



THE BERNARDS INN  
EST. 1907

## THE HISTORY OF THE BERNARDS INN

The Bernards Inn, like so many other landmark properties, has a long and storied history. Not all of the details are known about its many owners and. What is renovations known, however, has been culled from newspaper and magazine articles published at the time.

The Inn was first opened in 1907 by brothers Fred E. and Frank A. Ballentine of Church Street in Bernardsville. The building's construction, which began in 1905, used stone from an old stable that stood on Main Street (now Mine Brook Road) in the center of Bernardsville before being torn down that same year. Some of the other architectural details included in the building's construction were the mirrors, mantels, and hand carved columns and the lobby staircase posts, railings and balusters from the original Hotel Plaza in New York City. The lobby staircase still exists today. Likewise, the stone foundation can be seen in the Wine Cellar on the lower level. After running the Inn for a short time, the Ballentine brothers sold it to Mr. W.H. Parke, a gentleman with great experience in the hotel business. During his distinguished hospitality career Mr. Parke was the assistant manager of the Waldorf-Astoria for two years.



1907 - The Bernards Inn.  
Built in 1907  
from the stone  
of an old stable  
on Main Street.

In 1912, the Inn was the first venue in town to advertise for moving pictures and illustrated songs which were presented in the auditorium. Also in its early days the Inn was home to some famous motion picture stars, including Mary Pickford and Norma and Constance Talmadge who were shooting scenes in the area. In 1915, a group of 35 motion picture actors stayed at the Inn for six weeks.

Following Mr. Parke, the Inn was owned and operated as a hotel and restaurant by Mary Koester of New York until 1920. Not long after the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment to the U.S. Constitution went into effect in January 1920, which banned the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages, business dropped off dramatically. Mrs. Koester gave up the business and the property fell into the hands of the Commercial Trust Company of New York. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment was repealed in 1933, at least four illegal bars, known as "speakeasies," operated in Bernardsville. One of

those speakeasies was The Bernards Inn. The Inn was known to have been raided on more than one occasion by the local police.

In February 1922, Fred Ballentine purchased the Inn from Commercial Trust for a price that was believed to be under \$25,000. At the time, the Inn consisted of a lobby, dining room, bar, kitchen, store room, laundry, private meeting room, a large auditorium, several stores and a post office on the main floor and 38 fully furnished bedrooms on the upper floor. The lower level included a bowling alley and pool and billiard rooms. The Inn had been closed since Mary Koester gave up ownership with the building remaining idle until Mr. Ballentine bought back the property.



1920 - The Bernards Inn. As purchased by Fred Ballentine for \$25,000.

Following repairs to the interior and exterior, Mr. Ballentine reopened the hotel for business on July 17, 1922. During the course of the renovations by Mr. Ballentine the bar room was turned into a store and the second floor hallway reopened for use. In addition, the dining room was reopened with Mr. and Mrs. Fred Hedden, of Hedden's restaurant, in charge. The Inn's 35 guest rooms, under the direction Mr. Ballentine, were reopened as well for permanent and transient guests.

In early November 1928, Benjamin Getzoff, a local businessman, purchased the Inn from owner Fred Stroehmer. It's not known when Mr. Stroehmer acquired the property or from whom it was bought. At the time of purchase, Mr. Getzoff, who had plans to renovate the property, had already received applications from firms wanting to open a dry goods store and a five and dime once the renovation was completed. The F.W. Woolworth Co. was one of the applicants. Mr. Getzoff proposed to transform the lower level of the building into four or five modern stores, one of which would be used for his own grocery and butcher business.

On March 31, 1930 one of the most dramatic changes to the Inn took place. It was around 10:25pm when it was reported that a fire had broken out at the Inn. The fire, which consumed about a third of the building at its north end, destroyed the Bernardsville Borough offices including the



1949 - The Bernards Inn. The Inn, post war years, brought back to life by the local Kenney family.

police headquarters, three stores (a tailor, haberdasher and shoe store), several private offices and the town jail which was then part of the building. Three local fire companies brought the fire under control by 3:30am stopping it at the brick wall which separated the offices and stores from the hotel. That same brick wall is the current exterior wall at the Inn's north end. The section of the building destroyed by the fire was never rebuilt.

The fire broke out again around 6:30a.m. according to Bernardsville police officer Clifford Amerman who had been on duty all night. It was speculated that Charles Pfenhauer of Bernardsville, who was being held in the detention room at police headquarters on charges of disorderly conduct in connection with some family difficulties and for violating the prohibition laws, caused the fire. Mr. Pfenhauer was charged with arson and held in custody with bail set at \$5,000. Losses were estimated at \$100,000 for the maps and other documents stored in the borough offices in addition to \$50,000 to \$75,000 for the building itself.

Around 1954 the Inn was again under new ownership. Eugene Kenney, a Canadian who had made a substantial fortune in oil as a senior executive at Esso (now ExxonMobil), became the Inn's latest owner raising its stature as one of the best known inns in northern New Jersey. Mr. Kenney's name regularly appeared in New York magazines and newspapers and he was also heard on Town Meeting of the Air, a popular radio program at the time.



1949 - Eugene and Helen Kenney in redbook magazine. The Kenney's found a new and better way of life for the family through ownership of their own small hotel.

In the early 1960s, the Inn was sold to a local couple named Kelly. The Kellys, as did many previous owners, made a number of changes to the interior décor of the building including renovating the bar, dining room and guest rooms.

In 1968, ownership of the Inn changed hands once more. Michael Roscoe, a model, actor and television pitchman of some note at the time, and his partner Charles Rathbun purchased "The Inn of Bernardsville." Mr. Roscoe, a former lifeguard who was tall, blond and tan, had done commercials for Colgate toothpaste and Salem cigarettes, and used his popularity



2007 - The Bernards Inn. 100 years later, still a stately presence in the elegant history of the Somerset Hills countryside.

and good looks to attract guests to the Inn. Mr. Rathbun brought over 35 years of experience in fine restaurants and cocktail lounges to the business. Together, the two men undertook another remodeling of the Inn restoring its appeal as a comfortable, cozy resting and meeting place. At the time the Inn had 37 guest rooms, a banquet hall, two kitchens and the rathskeller bar. According to a local newspaper article, Mr. Roscoe, who had been a resident of the area for more than three years said "I'm here to stay." The stay wasn't all that long. Mr. Rathbun took over when Mr. Roscoe sold his interest in the property shortly thereafter.

Newspaper reports are sketchy as to who changed the name, but in the early 1970s the Inn operated under a completely different identity as the "Widow Brown's Inn." In June 1972, Paul Klein along with his son Richard and associate Lou



1995 - The Bernards Inn. Under the ownership of the Alice and George Rochat, another Bernardsville family, the Inn maintained its four-star dining rating

Collins, became the latest owners of the establishment. One of their first priorities was renaming the property "The Bernards Inn." As had been done many times before, the new owners began an extensive renovation of the public rooms. The work suffered a severe setback, however, when tropical storm Doria flooded the bar and dining rooms on the lower level with the water rising as high as five feet. Much of the equipment on the lower level was ruined. With the Bernardsville Fire department and the hotel's guests aiding in the clean up efforts, the Inn was remarkably able to reopen after only six days.

A number of significant changes were made to the Inn during the Klein-Collins ownership. The old upstairs restaurant, where the Mountain Colony residents dined in plush surroundings, was renovated and opened as the Red Room. It was used for dining, meetings and other functions. The pride of the Inn was the Blue Room, the main downstairs dining room, which included a new bar and dance floor and had live entertainment on Friday and Saturday nights. There were 18 guest rooms on three floors including eight suites. A number of local industrial firms maintained year-round accommodations at the Inn. The restaurant kitchen replaced the old bowling alley and Benjamin Getzoff's meat market and grocery store became the site of Palumbo's Pharmacy.

It was around 1974 that the next change in ownership took place with Richard Buxton becoming the Inn's proprietor. During his tenure, Mr. Buxton renovated the upper and lower level dining rooms. The downstairs restaurant was renamed the "Ride 'N' Hunt Club" with a décor that fit the name—lots of horse prints, hunting horns and the like decorating the dark walls. Nightly piano and vocal entertainment provided a welcome diversion for guests of the club. The space on the main floor was reserved for banquets and private parties.

By November 1983 the Ride 'N' Hunt Club had become the "Catch Penny Pub." Around the same time Mr. Buxton had plans to have a tea room in the hotel lobby on the main floor. In addition, a new gift shop named "Country Collectibles" was opened on the main floor. The shop, which was owned by Mrs. Raymond Parker, offered an array of handmade items including Amish and Mennonite quilts, Irish woolens and crystal, and oil and pastel paintings

by an in-house artist. By 1986, due to declining business conditions, the Copper Penny Pub had closed.

The closing of the Catch Penny Pub occurred during the time of the owners that followed Mr. Buxton. In 1985 the Inn was sold to Bernardsville residents Alice and George Rochat along with partners David and Linda Kane also of Bernardsville and Mark Johnson of Gillette, NJ who was the general manager of the business. It wasn't long after their purchase that the Inn was closed to the public and underwent an extensive multi-year renovation. The inside of the building was virtually gutted. It was reported that in some parts of the building one could see from the third floor all the way down to the basement.

The exterior also saw some dramatic changes with the construction of the terrace that spans the length of the building and the installation of the custom-made solid mahogany revolving door that, to this day, welcomes guests to the grand lobby. One of the goals of the new owners was to restore the building to its old grandeur and refurbish it in turn-of-the-century Edwardian style. They achieved that goal handsomely.



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The planned renovations, which included two new banquet rooms on the lower level, a new lobby, bar and two dining rooms on the main level and 18 to 20 custom-decorated guest rooms on the upper floors, were estimated to cost in excess of \$1.5 million. After being closed for nearly two years the Inn was reopened to the public in phases with the bar and Garden Room—the small dining room now called the “Conservatory”—opening in late October 1987.

In January 1988 the Great Room—the large, yet intimate, dining room at the back of the Inn—and the Somerset and Hunterdon Rooms (the two banquet rooms on the lower level which previously were the rathskellar bar, the Ride ‘N’ Hunt Club and the Catch Penny Pub) were opened. In April 1988, the hotel, with 20 guest rooms and suites, was reopened. The accommodations were strictly for transient and not residential guests as had been the situation under previous owners. Finally, in November 1992, the elegant Fenwick Ballroom, which previously was the site of the Palumbo Pharmacy, was opened. The renovation of the Inn that began in 1985 was now complete.

It was during the Rochat era that The Bernards Inn reached its prominence in New Jersey as the place for fine dining, luxurious accommodations and exceptional catered affairs. In 1988, Edward Stone joined the Inn as executive chef and later as a partner in the business. Chef Stone’s culinary creativity and professionalism earned the Inn, among other honors, the coveted Four-Diamond rating from AAA, the DiRoNa (Distinguished Restaurants of North America) and numerous three- and four-star ratings from leading newspapers and magazines. Not long after the arrival of the new millennium came the arrival of new owners. In October 2002 the Inn was sold by the Rochats to Dick and Kim Schlott of Bernardsville. Executive Chef Ed Stone remained at the Inn as a partner with the Schlotts. Mr. Schlott, who was a prominent realtor in the New Jersey marketplace, said that he had no plans for any substantive changes. Instead, his focus would be on bringing in more business to the hotel, which had become overshadowed by the success of the restaurant and banquet operations.

In early 2003 Chef Stone left the Inn and the search began for a new executive chef. The search included award winning chefs from across the country to ensure that the Inn not only retained, but enhanced, its standing as a fine dining venue. In the spring of 2003, the Inn welcomed Corey Heyer as its new (and current) executive chef.

The Schlotts held the property until early 2006 when it was put up for sale once again. In April 2006, Hampshire Destination Properties of Morristown, NJ purchased the Inn for a reported \$6.9 million (just a bit more than the \$25,000 paid by Fred Ballentine to the Commercial Trust Company in 1922). Like the Rochats, Hampshire has made a substantial investment in renovating and upgrading the now century-old landmark. The exterior of the Inn as well as the lobby, the Library Bar, the Conservatory, the Great Room and the guest rooms have all undergone a dramatic and magnificent makeover. In addition, the banquet rooms on

the lower level have been transformed into two stunning new rooms— The Silver Vault and Wine Pantry. The new décor of the property is reminiscent of the great estate homes of the Bernardsville Mountain Colony.

Today, as it was when the Inn first opened in 1907, we move into our second century with the same dedication to providing an exceptional experience for all of our guests in an atmosphere of gracious hospitality.