



**2024 Annual Report**  
**The Historical Society of the Somerset Hills**  
**Submitted by Sue Zibelli, Chairman**

**Board of Trustees**

Sue Zibelli	Chairman
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. Advisory Trustees joined in February. Three additional Trustees joined in September. One Trustee resigned in December. The Board convened ten times during 2024.

A general membership meeting was held in November. General membership meetings may include business updates, announcements and guest speakers. A new rotating exhibit “The Natirar Estate and Kate Macy Ladd Convalescent Home” was installed in the Brick Academy museum.

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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. In May 2024, 100 students from BMS attended this program for the first time. BMS is planning to continue to come to the Brick Academy with their 5<sup>th</sup> 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.

- **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](http://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 Blairsden 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.

- **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 and 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 membership in 2024 was 234. THSSH welcomed 48 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.

## **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.

## **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 close to 40 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 "The Natirar Estate and Kate Macy Ladd Convalescent Home," is on display at the historical society's headquarters museum at the Brick Academy. The exhibit showcases the Natirar estate, which encompassed 1,000 acres in Peapack-Gladstone, and the convalescent home.

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 and maintained 24/7 and maintained in perpetuity. THSSH joins 50 other New Jersey historical organizations participating in NJDH.

### **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 \$8000 in donations. Donations and Bequests are received from our school programs, current and past members, and their families.
- Membership dues paid in 2024 were \$3,775.
- 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 \$860.
- Non-profit organizations that conduct meetings at the Brick Academy provide a contribution.
- Area residents and out-of-town visitors to our museum leave donations in our donation box at the Brick Academy.

### **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, American Association for State and Local History, Small Museum Association, and National Trust for Historic Preservation.

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

### **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 Chairman

January 27, 2025