

# *Inside* THE BRICK ACADEMY



The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills

October 2019



## *Inside this Edition:*

- Lord Stirling  
1770s Festival
- Weekend Journey  
Through the Past
- THSSH Officers
- Holiday Gathering
- Membership Drive
- In Memoriam:  
Gregory Gonzalez
- Museum Positions
- Old Witch of Gillette
- Young Historians
- Archivist Position



On August 3, The Center for Contemporary Arts in Bedminster hosted two sold-out screenings for the premiere of the documentary *Under the Great Oak* from director Michael Reynolds. The feature-length film celebrates the life of the Great Oak tree, which stood on the grounds of the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church for six hundred years.

The tree, possibly the oldest White Oak in the country, was taken down on April 24, 2017 after it died the previous summer despite efforts of the church to preserve it.

The film illustrates the impact the tree had on the community through interviews and the Great Oak Art Celebration, which brought together artists and community members to honor the tree and its place in history.

Each film screening was followed by an informative panel discussion from prominent community members and the documentary team.

Moderated by Dana Reynolds, the documentary's Executive Producer, the panel included Sean Kirby (Editor of *Under the Great Oak*), Dr. Tom Ombrello (Senior Professor of Biology at Union County College), Michael Reynolds (Filmmaker), Gordon Ward (Musician), and Sue Zibelli (Chairman of The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills).

The Center for Contemporary Art and the filmmakers donated the net proceeds from the screenings to support Dr. Ombrello's Historic Tree Grove at Union County College in Cranford. The grove supplied the sapling that now stands on the grounds of the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church, grown from an acorn of the Great Oak.

For more information on the documentary follow *Under the Great Oak* on Facebook@UndertheGreatOak or visit [greatoakmovie.com](http://greatoakmovie.com).



*Photo: Mike Reynolds, film director, and Elie Porter Trubert, Executive Director, Center for Contemporary Arts.*

## Lord Stirling 1770s Festival

**Sunday, October 6**

*11:30am - 4:30pm*

Celebrate a local Revolutionary War hero at the former site of Lord Stirling's 700-acre estate. The festival, promoting historical and environmental education, includes early crafts and trades, period reenactors, children's activities, colonial music, and 18th C. wine cellar. The Historical Society will host a booth to promote membership benefits, volunteer opportunities and special programs.

Lord Stirling (the Scottish earldom and title acquired by William Alexander) was one of George Washington's top Major Generals during several critical battles of the Revolutionary War. Sponsored by the Somerset County Park Commission, the event is held rain or shine at the Environmental Education Center on Lord Stirling Road in Basking Ridge. Suggested donation is \$5 per person. Details at [www.somersetcountyparks.org](http://www.somersetcountyparks.org)




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## Weekend Journey Through the Past

**Saturday, October 12**

*10am - 5pm*

**Sunday, October 13**

*12pm - 4pm*

Explore Somerset County's quaint villages, learn about prominent residents, witness early colonial life, and discover Revolutionary War sites.

Nearly thirty historic places will feature special exhibits, interactive activities, guided tours, and music concerts...all open to the public and free!

The Brick Academy Museum, located at 15 West Oak Street in Basking Ridge, will showcase the "What Put Somerset Hills on the Map" permanent exhibit; "Back to School" early artifacts display; "Wish You Were Here" postcard display; Indian arrowheads; and the 1890s schoolroom with a pot belly stove, period furniture and student classwork. Details at [www.schistoryweekend.com](http://www.schistoryweekend.com)

## New Officers Elected to the Board

The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills is pleased to announce the appointment of two new Officers to the Board of Trustees:

Pat Gray, *President*

Meg Wastie, *Vice President*

Susan Zibelli continues to serve the Historical Society as Chairman and Robin Marion continues to serve as Recording Secretary.

## Save the Date!

**Thursday, December 19**

Please join us for the second of our 2019-2020 quarterly "Membership Gatherings" and celebrate the holiday season with fellow THSSH members. President Pat Gray will give a brief update as to what we've been up to and then the merriment begins with light refreshments and holiday cheer!

Date: Thursday, December 19

Time: 7:30pm

Place: The Brick Academy

15 West Oak Street, Basking Ridge

*Kindly RSVP by Monday, December 9  
to our official website:*

[www.somsethillshistoricalshociety.org](http://www.somsethillshistoricalshociety.org)

or call 908-221-1770 (without internet only)

## THSSH Membership Drive

Our membership renewal period has traditionally been in late autumn. Renewal of annual THSSH memberships is now moving to late spring.

As an added benefit to our current members, you will receive a half-year of free membership in 2020!

Your tax deductible membership allows us to function as a 501c3 non-profit organization supporting research projects, special events, educational programs and advocacy leadership on issues related to historical significance in the Somerset Hills.

***Thank You for your Support!***

## *In Memoriam*

### Gregory James Gonzalez



The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills notes with deep sadness the sudden passing of Gregory Gonzalez, 61, on May 13. Greg joined the Board of Trustees as Treasurer in 2014 and served as a member of the Executive Committee.

Highly proficient in the financial field, Greg owned Leaver & Gonzalez, Certified Public Accountants & Business Advisors, in Basking Ridge for over thirty years. He was a member of the American Institute of CPAs and the New Jersey Society of CPAs Member of Congress Key Person Program.

Greg was a well regarded guest speaker at Raritan Valley Community College and professional tax seminars. He attained many business and community accolades over the years including awards from the Somerset County Chamber of Commerce and the Somerset County Board of Chosen Freeholders.

Greg also was a man who was generous with his time and talent. He served as a board member of the Resource Center for Women and Their Families and was a Somerset County 4-H club leader for many years. In addition to the Historical Society, he was the Treasurer of the Branchburg Township Sesquicentennial Committee, the Branchburg Rotary Club and the Branchburg Country Fair Committee.

He had many passions in life, including his family and interests as an avid outdoorsman, a professional billiards player, a world traveler, and a food enthusiast. Greg will be fondly remembered for his valuable contribution to the Historical Society, infectious smile and personal commitment to "The biggest adventure you can take is to live the life of your dreams" - *Oprah Winfrey*

## Brick Academy Museum

### Curator & Committee Chair Positions

Sue Zibelli has decided to leave the roles of Museum Curator and Museum Committee Chair after having served both roles for nine years. During her tenure, Sue is most proud of creating, designing and installing the permanent exhibit at the Brick Academy Museum - *What Put Somerset Hills on the Map*, along with temporary exhibits such as *Hauntings in the Somerset Hills* and *Historical Politicians*. A collaboration with the Ross Farm continues with tools and farming equipment from THSSH's collection placed on long-term display.

Sue has enjoyed chairing the Museum Committee, currently comprising members Larry Terricone, Meg Wastie and Sylvia Gambony, as many improvements were accomplished. Artifacts were retrieved from storage and displayed at the museum, such as the oversized flag on the main floor, and the sled that adorns the third floor schoolroom. Additional display space was created throughout the three levels of the building, such as the Post Office exhibit located on the lower level. A most notable committee accomplishment is the MUSEUM sign outside the Brick Academy in an effort to draw attention to the museum as a community asset.

THSSH is actively searching for a volunteer who would like to become our Museum Curator. The curator is thought of as the storyteller of our historical and cultural artifacts and narrative. The museum curator will manage our collections, specifically, the acquisition, care and display of artifacts. Their role will be to create and maintain inspired exhibits from both the permanent collections, as well as temporary collections.

The Brick Academy Museum Curator will be a part of the Museum Committee which works together to provide input and feedback, as well as assist in creative problem solving and idea generation. Members of the committee prepare and hang exhibits and manage logistics related to the installation of the exhibits and return of loaned items. Additionally, the committee maintains records on permanent collection items, including acquisition/deaccession records, as well as organizes and maintains collections storage areas.

In the past, the Museum Curator had also served as the Museum Committee Chair. However, the Museum Curator position is currently open to any interested THSSH member. Please call 908-221-1770.

## The Old Witch of Gillette

By Florence Badgley Cornish  
February 29, 1940

You have heard about the witches  
That were burned in Salem town.  
Notorious in history, that story has come down.  
But have you heard the story  
Of a witch of local fame  
Right here in our own valley?  
Gresinger was her name.  
Her neighbors looked askance at her,  
They feared her occult power  
The children hastened by her house  
That evil, secret bower.  
And up and down the river  
Folks heard about her magic  
And dark nights they would shiver  
With fear of her, quite tragic.  
T'was said she knew the future  
Of every child and man.  
That nothing was concealed from her  
That they might do, or plan.

In Millington, so the tale doth run,  
A good crop of beans, had a worthy son  
Of the Baptist Church: but alas! alack!  
Someone stole those beans  
When he turned his back.  
He suspected the man was a shiftless neighbor,  
Reaping the fruits of another man's labor.

There the thought unbidden came  
"Why not consult the Gresinger dame?"  
A kind friend helped him a plan to make:  
Their purpose, a secret trip to take.

A dark and stormy night they chose  
To carry to the witch, their woes.  
The mud was deep in the old road-bed,  
And as they splashed along one said -  
"It's an awful night the country to roam,  
*I hope the old devil will be at home*".

At length they reached their journey's end  
And from their carriage did descend,  
And rapped on the witch's door.  
She opened it: they almost fell dead:  
For "*you find the old devil at home*" she said.

When they recovered from their fright,  
She said that their suspicions were right.  
And within the barn of the neighbor, they say,  
The beans were found the very next day!

## YOUNG HISTORIANS BUSY THIS SUMMER

The Young Historians, a group of high school and college volunteers, had a busy summer at the Brick Academy. Meeting every other week, they worked on a variety of activities that will enhance the programming that THSSH has to offer.

Molly Skillman, a senior at Salve Regina University in Rhode Island, has earned internship credit through the university for her research work for THSSH's "ABCs of the Somerset Hills." Twenty-six illustrated posters - each highlighting an important person, place or event in the Somerset Hills - will be displayed at the Brick Academy in a new permanent exhibit.

Ridge High School junior Pari Mandalapu has been continuing his work on THSSH's connection with the NJ Digital Highway affiliated with Rutgers University. Started by Trustee Cynthia Crosson, the project involves scanning and entering photos and documents that will then be available on the Rutgers website. Pari will also continue Molly Skillman's "ABCs of the Somerset Hills" work when Molly returns to college.

Annie Kleinle, a senior at Ridge High School, will assist Pari in continuing Molly's work. Her main project for the fall, however, is spearheading THSSH's entry into the Environmental Center's "Festival of Trees" event this December. Local groups enter holiday-decorated trees - each with a specific theme - for this annual event. Annie has selected the theme "Animals of the Somerset Hills" for THSSH's tree entitled "You'll Go Down in History." Most of the ornaments that will be displayed are donated from the late June Kennedy's estate.

These dedicated teenagers avidly pursue history through their volunteer work with THSSH. Any local teens who are interested in joining the Young Historians are encouraged to contact Trustee Meg Wastie at 908-221-1770 or email [kitmeg@verizon.net](mailto:kitmeg@verizon.net).

*Picture: Pari Mandalapu and Molly Skillman display the first two posters for the "ABCs of the Somerset Hills" project: "A" for "John Jacob Astor" and "B" for "Brick Academy."*



## Archivist Volunteer Opportunity

Cynthia Crosson, Archivist for the Historical Society of the Somerset Hills, has announced her resignation from the post due to an extended out-of-state stay. Since joining the Board of Trustees in 2016, Cynthia has made a significant contribution to the Museum's archival and research projects. Most notably, she spearheaded the Historical Society's partnership with NJDH (New Jersey Digital Highway), hosted by Rutgers University Libraries. The collaborative initiative is a community repository designed to preserve the state's cultural resources and historic artifacts for use by citizens, educators, researchers, and students through digitization, online access and digital preservation. The Trustees extend our sincere gratitude to Cynthia for continuing to oversee the NJDH project with Young Historian Pari Mandalapu.

In addition to her role as Archivist, Cynthia has served as Holiday House Tour Chair, assisted past President Daniel Lincoln with a grant application for the Society to purchase the historic Peppard Rickey House, and prepared a successful grant application for the Historical Society to receive \$1,500 from the Somerset County Cultural & Heritage Commission. The grant money will be used to replace display cases on the main floor of the Brick Academy Museum.

The Historical Society is currently seeking a volunteer Archivist. As a key member of the organization, the Archivist assesses, collects, organizes, digitizes, preserves, and provides access to various multimedia library and archival collections. The records maintained can consist of a variety of forms, including letters, diaries, logs, documents, sound and/or picture recordings, digital files, or other physical objects. The Archivist also recommends policies and procedures for the creation, maintenance and retention of library and archival assets.

If you share a commitment to preserve and interpret the natural and cultural heritage of the Somerset Hills, please consider volunteering several hours a month as our new Archivist! Contact THSSH at: 908-221-1770.



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[somersehillshistoricalsociety.org](http://somersehillshistoricalsociety.org)

**Museum Hours:**

First Sunday of the Month (*except Holidays*)  
2pm to 4pm

**Research Room/Library:**

By Appointment

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