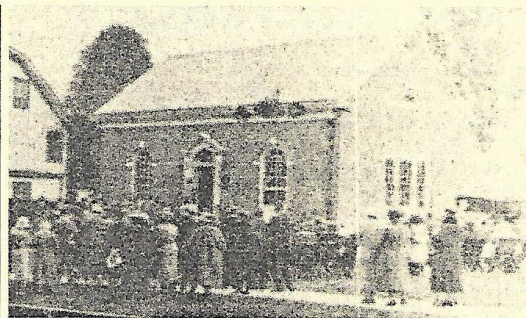
By *Ralph Rhodes*

The family of Edwin V. Thompson has indicated its intention to donate several letters and other documents once in the possession of John Ralston to the Ralston Historical Association collection of John Ralston papers. The papers were found by Ed Thompson in the attic of the Manor House during his ownership of the property.

Marjorie Davidson, long time member of the Historical Association, said that the majority of the present Ralston Papers were donated to the New Jersey Historical Society by Mrs. Emma Nesbitt Rood. They consist of (1) twenty-four daybooks and ledgers from the period 1782 through 1815 now in the archives of the New Jersey Historical Society in Newark, (2) one ledger from April 1803 to August 1804 on display at the General Store and (3) a number of documents in the care of the Mendham Township Historic Preservation Committee. Marge speculates that many of the documents may have been stored in the (very large) attic of the Manor

House at one time. Some slipped through a crack in the wall or floor to lie unnoticed until found by Ed Thompson. The letters to be donated were, for the most part, written by Hugh Nesbitt, John Ralston's business partner reporting problems in their import - export business. One letter involves a shipment of liquor that was shipped full and arrived nearly empty. Another, a situation where the customer paid for a shipment with worthless state scrip. Still another, the theft of two wagon loads of goods while the drivers slept.

Fortunately, the problems described in the letters must have been rare, for the Ralston/Nesbitt partnership endured very profitably for both partners for many years until John Ralston's death in 1819. Perhaps the difficulty and time involved in communicating by mail in those days, discouraged all but the most important letters. The papers to be donated by the Thompson family will be formally received at the Historical Association's Annual Meeting on June 10. They and the main body of Ralston Papers will be available for study by researchers approved by the Historical Association.



The Mendham Library designed in the Colonial Revival style was built in 1932, the gift of Louise Forsythe Demarest. It was originally a small one-room brick building. An addition in 1976 more than doubled its size. Here crowds attend the 1932 opening. (Morristown Library.)

A brief history of the Mendham Libraries

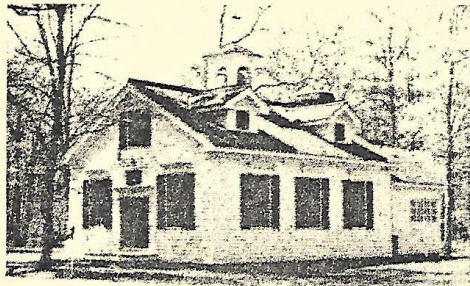
By *Kate Emmons,
Louella Hulbert
and Sarah Dean Link*

Literary Club.

On January 12, 1912, the building which is at present part of the St. Mark's Parish House, was the home of the Library Association. About 1,000 books were available for use and it was being run by the Book and Thimble Club. In September 1931 a bequest was made to the library from Mrs. Louise M. F. Demarest of a one hundred by two hundred foot plot of land. A library building was to be built on this lot— not to exceed fifteen thousand dollars. After this requirement of the bequest was completed, the balance of the estate was to be in-

The Borough library had a very humble beginning, dating as far back as 1797 according to Kate Emmons' book, *Through the Years in Mendham Borough*. The books kept on hand were mainly of a religious nature. The library at this time was called Mendham Library Company and was a lending library. In 1879 the library ceased to operate for a while after the death of Judge William Babbitt. It was not until 1911 that a group of interested citizens got together and once again formed a library group. This group was known as The

Continued on next page



The Union School House on Mosele Road. (The Mendhams)

Gypsy encampment recalled by former Ralston resident

As told to Marge Davidson...

When Nellie Backer was a student at the old Ralston School House on Roxiticus Road, Friday was embroidery lesson day. The teacher was Miss Willet who taught at the Union School House. To get to the school, the girls had to walk over the hill and through the woods along the Old Colonial Road in what is now the Schiff Land Preserve. But the girls were terrified because they had to pass by a gypsy encampment. They were afraid they would be kidnapped and stolen

away from their families.

As long as she was in school, Nellie could not recall any trouble with the gypsies even though they were frequently accused of stealing chickens, pigs, grain, etc. from local residents.

The embroidery skills Nellie learned were a life long interest and at age 80 she was still giving needlework lessons at Bantam in the Mendham Shopping Center—now Mendham Apothecary. Nellie never did say what the boys did on Friday afternoon.

RHA Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting of the Ralston Historical Association will be held on June 10, 2001 at 2 p.m. at the home of Ralph and Patricia Rhodes at 10A Roxiticus Road, next to the General Store. All RHA members are welcome. The Ralston Papers (see page 1 for

more detail) will be presented at this event.

Russell Buchanan, Marjorie Davidson, Samuel Fornaro, Lucille Hobbie Heimrod and Wilma Sagurton have been nominated to serve as trustees for the class of 2004.

2001 SPECIAL EXHIBIT

This year's special exhibit at the Ralston General Store Museum is entitled, "Early American Medicine." On display will be a variety of doctor's implements and medicinal herbs used during the 19th century. The museum is open Sundays, 2—5 p.m., June through October.

Libraries cont'd

vested and was to be used for the maintenance of the library. This gift was given in memory of Mrs. Demarest's daughter who loved Mendham so much. It is believed that the library building was built according to the donors specifications and design. The new library building was dedicated on June 20, 1932.

The first library in the Township was housed in a small room at the head of the stairs in the elementary school, the present Township Municipal Building. There were four class rooms with two grades in each room. When the decision was made to use this small room for the Visiting Nurse and for the school health facilities, the library was asked to move.

Louella Hulbert, a Brookside resident active in the inception of the library, described the move: There was a blacksmith shop where the Brookside Community Church office is now. The blacksmith shop had gone out of business so the books were moved to a small, triangular shaped area in the front of the shop on the side next to the church. Volunteers put up shelves, provided a polished black walnut research shelf under the window on the church side and a student lamp and a hooked rug on the floor.

Sarah Dean Link, the first permanent librarian for the Township continues the library history: After the blacksmith shop, the library moved to a closet in the Community Club in 1949. When the new elementary school was built in 1954, the Township Committee offered the library larger quarters in the old school building and the small book collection was moved into one

of the old classrooms, now the area of the circulation desk.

In 1969 the Township built the new firehouse and the library expanded into the old garage, the area of the present reference and periodical section. As the number of library volunteers increased, the hours of the library were also increased and in the 1970s the Mendham Township Library became the first library in Morris County to open on Sundays. The library was now open seven days a week and, thanks to the Friends of the Library, had a book budget to start building its own collection.

The biggest expansion occurred in 1981, when the Public Works Department moved from the Municipal Building to its new location on Mount Pleasant Road. The Friends of the Library undertook a major fund raising campaign to convert the old garage to the present stack area, which doubled the library space. Since the library moved into the Municipal Building in 1955, the collection had grown from 2,000 books to 20,000 books, and the hours per week were increased from 9 to 36, thanks to a very dedicated group of volunteers.

The final expansion occurred in 1993, creating the present children's room. With continued support from the Township Committee and the Friends of the Library, the library has computerized, increased its hours to 55 per week and expanded its book collection to 30,000 volumes.

Today, the library is in the top 1% in circulation per capita in the entire state of New Jersey.

NESBITT MILL RECOGNIZED FOR HISTORIC IMPORTANCE

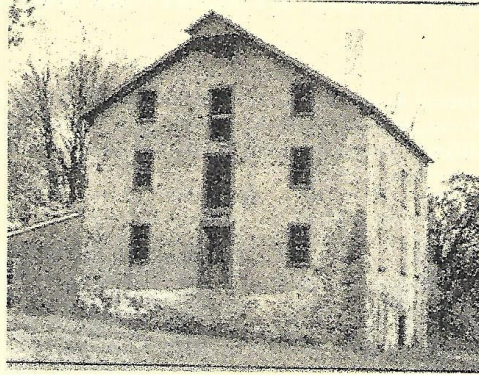
By *Tim Timpson*

Earlier this year, Morris County's Historic Visitor Center, Historical Society, Heritage Commission and Historic Preservation Trust put their heads together to select the County's 10 Most Threatened Historic Sites. Prominently listed is the Nesbitt Mills—an imposing and historically significant landmark that's recognized by almost all our residents and neighbors.

Mendham Township, of course, is rich in areas of historic importance. We have winding trails that follow abandoned rail beds or that trace the boundaries of long forgotten farms. We have homes that date from the Revolution, buildings and foundations that chronicle a burgeoning industrialization and others that tell of our return to an agrarian community sprinkled with cottage industries. We have the remains of sawmills, gristmills, woolen mills, tanneries, shoemakers, glassmakers, ice-ponds, iron forges, mill races and mill ponds.

With all these, why was the Nesbitt Mills assigned such importance? The explanation may lie in its history.

We don't know exactly when the gristmills started business. The Historic Preservation Committee's files contain the copy of a June, 1848 letter signed by John Nesbitt and his mother, Mary Ann (daughter of John Ralston), calling for construction of a mill on land described as "the sawmill lot, near the lime kiln." Assuming two years for construction, the



The Nesbitt Mill on Rt. 24 across from Sammy's Restaurant.

mill probably opened for business about 1850.

Local farmers brought their grain to the mill by horse-drawn wagon. The grain would be transported to a cleaning station at the top of the mill and flow from there to the storage hoppers and then to the grinding wheels where whole grain was processed into fine flour. (At Nesbitt's, two sets of grinding wheels were in operation. This is why the building is correctly called "gristmills" rather than "gristmill.") The flour would then be sifted and sorted according to coarseness and finally bagged for sale or delivery back to the farmers. The power to run the cleaners, grinders, sifters and other mechanical equipment came from a waterwheel located in the basement. The mill continued producing flour probably until the 1880s. At that time, railroads had made it easier and cheaper to buy flour from more efficient mills in the Midwest.

The Nesbitt Mills remained vacant for about 25 years. Then in 1908, four years following John Nesbitt's death, the mill was

bought by the Laughlin family and converted to the production of cider and apple-jack.

The production process was similar to that for flour. Apples delivered by local farmers were carried by conveyor to slicers at the top of the mill. From the slicers, the apples were fed into hoppers, and then to presses that squeezed the pulp into cider. The cider was stored in large wooden vats, and eventually poured off into jugs or bottles and sold either to stores or directly to customers.

Water was again the source of power for all the mechanical equipment. But the waterwheel was gone. In its place was a new, more powerful and efficient water turbine that gave the operators better control over the equipment's speed and power.

Typical cider mills would operate for three or four months each year during peak seasons for apples, pears and peaches. Then the workers would store the equipment so the mill could reopen quickly when the next harvesting season arrived. This is the way most mills operated, and the

Laughlin Mill (which had recently become the Fornaro Mill) was no different. Only this time, during the late 1930s, the mill never reopened. And that's one of the things that makes this mill unlike any other in all of New Jersey. All the equipment needed to make cider is still in the mill, and located almost exactly where it was the day the operators closed it down more than 60 years ago.

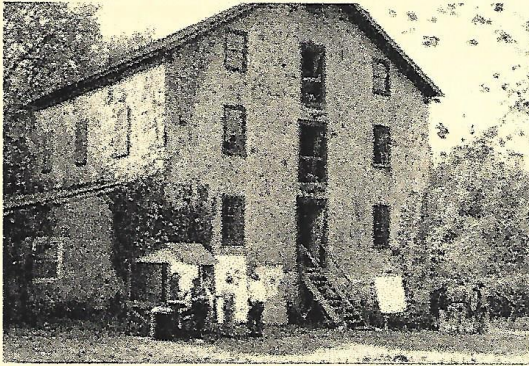
The Society for the Preservation of Old Mills has assembled a list of 250 to 300 mills known to have operated in New Jersey. Of these, only a dozen are identified as having been cider mills or distilleries. And of this dozen, nine are in ruins or can't be located; two were long ago converted into homes; and one houses municipal offices in Bernardsville.

The Nesbitt Mill, with its complete inventory of equipment is the only remaining mill in New Jersey that can be authentically restored as a turn-of-the-century cider mill.

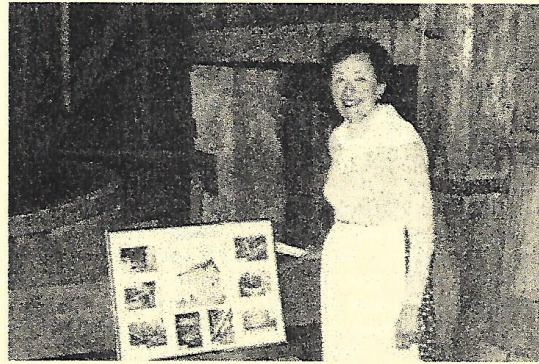
In addition to its listing as one of the County's 10 Most Threatened Sites, the Nesbitt Mill is also listed with both federal and state agencies as part of our Ralston Historic District. It's location provides access to newly acquired public property and to Patriot's Path. The building is privately owned, but the Township Committee, the Historic Preservation Committee and the building's owner are working together to assure its presence in our community for many more years to come.

RALSTON WEEKEND 2000

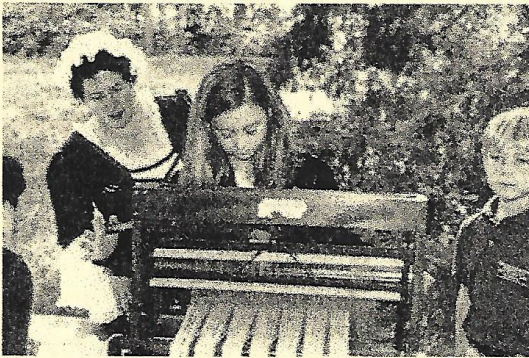
Last October, The Ralston Historical Association and the Mendham Township Historic Preservation Committee jointly presented a weekend event that included a lecture on the making of applejack by Bill Wilkie, a tour of the Nesbitt Cider Mill and a demonstration of flax spinning at the Ralston General Store.



The Nesbitt Mill, originally a gristmill, had a steady stream of visitors who were able to view all of the original equipment used in the process of making applejack.



Rose Carlin explains the process of making apple cider at the Nesbitt Mill. On the left hand side of the photo is an original vat used in the process.



Judy Craig is shown above demonstrating the process of weaving to some visitors who got "hands on" experience with a loom that was used to create a piece of cloth.



Dolores Crammer was on hand at the Ralston General Store to explain the special exhibit of the season, "Flax— From "Seeds to Shirts."

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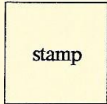
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Mendham, NJ 07945



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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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Please make your tax deductible check payable to:

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