
◆ The General Store ◆

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Newsletter of the Ralston Historical Association

Spring 2002

The Lenni-Lenape "A Stone Age Legacy"

A drum, grinding stones and wooden bowls are just some of the items that will be displayed at this year's special exhibit at the Ralston General Store entitled "The Stone Age Legacy of the Lenni-Lenape Indians." Once again, Wilma Sagurton has drawn upon her extensive collection from the Levi Lewis museum to create a fantastic display of tools, pottery and other artifacts from this group of people who were the first known inhabitants of the Mendham area.

The Lenni-Lenape Nation of the Algonquian People migrated to New Jersey from the "North Country," crossing the Mississippi River. While the exact date of their arrival is unclear, it is known that humans inhabited New Jersey 10,000 years ago. The Lenni-

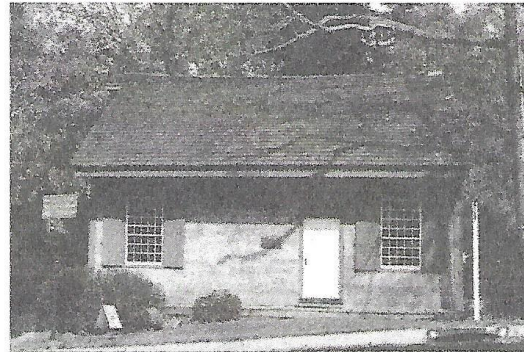
Lenape Nation was known by the Algonquian tribes as the "Original People," "Grandfather," or "Men of Men."

While only about 2000 Lenni-Lenape lived in this area, many neighboring tribes came to New Jersey to hunt, fish and cultivate the rich soil. Although basically nomadic, they raised crops of corn, pumpkin and beans. In warmer weather they walked to the Atlantic Ocean. There they often lived for the summer months, enjoying cool sea breezes, collecting shells, smoking fish for the winter, and eating crabs, oysters and clams.

In the early 1600s the Nanticoke People from southeastern Delaware and the Eastern Shore of Maryland migrated north and united with the Lenni-Lenape already living in New Jersey.

RHA Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting of the Ralston Historical Association will be held at 2 p.m. on June 9, 2002 at the General Store Museum, 313 Mendham Road—West, at the intersection of Roxiticus Road. Trustees and officers will be elected and a review of last year's accomplishments and plans for this year will be discussed. The 2002 museum season begins on Monday, May 27. Hours are from 2 to 5 p.m. Sundays and Holidays through mid-October.



General Store Gets A Face Lift

After some fifty years, the front exterior of the John Ralston Museum has reverted back to the way it looked when it was originally built in the late 1700s. Sometime around the 1940s, the building's front facade was painted and had remained that way until the end of 2001.

The trustees of the museum have been struggling with the peeling paint and alligating through the years. After research and due consideration, chemical stripping was chosen as the means of paint removal. Two coats and a little muscle took the building face down to the original bare wood. Separately, the trim and shutters were repainted.

It is expected that the am-

ber colored, stripped wide boards will gray with time and then will be protected with a clear preservative.

Interestingly, as paint layers were removed, it was observed that old signs, some legible and some illegible, began to appear. Some folks, in hope of being immortalized, had placed their initials there too. And judging by the number of tiny tick marks, the front of the store was also used as a bulletin board. Extending this last observation, perhaps pictures of your relatives or friends appeared on this wall as Post Office "Wanted" posters.

In any event, on your next visit, peruse this well used front facade representing a small page in Mendham's history.

From the Archives: How Ralston Lost Its Post Office

The Ralston General Store, now a museum, once proudly housed the post office for the Ralston section of Mendham (originally known as Roxiticus.) In the 1940s it held the distinction of being the oldest building in the United States to house a post office, and its postmark bore that claim.

Operated as a general store by John Ralston from 1786 until his death in 1819, the property was some time later sold to the Leddells who used it as a mill outlet for the grist mill across the street. It was again a general store when in 1892 it was used by the government for the Ralston post office.

In June of 1941 controversy surrounded Ralston's little post office. The building was in disrepair. A disgruntled and nearly frozen postmistress, Mrs. Catherine Groenewegen, a native of Ralston, moved the post office from the general store building to a location in better repair near her home.

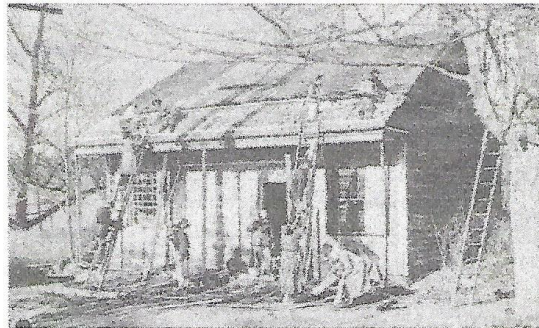
The move created quite a stir; newspapers around the country carried the story of the Ralston campaign to save the historic post office. Despite a valiant effort by the local citizenry to fix the building, the post office did not return to the general store. Some time later even the new location was abandoned, and Ralston lost its fourth class post office altogether.

But out of this unsuccessful effort by the local residents, who appreciated the history of the General Store and the role it played in the history of Mendham, the Ralston Historical Association was born. The building is now run as a museum by the association.



Municipal enterprise.

John H. N. Potter and Mary Langford pass shingles up to Mrs. Margaretta Potter (left) and Mrs. Florence C. Page, who fix new roof. Residents have organized Ralston Historical Association to restore the post office as a landmark.



A shingle bee.

To save face and their town's claim to fame, residents of Ralston, N.J. pitch in to recondition the dilapidated post office — one of the nation's oldest. Crisis was precipitated when Mrs. Catherine Groenewegen, postmaster, moved office from the historic structure because she "well nigh froze to death in it."

Below is a reprint of an article that appeared over 60 years ago in Time magazine, and three pictures from the Sunday News, January 11, 1942, which captures the controversy, a moment in the history of the Ralston General Store.

Time, June 16, 1941 - New Jersey

Miserable Postmistress

Ralston, N.J., a sleepy rural village of 100 inhabitants near Morristown, likes to boast that its post-office building (built in 1776) is the oldest in the U. S. Nowadays the post office has eight box holders, only 17 other customers. Most Ralstonites get their mail at Mendham or Chester, each two miles away.

One day last June, Mrs. Catherine Groenewegen took over the job of Ralston's post mistress. In summer she made out all right. Then winter came. Mrs. Groenewegen donned her woollies, put on a coat and overshoes. An icy blast swept in through rifts in the ancient clapboard walls, and the floor was none too solid. Mrs. Groenewegen installed an oil stove with three burners, to help the old potbelly stove. Said she dourly: "The place is well ventilated."

When spring came, Mrs. Groenewegen wrote to the Post Office Department in Washington. On her own land just 233 yards away from the post office was a good, warm shack only 40 years old. Could she move the post office

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ELLA MOCKRIDGE—Teacher, Collector and Writer

The creation of a local museum can begin, based on the Post Office article on page 2 of this newsletter, almost by serendipity. In the case of the Ralston General Store, obtaining the building was truly a grass roots project requiring the work of many local residents. In particular, one area resident was very instrumental in providing the museum with its fine collection of local antiques. Her name was Ella Mockridge.

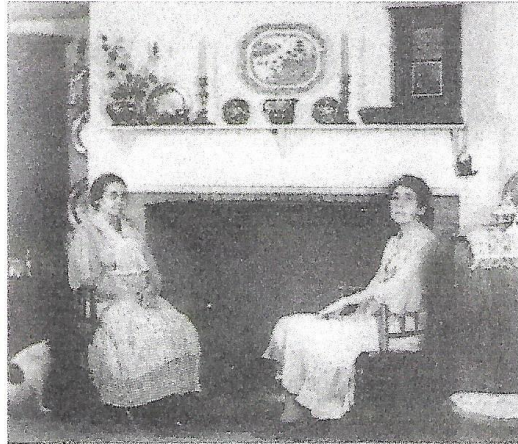
Ella was born in Pluckemin, NJ, in 1872 but was raised in Morningside Heights, NY. She was educated at Pratt Institute and taught art in the Newark School system for many years. She came to Mendham with her family in the summer of 1900 when they rented the Cramer house on Combs Hollow Road, currently the home of RHA President, Tracy Kinsel.

Ella fell in love with the

area and eventually made it her home when she purchased the Elias Babbitt house on Mountain Avenue across from the Mountain Valley Pond.

She began collecting antiques almost immediately, especially those from local families, and when not commuting back and forth to work, she liked to entertain her teacher friends in the small chicken coop with the stone foundation in her backyard which she called her "summer house."

Miss Mockridge started the Book and Thimble Club whose goal was to keep the Mendham Library going prior to the formation of an association that started in the early 1930s. Always civic minded, Ella proposed a new community club. When one was formed she was elected President. This club included both men and women and they met in town hall,



Ella Wilma Mockridge (right) in a 1920 picture taken with her mother, Margaret, and her fox terrier, Peggy, at Shagawam, her residence on Mountain Avenue, built by Elias Babbitt in 1796.

then the old Methodist church. It was this club that first proposed purchasing the Phoenix House for use as the borough's town hall. Before her death in 1964, Ella wrote

a book entitled "Our Mendham" and she also donated the bulk of her substantial antique collection to the Ralston Historical Association.



Shaping up.

Ralsonites check up on progress of reconstruction of the building's interior. Structure was built in 1776 as a general store. Fourth-class post office was established in 1892.

Lost Post Office *continued*

into that, before she froze to death? Back came a letter from Ambrose O'Connell, First Assistant Postmaster authorized to change the site...." Mrs. Groenewegen

Then George Jennings, a nurseryman, the biggest customer the Ralston post office has - he sends out some 300 letters and bills a month - heard what Mrs. Groenewegen was up to. On his office and the legend: "Oldest U.S. Post office

Building." Mr. Jennings was indignant. Said he: "This building ... is our only claim to fame. It means a lot, too, to stamp collectors who want the Ralston postmark in their albums." Mr. Jennings wrote to New Jersey's Senator W. Barbour, asking him to take a stand.

This week, Mrs. Groenewegen moved, stamp and stamper, into the new building. Ralston rose up, called a protest meeting, sent a petition to Postmaster General Walker, asking for a 90-day stay, promising to fix up the old premises. Mrs. Groenewegen, invited to the meeting, sent word she was "too busy."

Terry Family Donates Leddell Papers to RHA

The Ralston Historical Association would like to thank Peter and Trina Terry of Chatham for their kind donation of several items from the Leddell family. Peter Terry is the grandson of Edward Langford, who lived in the Ralston Manor house in the mid 1940s. He was an instrumental part of the effort to save the General Store after the post office vacated the building in 1941, and helped to form the Ralston Historical Association.

The Terry Family obtained the four Leddell items listed below from Mary Langford (Mary Langford is shown in the first picture included in the article, "From the Archives: How Ralston Lost its Post Office.")

- 1.) Psalms and Hymns Book Presbyterian Church – inset signed, *Maria Leddell, Newton New Jersey, Sept. 9th 1857*, publish date 1843.
- 2.) Receipts ticket book W. H. L. – blank receipts book for goods delivered by S. W. Leddell on the Morris & Essex Railroad, bags of oats, bags of feed, bags of meal, bags of flour, Morristown in 186_.
- 3.) Military Receipt – October 6th, 1804, two dollar fine paid by Dr. John Leddell to John Marter *Pay Master* for nonattendance on Military duty.
- 4.) Muster Orders – Sept. 15,

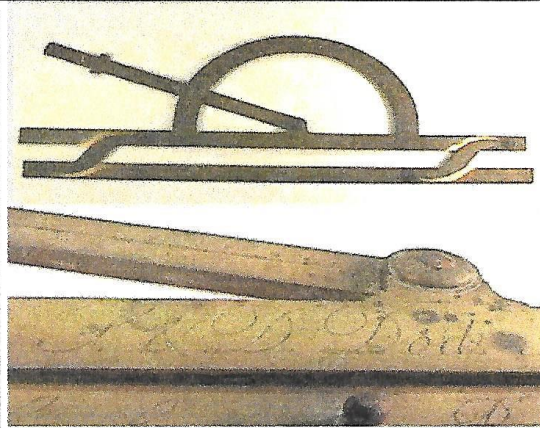
1812, orders for John W. Leddell to report to Wm McFarland Tavern, Hanover, signed John Squire Capt.

These items are an important link to Mendham's past. Some time after John Ralston's death in 1819, the manor house, mill, and General Store at the crossroads in Ralston, were acquired by the Leddell family.

Dr. J. W. Leddell was the son of Dr. William Leddell, a pioneer physician in Mendham. One of the donated items are orders for Dr. J. W. Leddell to muster during the war of 1812.

John W. Leddell you are hereby commanded to meet at Wm McFarlan's tavern in Hanover the 17 Sept at 9 oclock A. M. with musket knap sack and blanket: and three days provisions to march to Jersey camp. John Squire Capt. Sept 15 1812.

J. W. Leddell left his son S.W. Leddell the grist mill (Logan's mill) across from the General Store building. Beers atlas (1868) lists S.W. Leddell as owner of the grist mill in 1868. The receipt book donated by the Terry family was probably used by Leddell's mill business to record bags of oats, bags of feed, bags of meal, and bags of flour, transported to and from the mill out of Morristown on the Morris & Essex Railroad in the 1860s.



An early brass protractor and attached parallel rules made by S(Stephen) & D(aniel) Dod, Mendham, NJ for S.S. Beach, Circa 1780-1815.

Rare Dod Instrument Located \$4,500 Goal Set For Collections Fund

The Ralston General Store Museum contains many unique items made in Mendham, reminders of our industrial past. Two examples are an axe made at the Willet forge located off Roxiticus Road and a bottle of "Cherry Bounce," an applejack distilled in one of Mendham's seven distilleries.

The Ralston Historical Association has come across another item of local interest, a rare surveying instrument by S&D Dod of Mendham. The house where the Dod family lived is located on W. Main St. in the Borough, near West Field. It has a red Heritage Commission sign in the front.

The instrument is currently in private hands and RHA would like to purchase it and to place it in the museum for all to see. To this end, the Association has established a Collections Fund with the goal of collecting \$4500 over the next several years. If you would like to

help us reach this goal, please consider making a donation to the Collections Fund this year.

According to Munsell's 1882 history of Morris County, Daniel Dod was the son of Lebbeus Dod (1739-1816) of Mendham, who established an armory for the manufacture and repair of muskets after he had served as Captain of the artillery. Washington detached him from active duty to develop the armory. Prior to the war he had been well established as a maker of clocks and surveying instruments. He also worked as a surveyor. A tall clock in the Phoenix House was made by Dod.

Abner and Stephen Dod were brothers of Daniel Dod (1778-1823), a mathematical and mechanical genius who built steamboat machinery. He was killed in 1823 in an explosion of the steamboat *Patent* in NY's East River during a trial run. One of the Dod brothers was also a silver smith.

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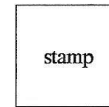
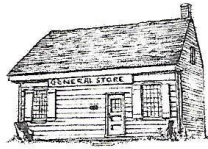
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313 Mendham Road—West
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Name: _____

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