

# *Inside* THE BRICK ACADEMY



The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills

February 2024

## 2023 ANNUAL REPORT

### *Executive Summary*

The primary objective of The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills (THSSH) in 2023 was to create cultural opportunities and enrichment for the local community by providing programs and initiatives that inform, educate and foster interest in local history.

#### **- Education Programs – Bernards Township**

The popular Early American Schoolhouse education program for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students, administered by former schoolteachers, was provided to over 350 children from five Bernards Township schools. Additionally, one Ridge High School student provided volunteer hours as part of the Young Historians program.

An interactive map of historic Basking Ridge center was created by a local Boy Scout and is now part of THSSH's website. The interactive map was sponsored by THSSH as an Eagle Scout project.

#### **- Research – Nationwide**

Nearly 30 research requests were addressed by Trustees via email. THSSH's Archivist met regularly at the Brick Academy to work on the proper management of our archives and donated materials. An electronic catalog program was purchased to capture extensive information that can be shared beyond THSSH in the future.

#### **- Museum – Somerset Hills**

The museum was open to the public the first Sunday of each month. A special exhibit was installed on the main floor of the museum during most of the year, "Slavery in Our Own Backyard," which focused on the history of slavery in the Somerset Hills. The exhibit featured the story of an enslaved black Revolutionary War soldier, Samuel Sutphin, who fought bravely in some of the most famous battles of the Revolutionary War. The "Rush Family Treasures," a multigenerational display featuring a rare collection of 18th & 19th C. personal artifacts, household items, and business documents from a local family was exhibited in the museum at the end of 2023. Out-of-print books on the area's history were acquired for the museum bookstore from the AAUW Book Sale.

#### **- Communications – Nationwide (membership)**

Members received three issues of "*Inside the Brick Academy*" newsletters, along with the Annual Report. An email communication was created and was sent at the same time as the newsletter to members, as well as non-members. The email, designed to lead readers to the current newsletter on our website and our Facebook page, highlights programs and events and includes a Volunteer Spotlight.

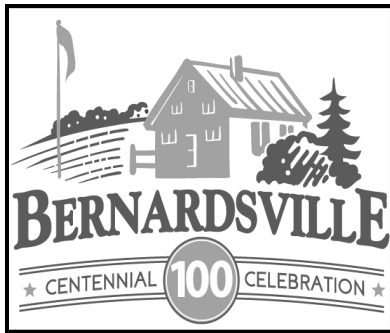
#### **- Website and Social Media – Nationwide**

THSSH continued to communicate news and information through our website [www.thssh.org](http://www.thssh.org), and through eMail. Extensive website revisions were ongoing throughout 2023. A Blog was created to reside on THSSH's website. A Facebook page (263 followers) and Instagram page (145 followers) was created for THSSH.

To ensure THSSH's archives and artifacts can be efficiently and effectively digitized and cataloged, the Verizon Internet service was upgraded in the Brick Academy, and a new computer, monitor, and printer were purchased.

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## Bernardsville Centennial



Bernardsville, originally a small farming and trading hamlet, was a section of Bernards Township known as Vealtown. During the Revolutionary War, the village was along the route of colonial troops and supplies headed to and from Morristown. In the winter of 1779-80, the New Jersey Brigade, consisting of 1,000 men and officers, established an encampment along Hardscrabble Road.

In 1840, through the efforts of Roderick A. Mitchell, the local postmaster, Vealtown was renamed Bernardsville in honor of Sir Francis Bernard, the Colonial Governor of New Jersey from 1758 to 1760.

After the Civil War, many wealthy and prominent New Yorkers moved into the area, first as summer visitors, then later as permanent residents of the Bernardsville Mountain. Necessary businesses began to open and were patronized by both estate and local working class families. In 1872 railroad service was extended from Summit to Bernardsville by the New Jersey West Line Railroad and played an important role in the borough's development.

Driven largely by the prospect of lower taxes, the Borough of Bernardsville was incorporated by an act of the New Jersey Legislature that officially took affect in a special election on April 24, 1924. The borough's first Mayor was George Cross, who served from 1924 until 1930. *Highlights of Bernardsville's early history include:*

- The John Parker Tavern, originally Vealtown Tavern, built in the 1700's was a frequent stop for Continental Army soldiers. The building, with legendary ghost Phyllis, later served as a private residence, a small post office, and the Bernardsville Public Library (1903-2000) for nearly a century.
- Early places of worship include Bernardsville Methodist Church (1843), St. Bernard's Episcopal Church (1897), Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church (1898), and Bernardsville Congregational Church (1910).
- Bunn Mill, where applejack was once made, was operated by John Bunn as a cider mill from 1844 to 1914.
- The Old Stone Hotel opened in 1849 under the brief ownership of John Beck. In 1912 Woodrow Wilson stayed at the hotel and gave a campaign speech in town. The building was expanded in the late 19th and early 20th century.
- In 1872 the train station was built on Mine Brook Road in a Stick Style architectural design. It was moved 'up the road' in 1902 to make way for the current station of stone-masonry construction. The Bernardsville News (established in 1897) was housed in the relocated train station for more than a century.
- Under the leadership of Theron Smith and Edwin Spinning, the volunteer Bernardsville Bucket Brigade (currently Bernardsville Fire Company No. 1) was established in 1897 with basic supplies of water buckets and a long ladder.
- Olcott Avenue School was built in 1906 and financed by Frederick P. Olcott, a Bernardsville mountain colony resident. Renowned New York architect Henry Janeway Hardenbergh designed the education building.
- The Bernards Inn, built by local brothers Fred E. and Frank A. Ballentine with stone from an old stable on Main Street, opened in 1907. Some of the architectural details are from the original Plaza Hotel in New York City.
- Calvin Day Smith, one of several prominent local merchants, opened a popular successful dry goods and grocery store (former Palmer Building) on Olcott Square in the late 19th century.
- In 1910 the First Farmers' Day celebration was sponsored by Charles Pfizer and hosted by his hunt club, the Essex Fox Hounds to thank local farmers for use of their land. The event is the current Far Hills Race Meeting.
- The Columbia Theater opened in 1915. It became the Liberty Theater with 400 seats in 1921. The movie theater was renamed again in 1970 as the familiar Bernardsville Cinema and has since changed ownership several times.
- Madame Butterfly movie with Mary Pickford was filmed at Yademos (Charles Pfizer estate) in 1915. Tommy Dorsey, bandleader, purchased Tall Oaks estate as a summer home from 1935 to 1944.
- Bernardsville has four structures listed on the National Register of Historic Places: John Parker Tavern (1978), Bernardsville Train Station (1984), Reynolds-Scherman House (1989), and Olcott Avenue Historic District (2009).

***WELCOME!***

The Board of Trustees  
is pleased to announce  
the following  
new memberships:

**Lee Wolfe & Betsey Bloom**  
*Bedminster*

**Ellen Houlihan**  
*Basking Ridge*

***REVOLUTIONARY SPIES***

**February 22 · 7-9 pm**

Snow Date: February 29

Secret agents, intelligence gathering and misinformation -  
not the first things that come to mind about the  
American Revolution. This shadowy world of espionage,  
including a spy in the Somerset Hills, will be exposed in  
an insightful presentation by historian Damien Cregeau.

*Light Refreshments*

*Fee: \$10 Members, \$15 Non-Members*

*To be collected at the door upon arrival*

**Brick Academy, 15 W. Oak Street, Basking Ridge**

***THSSH GIFT PROGRAM***

The Board of Trustees extends its sincere gratitude to THSSH members and community friends who have contributed with 2023 gifts (donations and bequests) to further our mission to *Study the Past, Record the Present, and Connect the Future*. The Gift Program includes donation levels to highlight some of the historical figures from the Brick Academy (Basking Ridge Classical School). To learn about their remarkable lives, please visit our website at [www.thssh.org](http://www.thssh.org).

William Dayton - Below \$100  
Robert Stockton - Below \$200  
Samuel Southard - Below \$300

Theodore Frelinghuysen - Below \$400  
Reverend Robert Finley - Below \$500  
Reverend Samuel Kennedy - \$500 Plus

**William Dayton** - Paul & Margaret Barno, Bernards Appraisal Associates, Maryann Bieksza, Jennifer Bongioni, John & Laura Broderick, Leslie Brownwitt, Mary Beth Bubert, Mary Jane Canose, William & Margaret Cronin, Michael & Marilyn Dee, Tom & Karen Fitzsimons, Catherine Forbes, Sylvia & Neil Gambony, Edmond & Bonnie Gould, Michelle Waldron Gratel, Timothy & Jennifer Harrington, Mary Kempen, Anne Kennison, Edwin Landis, Patricia Lorenz, Karen Marty, Anne McCauley, Anne & John Meany, Robert & Patricia Riedel, Virginia Vill

**Robert Stockton** - Dominick & Nancy Alfano, Elizabeth Bagnato, Robert & Rosalie Baker, Alexander Bedrosainn, Bernards Decorating, Philip & Kerry Haselton, Monique Rubens Krohn, Michael Loeloff, Jean McGuinness, Joseph Metelski, Jerry & Marcella Miccolis, Jamie Ryan-Morais, Eric & Susan Scharf, Kenneth & Margaret Trinter, Debora Went

**Samuel Southard** - Carl Bosland\*, William Engel, Jake Hindelong, Neil & Jame Kazan, Michael & Laura Mundoc, Barbara Pitney, Gregory & Molly Romano, Jonathan & Mary Vancleef

\* "In Memory of his brother, Brian D. Bosland, who passed away November 1, 2023.  
He loved history, particularly Pluckemin and the surrounding towns of their youth."

**Theodore Frelinghuysen** - Robin Marion, W. Barry Thomson, Ronald & Susan Zibelli

**Reverend Samuel Kennedy** - Roy Crego, James & Jill Gibson, David Urbani

For those interested in contributing during the current year, your gift would be tax-deductible, as the Society is a 501c3 nonprofit organization. Also, contributions to a charitable organization from retirement accounts, such as IRAs — as part of a required minimum distribution and/or by way of a will — are fully exempt from the otherwise-applicable income tax on the amount distributed.

## Somerset County Gets Ready to Celebrate America 250<sup>th</sup>

By Cynthia Crosson

Lord Stirling Park in Basking Ridge is the location of two homesteads of prominent revolutionaries:

- **William Alexander**, better known as “Lord Stirling,” who was one of the leading Five Generals under George Washington.
- **Elias Boudinot**, an intelligence officer under George Washington, who was elected to the Continental Congress, and became President of Congress at the end of the Revolution.

These homesteads will now benefit from two recently announced historic preservation projects as part of Somerset County’s celebration of America’s 250<sup>th</sup> birthday coming up in 2026. Somerset County Commissioner Melanie Marano made the announcement at a recent Middlebrook Symposium held at Raritan Valley Community College. Lord Stirling Park is one of five sites in Somerset County that will receive historic preservation funding from the county.

The basement and part of the foundation is all that is left of the original Lord Stirling manor. Somerset County has retained Richard Hunter and Associates, as well as Richard Veit of Monmouth University, to undertake an archaeological investigation into the homesite to see what more can be learned about his life and times, and the extent of the manor complex.



In addition, Somerset County this year is completing a substantial restoration of the Boudinot Mansion that sits on the Ross Farm section of the park. The project includes repairs to the trim and siding, column reconstruction, masonry repairs, repairs and reconstruction of side porches, gutter replacement, and electrical repairs. The Ross Farm Barn and Stable Outbuilding are also being restored. This work on the Boudinot buildings is expected to be completed in just 4-6 weeks.

A number of commissioners who attended the symposium emphasized that the projects are meant to highlight the central role Somerset County played in the Revolution — a role often

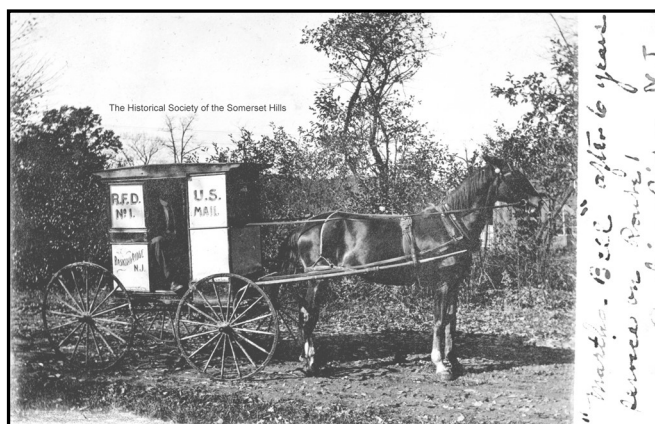
overlooked in the history books. George Washington spent more time in New Jersey during the war than in any other state in the Union. Only Morris County in New Jersey hosted him for more days than Somerset County (See infographic above).

### *'Martha Bell, Mail Horse'*

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mail was delivered in Basking Ridge by horse and cart. The displayed postcard inscription reads “‘Martha Bell’ after 6 years service on Route 1, Basking Ridge, NJ” (Nettie Allen Collection). The post office started experimenting with Rural Free Delivery (RFD) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and expanded it in 1902.

By 1925, Martha Bell had been replaced by Louis C. Day (1878-1945) and his truck. Day, a native of Stirling, lived on Conkling Street in Basking Ridge.

To view our weekly Blog posts, visit [www.thssh.org](http://www.thssh.org)



## **2023 Annual Report**

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### **- Programs**

A book talk and book signing brunch event for “*All the Presidents’ Gardens*,” by Marta McDowell was held at the historic Grain House restaurant. A Black Revolutionary War Soldier reenactor delivered a living history program at the Brick Academy. Author reading and book signing of “*The Gilded Frame*,” a historical mystery set in New Jersey’s Bernardsville Mountain Colony, was held at the Brick Academy. An exclusive, members only presentation on the history of the Sky Farm Nudist Resort was held at the Brick Academy. A special screening of the film “Saving The Great Swamp Battle to Defeat the Jetport,” documenting an important piece of the Somerset Hills’ history, was presented at the Brick Academy along with a Membership Gathering that served as the General Membership Meeting. THSSH hosted a Holiday Party that took place in St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Basking Ridge where members were entertained by the Somerset Hills Harmony a Capella Chorus in the historic 1852 Post Chapel.

Trustees gave a tour of the historic “Astor Mansion,” Bernards Township Townhall to St. James first-grade class, as well as during the Mayor’s Fall Festival.

A Programs & Events brochure was created that listed the programs and events in 2023. Copies were left at Bernards Township Town Hall, in local libraries and food establishments.

### **- Advocacy**

THSSH participated in the 1770’s Lord Stirling Festival and Somerset County’s Weekend Journey through the Past. THSSH print pieces were provided to the Somerset County 4-H Fair.

### **- Historic Restoration/Preservation and Brick Academy Maintenance**

THSSH continues to work with parties to advise on the historic importance of properties. An issue with the boiler at the Brick Academy was effectively addressed.

### **- Membership – Nationwide**

Total membership in 2023 was 234. THSSH welcomed 48 new members in 2023.

### **- Donations – Nationwide**

THSSH received over \$8500 in donations. Several artifacts were donated to the museum including an extensive, and important collection from a local family dating into the 1700s, as well as a framed “General Return of Wagons and Horses in the Service of the United States” from the late 1700s.

## **Education**

Print publications are available free of charge at the Brick Academy:

- THSSH Pamphlet – Highlights the history of the Brick Academy, the mission of The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills, ongoing projects, fund raising events, museum hours, and membership information.
- Inside the Brick Academy Newsletter – Published three times a year and mailed to our membership, this newsletter comprises society news, event calendar, and local interest stories.
- Volunteer Brochure – Describes the primary THSSH committees, which include Affiliate Organizations; Archives & Research; Bookstore; Building Maintenance; Clerical; Community Outreach; Education; Fund Raisers; Gardens & Grounds; Hospitality; Membership; Museum; Newsletter; Production; Public Relations; Publicity; Speaker Programs; Website/Social Media

On sale at the Brick Academy is the *Around and About Basking Ridge, Liberty Corner and Lyons* picture book, as well as other history related books.

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## **2023 Annual Report**

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### **Archives & Research**

THSSH archives is coveted by local and distant researchers who contact THSSH via our website, phone, and mail to request local research assistance. The primary information requested is local family and house documents and pictures; historic maps; local historic figures; and buildings.

THSSH received over 30 research requests that were addressed in person and remotely by Trustees.

### **Museum**

The Brick Academy serves as a museum of local artifacts and historical information about the towns in the Somerset Hills – Bedminster, Peapack-Gladstone, Far Hills, Bernardsville, and Bernards Township/Basking Ridge, the only one of its kind in the Somerset Hills.

The top floor, restored to an 1890s period schoolroom with an authentic potbelly stove, period schoolroom furniture, and classroom objects, is used for education programs. Along with the 1890s schoolroom display, the top floor displays a timeline of the building; poster images and biographies of important people who had once attended the Classical School of Basking Ridge, the precursor to the Brick Academy; a schoolwork display case that showcases students' work from the early 1900s; and a bobsled that was used in the township in the early 1900s.

The lower floor, which is mainly used for research and meetings, has on display late 1800/early 1900 maps of the Somerset Hills towns, artifacts from local post offices, and other notable artifacts.

The main floor displays a permanent exhibit: 'What Put Somerset Hills on the Map.' Included in the exhibit are 8" x 10" color photographs of many of the magnificent homes on the Bernardsville Mountain. THSSH has been given the rights to many of the photos for this exhibit by the Turpin Real Estate Agency. In addition to building our library with these important photos, the Museum Committee has been building relationships with many organizations in the Somerset Hills, including Hamilton Farm, Trump National Golf Club, Natirar, Matheny, Meadowbrook Inventions, the USGA, the Jacobus Vanderveer House and Museum, the Farmstead Arts Center, and the Boudinot-Southard-Ross Estate, to name a few.

A temporary exhibit "Slavery in Our Own Backyard," which focused on the history of slavery in the Somerset Hills, was on display during most of the year. The exhibit featured the story of an enslaved black Revolutionary War soldier, Samuel Sutphin, who fought bravely in some of the most famous battles of the Revolutionary War. The "Rush Family Treasures," a multigenerational display featuring a rare collection of 18th & 19th C. personal artifacts, household items, and business documents from a local family was exhibited in the museum at the end of 2023.

In the interest of collaborating with other history organizations, the Museum Committee has provided on long-term loan to the Boudinot-Southard-Ross Estate a collection of tools and kitchen utensils.

THSSH museum and archives collections are catalogued, digitized and entered into Rutgers' New Jersey Digital Highway (NJDH), a digital repository that preserves the state's cultural resources and artifacts for use by current and future generations of citizens, educators, researchers, and students. Resources are available 24/7 and maintained in perpetuity. THSSH joins 50 other New Jersey historical organizations participating in NJDH.

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## **2023 Annual Report**

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### **Website and Social Media**

The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills (THSSH) online:

Website: [www.thssh.org](http://www.thssh.org)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/historicalsocietynj>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/historicalsocietynj/>

### **Donations**

- Several artifacts were donated to the Museum.
  - THSSH received over \$8500 in donations. Donations and Bequests are received from our school programs, current and past members, and their families.
  - Membership dues paid in 2023 were \$2,600.
  - Revenue is generated through program and event ticket sales, as well as book sales.
  - Gift items sold through our website, and at the Brick Academy and community events, amounted to \$75.
  - Non-profit organizations that conduct meetings at the Brick Academy provide a contribution.
- Area residents and out-of-town visitors to our Brick Academy museum contribute to our donation box.

### **Brick Academy Utilization**

In addition to our museum, research room, education programs, speaker programs, and community events, the Brick Academy is normally utilized by outside groups for their meetings and programs.

### **Advocacy & Affiliations**

The Historical Society is a member of The Somerset County Historical Society, League of Historical Societies of New Jersey, Small Museum Association, National Trust for Historic Preservation, and American Association for State and Local History.

THSSH participated in the *1770's Lord Stirling Festival* and *Somerset County's Journey through the Past*.

### **2024 Outlook**

The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills will continue to pursue its mission to acquire, conserve and share artifacts and information on matters of local historic interest; cultivate interest in local history; partake in community events; encourage the preservation of local historic resources; facilitate historic research; and preserve, operate and interpret the Brick Academy.

- To strengthen and grow the organizational structure of THSSH's Board of Trustees.
- Trustees will be actively engaging current members to volunteer on THSSH committees, as well as for programs and events.
- THSSH will maintain its image as a premier historical society through committee work.
- Programs will be offered that appeal to our members and to the community.
- Our website and social media strategy will continue to share information regarding local events and history in the Somerset Hills.
- THSSH will work toward growing sources of income to achieve financial independence.

**Susan Zibelli, THSSH Chairman**

## THSSH

P.O. Box 136

Basking Ridge, NJ 07920

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



**THSSH Headquarters:**

15 West Oak Street,  
Basking Ridge, NJ 07920  
908.221.1770

**Museum Hours:**

First Sunday of the Month  
2 - 4 PM

***Inside the Brick Academy***  
is a membership benefit.

Newsletters are posted online and printed editions  
mailed in February, May and October

*Editor: Marcella Miccolis*

**The Historical Society  
of the Somerset Hills**

*A 501c3 nonprofit organization  
founded in 1928*

**Executive Committee:**

Sue Zibelli - *Chairman*  
Pat Gray - *President*  
David Urbani - *Treasurer*  
Cynthia Crosson - *Recording Secretary*

**Trustees:**

Jon Booth  
Roy Crego  
Marcella Miccolis