
◆ THE GENERAL STORE ◆

NEWSLETTER OF THE RALSTON HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

SPRING 1996

ANNUAL MEETING TO BE HELD AT GARABRANT CENTER

The annual meeting of the Ralston Historical Association will be held at the Garabrant Center on Wilson Street in Mendham Boro. The meeting is scheduled to begin at 1 pm on Saturday, April 27, 1996.

This year the Association has asked the members of the Morris County Historical Association to join them for a presentation by Ernie Maw who will give a slide show of the early industrial sites in Mendham. Mr. Maw is currently Chairman of the Historic Preservation Committee in Mendham Township.

After the meeting, all are invited to the General Store Museum on the corner of Route 24 West and Roxiticus Road where Wilma Sagurton will have a special display of antiques and their current counterparts titled Then and Now.

NOMINATION OF TRUSTEES

At the annual meeting the following have been nominated by the trustees to serve as officers for the 1996-97 season:

President - Pat Rhodes

Vice President - Marge Davidson

Treasurer - Jeff Purcell

Secretary - Wilma Sagurton.

Nominations for trustees include Pat Rhodes, Owen Carlin, Dolores Crammer and Tracy Kinsel. We have two trustee positions open - so if you'd like to get involved - let us know. The trustees attend monthly meetings, work as storekeepers and help keep the building running as a museum. Call Jeff Purcell at 201-543-7834 for more details.

STREET TALK

Ever wonder how the streets in Mendham got their names? Town Historian and Association Secretary, Wilma Sagurton has the following to say. "Cold Hill Road should really be called Cole Hill Road as it was originally named for the family who lived in the big white house at the top of the hill. At some point the name "Cold" overtook "Cole" and people have been calling it that ever since." The same thing probably happened to India Brook Road. "Old maps of the area list it as Indian Brook" according to Sagurton who pointed out that the same thing almost happened to Kennaday Road. Kennaday Road turned into Kennedy Road. Historians located the original family in California and insisted that the name be changed back to its proper spelling.

MENDHAM TO HAVE ITS OWN WOVEN THROW

A 100% woven cotton throw depicting historical sites in the Mendhams should be available this October. Carol Esch, from Chester Furnishings, says she is working on her final selection of which sites will be included. "There will be the Black Horse Inn, the Phoenix

House, and the General Store, along with sites in Brookside," said Carol, who also stated that "the throw will be available in blue, cranberry and hunter green." The cost of the throw is estimated to be \$45.50, of which five percent will be donated to the Ralston Historical Association. A

similar throw was woven for Chester and over \$1,000.00 was donated to their Association. Chester Furnishings is located at 60 E. Main Street in Chester. Buying a throw is a great way to support a local business and your town's historical association.

TUNNEL VISION

OR

THOUGHTS ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN MORRIS COUNTY

by Frances D. Pingeon

Historians hesitate to accept rumor as the basis for historical events often unaware that rumor itself is a part of history. In fact, rumor, legend and folklore add an important dimension to the interpretation of the experiences we are trying to understand.

Consider the Underground Railroad in Morris County. One of the County's most popular causes from the 1830s to the Civil War, the Railroad helped slaves to escape from the South to freedom in Canada. Because it was illegal, especially after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, it was carried on in the deepest secrecy and documentation of *conductors* and *agents* on the railroad are hard to come by. As elsewhere, the rumors of real underground tunnels used for slave smuggling are rampant. Many Morris County residents came to believe that the railroad, or parts of it, ran underground.

Take the Boisaubin house in Chatham Township for example. Built by Vincent Boisaubin, a Frenchman, circa 1800, it is known to have a brick lined tunnel that ran from a hollow column in the house to a barn (now destroyed) across the street. Alan McAlpin who lived in the house as a boy and explored the tunnel many times, never questioned the stories he heard from his family that it was used as an escape route for slaves. In *Tours of Historic Morris County*, published in 1977, one historian described it as a unique stop on the Underground where slaves "when their safety was threatened went through the tunnel and up the hollow column to hide in the mansion attic". In 1966 the State of New Jersey placed a marker in front of the mansion calling it a stop on the Underground Railroad.



The David Thompson house on W. Main St. (Rt 24) in Mendham.

There are some who did not accept this story. In the November 23, 1953 issue of the *Morristown Daily Record*, a staff writer maintained that Vincent Boisaubin had good reason to fear for his life. According to this article, the French Revolution had given rise

to a parallel war in New Jersey and Boisaubin built the tunnel as a place to hide from his enemies (real or imagined).

When the 18th century King house on Hilltop Road in Mendham was in the process of renovation, vestiges of an underground tunnel were discovered and linked by Mendham residents to the Railroad. It is said that this tunnel led to the David Thompson store house on West Main Street (Route 24) which was also rumored to be part of the Railroad.

A headline in the Madison Eagle on March 24, 1988 announced that the historic Wisteria house (now torn down) was connected to slave smuggling. A construction firm hired by the Borough of Madison to investigate repairs to the house discovered an underground chamber "too small to be a wine or root cellar." The caretaker of the house, according to the report, believed that the chamber may have been an entrance to a tunnel used to smuggle slaves.

Grace Church, built in Madison in 1854 by Francis Stevens Lathrop and Arthur M. Treadwell who lived at one time in the Boisaubin house, was rumored to possess an underground system of tunnels used to help escaping slaves. The Madison area was the home of many leading anti-slavery people, which adds color to the myth.

The 18th century Luke Miller house, also in Madison, was connected by an underground tunnel to a small brick structure buried in the hillside to the left of the house. This tunnel has been called an Indian escape tunnel or a passage for escaping slaves. Madison historian, Barbara S. Parker, believed it more likely that it was used by Luke Miller, a blacksmith "to commute to work without risk of bad weather."

Underground tunnels have been found in many parts of the country beyond Morris County. The reason for them still remains a mystery, although it is unlikely that they were built for the Underground Railroad. According to the memoirs of Charles Hopkins, Civil War veteran and resident of Boonton, slaves traveled overland in covered carriages after dark so as not to be caught by greedy sheriffs who wanted to cash in on the bonuses they would receive if they were captured. Hopkins was an agent on the Railroad at age 14 to age 20 and carried many slaves to and from Boonton to stations in Newfoundland, Charlottesville and Stockholm. The descriptions of his hair-raising journeys have been published in *Boonton, The Gem of the Mountain*, published in 1910.

Fascination with the lore and ideals of the Underground was so intense that few people stopped to analyze the work and expense involved in digging such tunnels when slaves could be hidden during the day in houses and barns and carried by night in carriages or, as some historians believe, in barges on the Morris Canal. The romance, mystery and heroism involved in the cause transformed tunnels into escape routes for slaves. And so the tunnel myth was integrated into the history of the Underground Railroad.

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Check the appropriate Membership:

REGULAR MEMBERSHIP \$ 10.00 per year
 PATRON MEMBERSHIP \$ 20.00 per year
 LIFE MEMBERSHIP \$100.00 one time

BUILDING FUND A BIG SUCCESS

Thanks to you, the Association members, this year's building fund collected over \$500 towards much needed repairs on the building's east side. We are hoping to get the rough sawn oak clapboards donated by a family who is building a home in the area. Thanks again to all of those who contributed to the fund!

Building Fund Donation for 1996 _____

Name: _____

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If you would be interested in working at the General Store on a Sunday, check here _____
Please give us your phone number _____ and the best time to reach you. _____

Please make your check payable to: Ralston Historical Association
P O. Box 301
Mendham, NJ 07945