

Inside THE BRICK ACADEMY



The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills

February 2025

2024 Annual Report *Submitted by Sue Zibelli, Chairperson*

Board of Trustees

Sue Zibelli	Chairperson
Pat Gray	President
Dave Urbani	Treasurer
Cynthia Crosson	Recording Secretary
Jon Booth	Historic Preservation and Restoration, Building Maintenance
Leslie Brownwitt	Education
Roy Crego	Archives, Content Management, Social Media, Website
Sue Manion	Corresponding Secretary
Ruth Melillo	Event Committee Chair
Marcella Miccolis	Affiliate Memberships, Newsletter, Publications
William J. Kearns, Esq.	Advisory Trustee
Michael C. Vaccaro, Esq.	Advisory Trustee

The Board of Trustees comprised of twelve volunteer members. Two Advisory Trustees joined in February and three new Trustees joined in September. Three Trustees resigned in December. The Board convened ten times.

A general membership meeting was held in November. General membership meetings may include business updates, announcements, and guest speakers.

The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills (THSSH) is the oldest historical society in the Somerset Hills and surrounding area, in existence for over 90 years. THSSH is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization.

Executive Summary

The primary objective of The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills (THSSH) in 2024 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 – Bernards Township and Bernardsville

The popular Early American Schoolhouse education program for 3rd grade students, administered by former schoolteachers, was provided to over 350 children from five Bernards Township schools. In 2024, THSSH developed an education program for Bernardsville Middle School 5th grade students. In May 2024, 100 students from BMS attended this program for the first time. BMS is planning to continue to visit the Brick Academy with their 5th grade class in 2025. Tours of the “Astor Mansion” were provided by THSSH trustees to a local Girl Scout troop, Saint James 1st grade students, and visitors during the Mayor’s Fall Festival.

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Historical Society Appoints New Trustees

"We are excited to welcome Leslie Brownwitt, Sue Manion, and Ruth Melillo to our Board of Trustees," says Sue Zibelli, Chairperson of THSSH. "They bring extensive experience in business strategy and finance, aiding THSSH in its focus on delivering its long-term goals."

THSSH extends its sincere gratitude and best wishes to several retiring Trustees:

After 20 years, Marcella Miccolis has decided to resign from the Board of Trustees. Marcella led the Historical Society as Chairperson for eight years. "Marcella was extraordinary," current THSSH Chair Sue Zibelli says. "She was always willing to do whatever was necessary to make sure we achieved our objective. This organization exists today for the most part because of her contributions. Although she is leaving our Board, we know she will continue to remain an active member and continue to volunteer to help THSSH achieve its goals."

Pat Gray has resigned from the Board having served as a Trustee since 2005, and most recently as President. She was part of the team that worked on the Brick Academy Top Floor Restoration Effort and served on the Historic Preservation Committee. As Trustee, Pat provided insightful guidance to the Board and was instrumental in assisting in developing fundamental operational guidelines.

Also resigning this year, David Urbani served as Treasurer for THSSH since June of 2021.

Leslie Brownwitt

Leslie has an impressive thirty-year volunteer background including executive positions and major fundraising initiatives with Bernardsville Garden Club, Bernardsville Library Foundation (started endowment with fundraising giving \$800,000 to the library), Friends of the Shelter, and Integrity House. She is also former Treasurer of the New Jersey Association of Independent Schools and Chair of Events at Gill St. Bernard's School. Leslie currently serves on the Historical Society's Events Committee as well as our Education Committee.

Her professional career includes Vice President, National Sales Management, and Account Executive positions with major corporations in the branded footwear industry. She designed product and ran multi-million dollar sales teams and budgets. Leslie traveled extensively with her career and by joining local charitable organizations she had a "touch base" to town when returning home.

Leslie has lived in Bernardsville since 1981, raised her two children here, and continues to be an active member in many charities that are important to the area. Her wonderful husband of twenty-five years is Bob.



Susan Manion

Susan has hands-on personal experience in historic preservation as she and her first husband partially restored and learned the history of a large New Jersey farmhouse built in 1736. The experience left Susan with a respect for the preservation of physical items and knowledge. Upon her husband's passing the farmhouse was sold and the restoration project fortunately completed by the new owners.

Professionally, Susan was the owner operator of a pet boarding and grooming business from 1975-1994 prior to completing a degree in Accountancy at Trenton State and obtaining her CPA license. She worked as an accountant for twenty-one years with a focus on financial statement preparation and analysis at major pharmaceutical and medical corporations including Johnson & Johnson, Alpharma, and ConvaTec.

Susan retired in 2017 and moved to the South Jersey shore area with her husband Tom. They relocated to Bedminster, an area Susan always loved, in 2021 to be closer to their two grandchildren. Susan will serve as Treasurer of the Historical Society.



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Historical Society Appoints New Trustees

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Ruth Melillo

Before retiring in 2021, Ruth worked alongside her husband in the Real Estate business as a design consultant. She has always been an active volunteer, generously offering her time and support to her children's schools, local programs, and her church.

Currently, Ruth serves as a valuable member of the Board of Trustees of the Somerset Hills Education Fund (SHEF), and holds the leadership position of the Events Committee at The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills (THSSH). These roles allow her to continue her passion for giving back and making a difference in the lives of others.

Education and history hold a special place in her heart, and she firmly believes that the two are intertwined. As Chair of the Events Committee, Ruth aspires to contribute to the enrichment of others, particularly the younger generation, by helping them gain a deeper understanding of their roots and heritage. Her ultimate goal is to foster a genuine passion for history through the diverse programs and to inspire others to volunteer their time and expertise whenever they can.

Ruth has been enjoying a wonderful 40-year marriage with her husband Mark. Together, they have raised their two children in Bernardsville. Ruth takes immense pride in her role as a doting grandmother to three adorable grandchildren.



The Natirar Estate and Kate Macy Ladd Convalescent Home

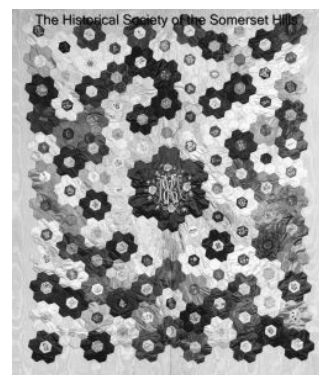
New Museum Exhibit through 2025

In 2024, THSSH received a major donation of historical records and artifacts from the Borough of Peapack and Gladstone, documenting its rich history. Items from the collection that came from Natirar and the Kate Macy Ladd Convalescent Home were selected for this museum exhibit. Additional items were donated by local historian W. Barry Thomson.

Natirar encompassed 1,000 acres across three towns, and was one of the largest privately owned properties in the area. Kate's branch of the Macy family established a successful whaling and shipping business on Nantucket in the 1600s, which eventually led her father to establish an oil refinery that in 1872, was acquired by John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company.

The feature element in this exhibit is the extravagant 1883 Engagement Quilt - a 5 foot x 6 foot photographic print (*image above*) that looks kaleidoscopic when viewed upon entering the Brick Academy. The intricate pattern quilt fabricated by Kate's female friends and relatives from both the Macy and Ladd families, was made in anticipation of Kate Everit Macy's December 5, 1883 wedding to Walter Graeme Ladd. The couple had no children.

Having struggles throughout her life with personal loss and various illnesses, Kate Ladd was inspired to devote much of her family fortune to support medical research, health care and convalescence, initially at Maple Cottage on their estate, which operated as a convalescent home until the larger facility was established in the mansion. Over 22,000 female "guests" were admitted without charge to the Kate Macy Ladd Convalescent Home at Natirar (1949-1983).



The Museum is open 2-4 pm the first Sunday of each month

Exhibit items can also be viewed on our website by visiting Online Collections from our Homepage

Gone But Not Forgotten — Pluckemin's Revolutionary War Houses, Part 2

The Boylan House

By Cynthia Crosson

The Somerset Hills has been home to captains of industry and financial moguls throughout its history. John Boylan, also known as CAPT Bullion, was among the first. During the American Revolution, he owned and operated in Pluckemin the largest and most successful general store for miles around. Its patrons included Bernards residents and those from many other communities. John also owned stores and taverns in Liberty Corner, Vealtown (now Bernardsville), and Vanderveer Mills. Some think he came to be called Bullion because of his financial genius.¹



The Boylan house was built in 1751 by John's father Aaron across the street from what is now the Pluckemin Presbyterian Church. It was St. Paul's Lutheran Church at the time. Aaron had provided funds to help build the church. John, who was born in 1746, lived in the house for many years with his wife Eleanor Hodge Boylan. "Eleanor was a remarkable lady. She was married at 15 and had 15 children, most of whom lived to grow up. Her husband died when he was 45 years old. She was a widow for 50 years, dying at ninety-five years of age."²

The Boylans were among the many Pluckemin residents who welcomed Washington and his troops in early January 1777 during the army's two-day rest stop following the battles of Trenton and Princeton. Washington actually slept in the neighboring Fenner House during this stop. (See Part 1 of this series about the Fenner House in the THSSH October Newsletter.) "The Story of An Old Farm," by Andrew Mellick describes the great excitement and activity Washington's rest stop brought to Pluckemin. "Captain Bullion too—John Boylan, Pluckemin's first storekeeper—was robbed of his usual Sunday quiet, being obliged to expose his wares for the benefit of impatient soldiers and visitors."³

The fields behind the Boylan house were also pressed into service during the war. The rear boundary of the house was known as General Knox's Lane. It was built on orders of General Henry Knox, Washington's first Secretary of War, to provide access to the artillery encampment built to house and train over 1,000 men and all their equipment.⁴ Construction of the barracks began in December 1778 and was completed in a month. Construction of the other buildings, including an academy, continued in 1779 during Washington's Middlebrook encampment.⁵ Knox's temporary military academy at Pluckemin is considered the original West Point.

The north lawn of the Boylan house is also reputed to have been the site of a temporary ballroom that was the scene of what was no doubt the most glittering social event in Pluckemin's history — the Grand Alliance Ball in 1779. John and Eleanor entertained George and Martha Washington in and around their home during the ball, which celebrated the one-year anniversary of the American colonies' alliance with France.

The artillery encampment is now near the homes which are part of the Hills development built in the 1980s. An archaeological dig was conducted to preserve artifacts from the encampment before the construction of the Hills. The artifacts are preserved in the collections of the Jacobus Vanderveer House & Museum in Bedminster.

John became a judge in Somerset County and was also known as "Judge John" before he died.⁶ He and Eleanor now reside in the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church cemetery. The original house, on the site of what is currently Quantum Wellness, was purchased by investors and converted to office and retail space in 1989.

¹ "Among the Blue Hills," Bernardsville History Book Committee, 1991, p. 45;

"The History of Hunterdon and Somerset Counties," James P. Snell, 1881, p. 712.

² "Our Home: A Monthly Magazine devoted to Local and General Literature," Vol. I, 1873, p. 533.

³ "The Story of An Old Farm," Andrew D. Mellick, 1889, pp. 384.

⁴ "Bedminster Township 250 Years," Prich Matthews, 1999, pp. 32-33.

⁵ The Somerset County Historical Quarterly, Vol. V, pp. 234-235; Vol. VI, p. 162.

⁶ A letter written by F. H. Bockoven to Arch Carswell, former President of the Basking Ridge Historical Society (now The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills), June 12, 1961. Photo source is THSSH Archives.

THSSH GIFT PROGRAM

The Board of Trustees extends its sincere gratitude to members and community friends who have contributed 2024 monetary gifts to further our mission to *Study the Past, Record the Present, and Connect the Future*. Donation levels highlight some of the historical figures from the Brick Academy (Basking Ridge Classical School). To learn about their remarkable lives, visit our website at www.thssh.org.

William Dayton - Up to \$100

Dominick & Nancy Alfano, Robert & Rosalie Baker, Leslie Brownwitt, Mary Beth Bubert, Mary Jane Canose, Rebecca Casey, Michael & Elizabeth Catelli, Jeanne Clements, Granville & Susan Conway, William & Margaret Cronin, Cynthia Crosson, Michael & Marilyn Dee, Tom & Karen Fitzsimons, Kelly & Douglas Hoff*, Mary Kempen, Anne Kennison, Carolyn Koch, Steven Kramer, Earnest & Veronica Larini, Roberta Marion, Janet Mavec, Michael Omalley, Justin & Morgan Opalenski, Janet Petrillo, Michael & Alexandra Saulich, Francis & Gail Smith, John Smith, Matthew & Joanne Suriano, William Barry Thomson, Kevin & Ann Torstein, Kenneth & Margaret Trinter, Kimberley Turiansky, Jonathan & Mary Vanceef, Janice Virtue

* In memory of friend Brian Bosland

Robert Stockton - \$101 to \$200

William Engel, Edmond & Bonnie Gould, Richard Lufkin, Jerry & Marcella Miccolis

Samuel Southard - \$201 to \$300

Lorraine Heinen, J Neil & Jane Kazan, Joseph Metelski, Paul & Stephanie St. Onge, Gregory & Molly Romano, Jesse & Emma Watters, Ron & Susan Zibelli

Reverend Samuel Kennedy - \$500 Plus

Roy Crego, Barbara Long, Judy Quigley, David Urbani

If 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.



MUSEUM ACQUISITIONS

The Board of Trustees extends its sincere gratitude to the following patrons for their generous gifts:

- Peapack & Gladstone Municipal Archive, 45 boxes
Gift of Borough of Peapack and Gladstone, NJ
- Twenty surveys and other drawings pertaining to the Natirar Estate
Gift of W. Barry Thomson, Williamsburg, MA
- Richard Irving Family Bible from Madisonville, NJ
Gift of Wanda Linzer, Barnet, VT
- Five blueprints of Lyons Railroad Station
Gift of James Baker, Rutherford, NJ

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

Ann Belland	Waterford, VA
Barbara Cipolla	Lebanon, NJ
Lois Clark	Bridgewater, NJ
Maureen Corcoran	Basking Ridge, NJ
Jonathan Cuss	Basking Ridge, NJ
Nancy Edden	Basking Ridge, NJ
Jane Fitzpatrick	Basking Ridge, NJ
Christopher Herold	Pottersville, NJ
Ashley Mason	Bernardsville, NJ
Maria Nadel	Pottersville, NJ
Eileen Napolitano	Basking Ridge, NJ
Morgan Opalenski	Basking Ridge, NJ
Cian Riely	Watchung, NJ
Jeannette Rosenfeld	Bernardsville, NJ
Roberta Ruschmann	Bernardsville, NJ
Alexandra Saulich	Gladstone, NJ
Mark & Jennifer Shaper	Basking Ridge, NJ
Jutta Seeler	Summit, NJ
Wendy Tabor	Bernardsville, NJ
Raymond & Bernadette Wierzbicki	Bernardsville, NJ

2024 Annual Report

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- **Research – Nationwide**

Close to 40 research requests were addressed by Trustees throughout 2024, with 7 in-person visits to THSSH's Research Room in the Brick Academy. THSSH's Archivist position became vacant in 2024. An Archive Committee was formed consisting of one Trustee and three volunteers. The Committee met regularly at the Brick Academy to develop and work on proper management of our archives and donated materials. The electronic catalog program that went live January 2024, continues to capture extensive information, which has been shared, in part, on THSSH's website through the Online Collections Catalog, which launched in September 2024. The Online Collections Catalog contained 130 public access records as of December 2024. THSSH's library was culled of books not related to the Somerset Hills.

- **Museum – Somerset Hills**

The museum was open to the public the first Sunday of each month from 2-4pm. Room-darkening window shades were installed on the third floor to protect artifacts from fading, the same as were installed on the main floor in 2023. A special exhibit was installed on the main floor of the museum in November, "The Natirar Estate and Kate Macy Ladd Convalescent Home." The exhibit showcases the Natirar estate in Peapack-Gladstone, and the convalescent home, which admitted over 22,000 female guests without charge during its operation (1949-1983). Through Bernards Township, the Brick Academy was registered to participate as one of 15 programs in consideration for the New Jersey Motion Picture and Television Commission Film Ready New Jersey Project.

- **Communications – Nationwide**

Members received three issues of "*Inside the Brick Academy*" newsletters, along with the annual report. Copies of the newsletter are also left at Bernards Township Town Hall. An email communication is sent at the same time as the newsletter to members, as well as non-members. The email highlights programs and events and includes a Volunteer Spotlight. The email leads readers to the current newsletter on our website, as well as our Blog and Facebook page. Copies of the 2024 Programs & Events brochure were left at Bernards Township Town Hall, and in local food and business establishments.

- **Website and Social Media – Nationwide**

THSSH migrated the website to a new hosting and website computer support company in 2024. THSSH continued to communicate news and information through our website www.thssh.org, and through eMail. The Genealogy Research page was updated to add other religious denominations, FamilySearch, and FindaGrave. Our Facebook page has 392 followers; our Instagram page has 235 followers.

- **Programs – Somerset Hills, surrounding area**

"Revolutionary Spies," a talk about George Washington's Intelligence Network, was given at the Brick Academy in February. A tour of the Congdon-Overlook Lodge in downtown Bernardsville was offered as part of the "Freemason Secrets" program in March. In April, THSSH held its signature event, "Afternoon Tea," at FOX News CEO's historic home on Bernardsville Mountain, '*Little Thorseby*.' Author reading and book signing of "Architecture of *the Gilded Age*," was held at Blairsdon Mansion in May. The Real Housewives of New Jersey program was held at the Brick Academy in September. A Members Social Gathering at the Brick Academy in November and Holiday Party at a Trustee's historic home on Bernardsville Mountain ended the year.

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- **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. THSSH expressed a concern to the Bernardsville Planning Board about the plan to tear down the Boylan House in Bernardsville. THSSH's website promoted the preservation of the gravestones in the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church Cemetery and the restoration of the steeple of the Pottersville Reformed Church in Bedminster.

- **Membership – Nationwide**

Total members in 2024 were 268. THSSH welcomed 54 new members in 2024.

- **Donations – Nationwide**

THSSH received over \$8000 in donations. Several artifacts were donated to the museum including a collection of title searches and other documents relating to Bernards Township from Palmer Law Offices (gift of Peter Palmer, Bernardsville); two circa 1860 handcrafted wood chairs (gift of Connie Kearns-Doughty, Basking Ridge); blueprints of Lyons RR Station (gift of James Baker, Rutherford, NJ); and Natirar estate photos, surveys and drawings (gift of W. Barry Thomson, Williamsburg, MA). The Borough of Peapack & Gladstone passed a Resolution in June 2024, authorizing their Historic Preservation Committee to donate all their historical items to THSSH.

2025 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.

Respectfully submitted:

Susan Zibelli

Susan Zibelli, THSSH Chairperson

January 27, 2025

For the full report, contact THSSH at 908-221-1770 or info@THSSH.org

THSSH

P.O. Box 136

Basking Ridge, NJ 07920

www.thssh.org



Natirar – A Journey Through Time

Date: February 23, 2025

Time: 12:30pm - 3:30pm

Lecture and Luncheon at Pendry Natirar

Fee: \$150 per person

Location: Pendry Natirar, 400 Natirar Drive, Peapack NJ



We invite you to embark on A Journey Through Time and immerse yourself in the enchanting history of the Natirar Estate. Discover the illustrious legacy of Kate Macy Ladd and her husband, Walter Graeme Ladd, at an exclusive luncheon event, co-hosted by The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills and Pendry Natirar.

Prepare to be captivated by W. Barry Thomson, a distinguished local historian and acclaimed co-author of the two-volume works, *New Jersey Country Houses: The Somerset Hills*. He will reveal the hidden stories of 'Natirar and the Ladd family,' bringing to life the opulence and grandeur of a bygone era. With a stunning array of visuals, Thomson will whisk you away to the turn of the 20th century, unveiling the origins of the Ladds' breathtaking 1,000-acre estate, crafted by the renowned architects Guy Lowell and Henry Janeway Hardenbergh.

Support the Society's noble mission to preserve our rich heritage while experiencing the meticulously restored and reimagined estate by Pendry Natirar, now transformed into one of New Jersey's premier destinations.

Visit <https://somersehillshistoricalsociety.org/events/natirar-a-journey-through-time/> for more information and to reserve your seat. Sponsorship opportunities are also available.

