

**Tour of
Historic Homes
in the
Ralston
Historic District
of Mendham
Township**



**Sunday
October 16, 2005
11am to 3pm**

**Presented by the
Ralston Historical Association**

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HISTORIC RALSTON

It is listed as Ralston on the state and national registers of historic places. To the farmers, millers and blacksmiths that settled the area in the early 1700s, it was known by its Native American name, Rocksiticus. But few people today can identify the whereabouts of this once flourishing crossroads village, or the significant role it played in the early days of an emerging nation.

The colonial history of the area dates to 1707 when Englishman John Brain built a small cabin at the intersection of what is now Roxiticus Road and Route 24. The land was rich in natural resources and could not help but attract colonists looking to profit from the generous supplies of fresh water, woodland and fertile soil. The clearing of trees and the building of homes brought the people of the community together. The area was one that thrived on agricultural development.

The north branch of the Raritan River and other tributaries powered the mills that quickly spread throughout the region. Among the first was a grist-mill built by Edmund Martin in 1742. During the Revolutionary War, the mill was operated by John Logan and in 1786, it was purchased by Philadelphia businessman, John Ralston. Ralston encouraged the establishment of other business ventures throughout the area and his personal estate grew to thousands of acres. His influence was so strong that the area later became known as Ralston.

Ralston today is the product of over 250 years of history. The homes on this house tour span the full range of that history. While little remains of the way of life that once made Ralston a vital crossroads of the community, these buildings survive to serve as reminders of Mendham's earlier days.

SITES ON THE 2005 HOUSE TOUR:

- 0 Ralston General Store
- 1 Nesbitt House
- 2 Sears Roebuck House
- 3 Bank House
- 4 Ralston Manor House
- 5 Mill Workers' House
- 6 Leddell House
- 7 The Ralston Grist Mill House
- 8 Pine Hill



Please note the following guidelines:

Please remember that you will be visiting private homes. In order to make this an enjoyable experience for everyone, please show consideration of the following guidelines.

- * Smoking is not permitted on the tour.
- * No food or drink is permitted on the tour.
- * Please do not touch items in the homes.
- * No photography inside private homes without prior permission from the homeowner.
- * Children under 16 must be accompanied at all times by an adult.
- * No strollers inside any homes.
- * No usage of the bathrooms inside the private homes. Please use the facilities at the Ralston firehouse.
- * Please be careful of high-heeled and hard-soled shoes on the bare floors and stairs.
- * In the event of rain, we ask that you exercise special care in the removal of water from shoes, clothing and umbrellas.

Kindly show your brochure to a docent when you begin the tour of any home.



0. GENERAL STORE

313 Mendham Road West

Owned and operated by the Ralston Historical Association

Built in the 1780s by John Ralston, this building was used as a mill office and general store. John Ralston and his partner, Hugh Nesbitt carried on an extensive business between Ralston, New York and Augusta, Georgia. Bills of lading and receipts show that some of the items shipped by schooner to Savannah were iron, peach brandy, animal pelts and bars of German steel in exchange for items from the South like indigo, molasses, tobacco, cotton and rum.

The General Store was an important feature of the community supplying the necessities of life from shovels to silk handkerchiefs. Food items included lard, salt, tea and spices. The barter system was utilized as money was in short supply after the Revolutionary War. Ralston's Day Books show that many accounts were paid for in wood ashes. Ashes were important in the production of soap, a needed commodity for Ralston's fulling mill. One entry shows that an account to Dr. Mulford for twenty-two pounds sterling was settled by bartering a Negro boy named Brink.

In 1893, the store became the Ralston Post Office and it remained so until 1941 when the postmistress requested a change of venue as she was "freezing to death" in the old building. The General Store is the oldest building still standing in the USA to ever have housed a post office.

When the location closed, local residents purchased the property and refurbished it. Forming the Ralston Historical Association, they collected local artifacts, tools and documents. In 1964, it opened as the General Store Museum. It continues to operate as a museum today and is open every Sunday and holidays from June to October.



1. NESBITT HOUSE

330 Mendham Road West

Owners: Matthew and Teresa Finlay

In 1813, John Ralston bought the Wills Plantation, which adjoined his property along the North branch of the Raritan River. He paid \$14,000 for this 469 acres. Sometime afterward, the small southern-facing, wood shingled farmhouse became home to Ralston's daughter, Mary Ann and her husband Hugh Nesbitt. This Nesbitt was a nephew to Ralston's business partner with the same name. The couple had two daughters and a son. Their son, John Ralston Nesbitt built and operated a gristmill which later became the Cider Mill which you can tour today.

The Nesbitt farmhouse was substantially enlarged in the mid-19th century with the addition of the Georgian center hall that now represents the main part of the house. The rear of the house was dressed with a two story Greek Revival portico similar to that of the Phoenix House. Original features include the fireplace located in the kitchen/keeping room; wide plank floors; 6 over 6 divided windows; staircase balusters and railing and plaster walls and ceilings. Visitors should not miss the original mill stone embedded in the patio outside the back door and the dining room furniture that belonged to General Luke William Finlay, the owner's grandfather.

Of special note is the adjacent barn. Built in the 1790s, it is an excellent example of stone and bank construction. The barn is one of the few original barns left in the area.

Originally the driveway went only to the barn and one walked 50 ft. to the house. The present owners created a new driveway when they moved there in 1998, since Mrs. Finlay found herself "having to lug wheelbarrows full of groceries back and forth with an 18-month old and being nine months pregnant myself." At the time, the central staircase was tilted at a crazy pitch and many of the walls and ceiling had holes from extensive water leaks. "In other words, we were crazy! We really wanted something special and we got it," said Mrs. Finlay.



2. SEARS ROEBUCK HOUSE

314 Mendham Road West

Owners: Georges de Pompignan and Nancy Rodrigues

In every corner of our country there are homes from bungalows to mansions that share the same humble beginnings. These homes came in the mail after being ordered from the Sears Roebuck catalogue. From 1908 until 1940, Sears offered their subscribers 370 models to choose from. After the model was ordered, it arrived in about 30,000 pieces including roofing, siding, flooring, windows, doors, paint and a 75 page instruction book. Sears Roebuck promised that a man of average abilities could build one of their homes in 90 days.

This particular home is the “Del Rey” model offered from 1921 through 1926. The original owner, Mr. Engle, a banker from New York City, had it assembled in 1926 on site. The “Del Rey” is described as a California bungalow that was admired by travelers from all parts of the world. Among its unique features noted in the catalogue was the wide overhanging roof that protected windows and doors from the weather. The price was quoted as \$1,978 to \$2,557. A detached garage behind the house, the “Avenue” was also available from Sears at a cost of \$173.

The present home has changed little from the original. The materials and design are as originally conceived by Sears, with the exception of the central air conditioning. A large sugar maple tree opposite the house was planted by the first owner in 1926 and named for his daughter, Muriel. A similar tree planted for his son, Philip is no longer there.

It was love at first sight for the present owners. They offered full asking price and a mortgage commitment the very day of their initial visit. The beautiful lot with a path running to a stream at the back of the property adds to the charm of this unique structure. Enjoying the home for the past four years, the owners are considering building an addition on to the back of the house that would be designed to perfectly integrate the architectural components of the original plan.



3. BANK HOUSE

45 Ironia Road

Owners: Tony and Jane Wahl

Many homes and barns in this region of New Jersey and Pennsylvania used the rolling hills and were built right into their very banks. First built by the German settlers, these structures were built into the side of a hill and gave entrance on two levels.

Speculation abounds as to the origin of this Bank House. The owners were told it was used for grain storage for the local mill (probably John Logan’s). Another source cited that it was part of the outbuildings for the original Presbyterian Church situated above on the top of Ralston hill. It is known that a horticulturist, Leonard H. Colville owned the home in the 1960s and developed the ponds and plant life around them.

This is the third old home owned by the present owners. The age of each of their homes has progressed further into history as their first was a Victorian, the next was built in the 1760s and their current home dates to 1730.

Needless to say, the owners enjoy the restoration process. Since purchasing the house in 1998, they have removed sheet rock walls to expose original stonework, updated bathrooms and installed tile flooring. The coal bin was converted to a wine cellar and features an historic door and beams.

Please note the beehive oven in the living room fireplace, the original ceiling beams and stone walls as you tour the interior. As you stand in the driveway facing the massive west wall you can make out the diagonal stone line that marks a possible addition. At the front door there is a mill stone possibly from the Ralston mill.



4. RALSTON MANOR

10A Roxiticus Road

Owners: Ralph and Pat Rhodes

Ralston Manor was built in 1781 for John Ralston and his wife, Margaret. John Ralston was a wealthy businessman and landowner. The land was purchased from his father-in-law, John Logan along with the adjacent stone mill. After Ralston's death, the house was purchased by John Wick Ledell in 1833. It remained in the Ledell family until the 1950s.

Following their love of old houses, the present owners purchased this home in 1977. They were delighted to find so many original features still present with few structural changes. Their changes have been largely replacement in kind of the originals: roof, siding, porch, chimneys and windows.

Ralston Manor is a federal style house of post and beam construction. The framework (visible in the attic) consists of heavy beams pinned together with oak pins. It is built on a center hall plan. The gambrel roof, double-end chimneys and large windows are characteristic of the Federal style architecture of the 18th and 19th centuries.

As you visit the Ralston area's first mansion, the owners invite you to take notice of the following features. The plaster molding in the front rooms is identical to that of the Ford Mansion in Morristown. The oversized doors are still adorned with their original hardware. There is a fireplace in every room with plain (but different) designs. In the living room hangs a portrait of John Byram, owner of a Brookside textile mill. Byram's grandfather, Ebenezer Byram was a founding father of Mendham. Notice the Phi Beta Kappa key. Perhaps one of the most unique features of this home is the slave quarters in the attic. These were partially dismantled in the 1940s and the wood was sold to the National Park Service for use in the reconstruction of the Wick house in Jockey Hollow.



5. MILL WORKERS' HOUSE

16 Roxiticus Road

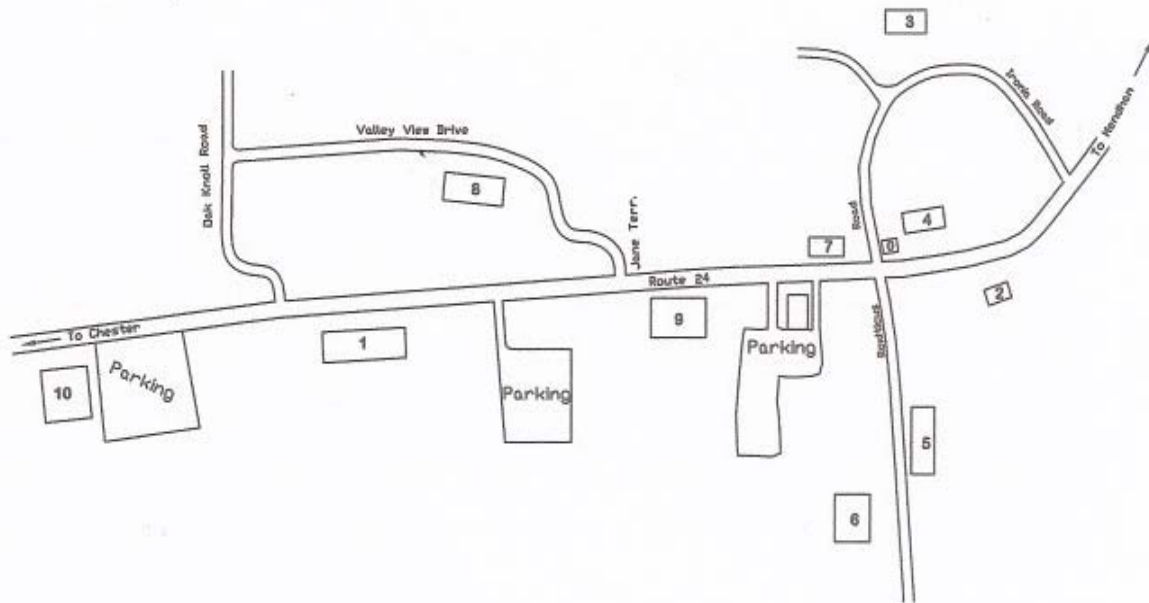
Owners: Ben and Valerie Horowitz

Sawmills, gristmills, textile mills, iron and even copper and mica mills were an integral part of the economy of Ralston. This home, appearing on maps in 1867, 1868 and 1887, is believed to have served as a tenant house for the workers in Samuel Leddell's mill. It is interesting to speculate on the number of people who lived in the house when it was a tenant house, and how they lived. The house was built in 1760 according to county tax records, and is thought to have been part of a large tract of land bought by Leddell from Jacob Tiger for \$1,800 on December 4, 1860. The present owners are in the process of doing additional research into the home's history.

The house exhibits the Georgian architecture of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The first floor showcases original ceilings with hand-hewn beams and wide plank floors. The fieldstone foundation, first floor fireplace and two basement hearths (please note photo display) date back to the home's inception. The house has most of the original doors and hardware, and low sloping ceilings in many rooms. Of later historical interest are the bargello chairs and needlepoint chair pads on the chippendale dining room chairs that were sewn by the owner's grandmother, Mathilda Brailove, while on airplane flights during humanitarian missions to Israel during the 1960s.

The present owners were attracted to the historic appearance and natural setting of the house when they purchased it in August 2004. Since then they have installed new windows throughout, painted the exterior and added shutters. Structural and safety improvements were made such as the installation of steel beams in the first floor ceilings to support the floor above. The Horowitzes plan to build a wood mantle over the fireplace and put in brick walkways and a brick patio in the coming year.

Ralston Historic House Tour



0. Ralston General Store Museum
1. Nesbitt House
2. Sears Roebuck House
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6. Leddell House
7. Ralston Grist Mill House
8. Pine Hill
9. Ralston Fire House - LUNCH AVAILABLE
10. Ralston Cider Mill - FREE TOUR



6. LEDDELL HOUSE

13 Roxiticus Road

Owners: Haywood B. Huntley, Jr. and Beirne Donaldson

This home was designed by the architect and master builder, Aaron Hudson. He was born in Mendham in 1801 and died here in 1888. During his career, 1830s to 1870s, he designed many local buildings including the Phoenix House.

In 1841, Dr. John Wick Leddell commissioned Hudson to design and build this home on Roxiticus Road. Leddell was living in the Ralston Manor house at the time. The new home was to be a wedding gift to Leddell's son, Samuel and his new bride.

A twin of this house is the Nicholas House located on New Street in Mendham Borough. Both homes feature upstairs eyebrow windows and low sloping ceilings. It is thought that the inspiration for these two homes were the villas of France. Both homes are square in shape, capped with shallow pyramidal roofs. An above ground basement is another characteristic of this architect's style.

The Leddell House has all original windows, floors, moldings, plaster walls and ceilings (except kitchen). What is now the dining room was the original kitchen. The original fireplace was restored after the removal of a heat-o-lator. Remains of the baking ovens with beehive back are still intact. This house was originally built for coal stoves. Heat was available in both parlors and the bedrooms above. The main hall and third bedroom upstairs had no heat. Convection carried heat up the stairs and throughout the house.

The homeowners have a letter from the young bride to her father explaining that rain had slowed the masonry work on their new home so they were not able to occupy it on time. The letter has always been with the house.

In the words of the homeowners, buying the house was easy, it was love at first sight. It has been a labor of love for 22 years.



7. THE RALSTON GRIST MILL

7 Roxiticus Road

Owner: Craig J. Leach

The Ralston Mill was operating as a grist mill and saw mill as early as 1742. It belonged to John Logan who was a commissary to the Continental troops at Jockey Hollow. The mill ground flour to help feed the soldiers during the winters of 1779 and 1780. History tells us that Logan either was paid in worthless Continental money or not paid at all, leading to his subsequent bankruptcy. The mill and adjoining property was purchased at a sheriff's sale by John Ralston, an enterprising merchant from Pennsylvania. It remained a working mill until 1900.

The mill was transformed into a residence in the early 1940s by a progressive thinking businessman, F. LeMoyné Page. The early industrial structure was gutted and carefully crafted into a well-proportioned living space. The creative design strikes a perfect balance between history, old world charm and modern conveniences. The original A frame roof line and thick stone walls are still intact. Several of the original mill stones serve as ornamental features: in the center of the circular driveway, as well as the front and back door steps, and as a garden step descending from the upper to lower lawn. Some of the original spokes of the mill wheel have been transformed into staircase handrails and newel posts. Hand hewn exposed beams support the ceiling throughout the entire length of the mill. The beams show original markings and on one of the largest in the living room one can read the motivating inscription, "Flour is Cash."

Three years ago a lengthy house search abruptly ended after an initial walk through the mill and grounds. The historical charm, structural integrity and innovative design were irresistible to the owner. Drawing inspiration from the simplicity of the interior room plan, the mill has been decorated using original mill artifacts, vintage furniture from the 1940s and a mix of modern and antique furnishing including the grandfather clock on the lower staircase landing.



8. PINE HILL

12 Valley View Drive

Owner: Russell C. Buchanan

In 1713, the West Jersey Proprietors granted their clerk, John Wills, 862 acres west of India Brook and north of the Raritan River. With this grant, Wills became the first recorded landowner in the region. Although he never lived on his land, his son, James built the area's first home here in 1724.

It was a small and unremarkable house for its time but in 1740 it was to undergo its first of many renovations. The Wills family were Quakers and their addition followed the plan of their leader, William Penn. He declared that every house should have one large room and two smaller ones (probably to accommodate church gatherings). Through the years, this home has witnessed many changes. Among them the removal of a cellar that was rumored to house the ghost of a murdered slave. In 1958, the house was moved back 1,800 ft. from Route 24 to a hill surrounded by pine trees. At this time, wings were added to each end and new chimneys were built.

Pine Hill has provided shelter for activities outside those of daily family living. At the turn of the 20th century, a lady spiritualist held seances in a small rear room. Still later, when the property was known as Knox Farm, it operated as an American Legion convalescent home for World War I soldiers.

Acquired in 1966 by the present owner, Pine Hill's ten acres include the house, paddock, ponds and recreational areas for outdoor sports such as golf.

A small, private cemetery, the Wills cemetery, lies southwest of the house. It is one of the oldest surviving family cemeteries in the region with graves dated 1798 to 1817.

Acknowledgements

House Tour Committee

Paula Duer, co-chairperson

Margaret Hogan, co-chairperson

Valerie Horowitz

Pat Rhodes

The Ralston Historical Association would like to thank the following homeowners who made this tour possible:

Russell C. Buchanan

Wood Huntley and Beirne Donaldson

Matthew and Teresa Finlay

Ben and Valerie Horowitz

Craig J. Leach

Georges de Pompignan and Nancy Rodrigues

Ralph and Pat Rhodes

Tony and Jane Wahl

Research Sources

Legacy through the Lens by Janet W. Foster. Mendham: Mendham Free Public Library, 1986.

The Mendhams by Martha G. Hopler, Edward W. Roessler and Wallace G. West. Mendham: Published by the Mayor's Tercentenary Committee, 1964.

The Ralston Historical Association is a non-profit organization that was formed in 1941 to acquire, maintain and exhibit objects and buildings of historic interest located in the Ralston section of Mendham Township, New Jersey; particularly the General Store. Proceeds from this tour will help support our mission to preserve and interpret the history of the Ralston area.

The Ralston General Store is located at the intersection of 313 Mendham Road West (Route 24) and Roxiticus Road in Mendham Township. The museum is open June through October on Sundays and holidays from 2 to 5 p.m. Call 973-543-6878 for group tours or send an email to pfr14@aol.com.

Please visit the Association's website: www.ralstonmuseum.org.



Ralston Historical Association
Established in 1941

Ralston Historical Association

313 Mendham Road West
Mendham, NJ 07945

President – Jeff Purcell

Vice President – Tracy Kinsel

Recording Secretary – Wilma Sagurton

Corresponding Secretary – Rose Carlin

Treasurer – Judy Craig

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Proceeds from the House Tour will help support the Ralston Historical Association's mission to preserve and interpret the history of the area for current and future generations.