
◇ The General Store ◇

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NEWSLETTER OF THE RALSTON HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Spring 2014

~ *Special 50 Year Commemorative Issue* ~

How Ralston Lost Its Post Office – And Gained A Museum

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 1931 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 just down the street on Roxiticus Rd.

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

FACE LIFTING A LA CIVIC PRIDE



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."

general store. Some time later even the new location was abandoned, and Ralston lost its fourth class post office altogether.

But out of the 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.

Below is a reprint of an article that appeared over 70 years ago in Time magazine. The three photos are 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 vil-

Continued on Page 3

The President's Message

History has surely come alive for one Connecticut Yankee uprooted to Mendham, New Jersey, over 40 years ago, and I hope that it will soon come alive for you as well.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Ralston General Store/U.S. Post Office Museum. The members of the Ralston Historical Association have been very busy preparing for the "reopening" or rededication of the Museum on June 15, 2014 at 2:00 P.M.

In preparation for this exciting event, a slide show presentation and an announcement of a stamp designing contest were made at each of the Township's schools. Excitement permeated the air as the students heard about their own town's history dating back to the 18th century, highlighting the



General Store in Ralston and the opening of the General Store Museum. Of particular interest was the fact that this building at one time housed a U.S. Post Office and is today the oldest building still existing to have served this purpose.

Submitted for consideration in the contest were 62 beautifully designed stamps from students in grades K-8, some of which are displayed in this newsletter. Designs were divided into grade level categories, and selections made from each of these categories to receive



Shaping up – Ralstonites check up on progress of reconstruction of the building's interior. The structure was built in 1776 as a general store. Fourth-class post office was established in 1892. *Sunday Evening News January 11, 1942.*

awards that will be presented at the rededication ceremony on June 15th. A quilted wall hanging bearing the winning designs will be unveiled at this time.

History will be repeating itself when we rededicate the General Store in Ralston with special guests in attendance, music, presentation of colors, and refreshments for all. We learned from a 1964 article in the Observer Tribune that there was no penny candy for the young public attending the opening of the Museum. This spring we are restoring the penny candy jars found in storage in order to bring back the true feeling of including something for everyone at the store.

The Ralston Historical Association is also presently engaged in planning a fall event in celebration of the 50th Anniversary. On the docket is a house tour. Please visit our website: ralstonmuseum.org for further details and updated information. Remember, it takes many hands and volunteer hours to bring history alive for all generations. I look forward to meeting you at these special events and encourage all to consider member-

50th Anniversary

MARK THE DATE ON YOUR CALENDAR!

June 15, 2014

2:00 P.M.

**Ralston General Store
Museum**

The Annual Meeting of the Ralston Historical Association will be held at 1 PM on June 15, 2014 at the General Store Museum, 313 Mendham Road West (Rt. 24) at the

RALSTON HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION 2013-2014

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Ralston Historical Association
313 Mendham Road – West
Mendham, NJ 07945



Ralston Historical Association
Established in 1941

President – AnneMarie Hornyak
Vice President – Greg Duer
Secretary – Kris Lamb
Treasurer – Pat Rhodes

Trustees
Janice Backer
Judy Craig
Paula Duer
Margaret Hogan
Tracy Kinsel
Jeff Purcell

RHA Annual Meeting – Sunday, June 15, 2014
1 PM at the Ralston General Store
Visit our website: www.ralstonmuseum.org

2014-2015 Membership Renewal Form

Please indicate your membership information

New Member _____ Renewal _____ Corporate /Matching Gift _____

John Ralston Society (\$1,000.00 one time)

Life Member (\$250.00 one time)

Sustaining Member (\$100.00 per year)

Family/Institution Member (\$40.00 per year)

Individual Member (\$25.00 per year)

Senior citizen (\$15.00 per year)

Building/Collections Fund \$ _____

Name _____

Mailing Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Email _____

The Ralston Historical Association is always looking for volunteers to help in a variety of ways. If interested, please include your name and phone number below or send an email to: rjp543@verizon.net

Name: _____

Phone: _____

RHA is a 501(C)3 organization. Please make your tax deductible check payable to:

Ralston Historical Association
313 Mendham Road – West
Mendham, NJ 07945

Old Ralston Store to Reopen

The following article appeared in the newspaper regarding the opening of the Ralston General Store Museum on June 8, 1964.

By JIM STAPLES
Staff Correspondent

RALSTON – John Ralston ventured northward from his native Philadelphia and opened a general store beside Roxiticus Creek here in 1786.

If he came back for its grand opening Saturday, at 2 p.m. Ralston would probably recognize most if its contents, especially his old ledgers.

The fourth of July ceremony, high point of Mendham Township's Tercentenary year observance, represents more than a year of intensive work by members of the Ralston Historical Association

With a new coat of paint, its basement restored, bees removed from the attic and shelves once more displaying goods like Ralston sold, the store will hence forth be open Saturdays and Sundays from 2 to 5 p.m. and other times by appointment.

Nothing for Sale

Nothing will be for sale, but visitors will leave the tiny general store with new insight into the rich history of Morris County.

In addition to being a pioneer general store, the little building on Route 24 for many years was the oldest structure in the United States to house a post office.

"Many persons donated or loaned tools or merchandise from the John Ralston Period," said Miss Marion Wyson, historical associa-



tion trustee and exhibit chairman. "One of the prize exhibits is John Ralston's ledger for the first years of the 19th century."

In addition to items like a harness, nails, hammers and spinning wheels, the store contains many unique exhibits ranging from a pig stretcher, bed winch and peel to a flail; and hetchel.

A pig stretcher is a piece of wood used to stretch the carcass of a slaughtered pig — a bed winch, a device for tightening a rope bed mattress support — a peel, a wooden scoop for removing bread from an oven — a flail is for beating flax for linen-making, and a hetchel, a flock of wood from which spikes protrude, used for carding flax.

13-Star Flag

The ceremony will begin with presentation of a 13-star American flag to the historical association by a color guard from Schiff Scout Reservation, national Boy Scout training center here.

Members of the group, from each of the 13 original colonies will also present six historic flags dating to the days of Queen Anne.

The guest of honor will be Miss Ella Mockridge, 91, of Mountain Avenue, Mendham who will arrive

in a 1922 Rolls Royce driven by its owner, Lester Freeman of Mendham. She loaned much of the historical material on display in the store.

Hugh Nesbitt of Gladstone Road, and his brother, Justus of Mendham, will symbolically open the doors. Their great grandfather, Hugh Nesbitt, was John Ralston's partner. The original Nesbitt married Ralston's daughter. Thus he founded the family which still lives nearby.

Hugh W. Adams, who lives next door to the store, will be master of ceremonies. President of the historical association, he and his wife, occupy a grist mill which operated prior to the year Ralston opened the store.

Also on hand will be Mendham Township Mayor Percy Jones, local and county officials.

Should Ralston return, he would see his fine, delicately balanced flintlock rifle hanging on the wall where it was placed last week by Ralston's great-great grandson, Hugh Nesbitt.

The gun was made in Lancaster, Pa, between 1750 and 1780," Nesbitt said. "It's stock is curly maple.



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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 landmark. Sunday Evening January 11, 1942

lage 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 woolies, put on a coat and over-shoes. 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 potbellied 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 into that, before she froze to death? Back came a letter from Ambrose O'Connell, first Assistant Postmaster General: "You are hereby authorized to change the site...." Mrs. Groenewegen made ready to move.

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 mail is a picture of the post 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 the albums." Mr. Jennings wrote to New Jersey 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

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