

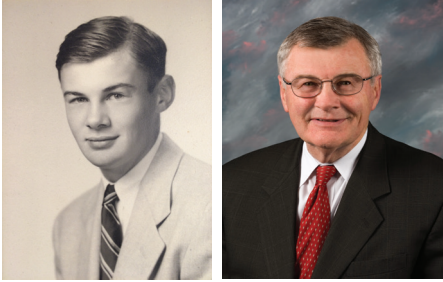
Exploring Bernardsville's Origins: A Journey Through Time

by PETER PALMER

BLOG POST #1

1760-1908

PETER PALMER - LIFELONG RESIDENT



He's a collector of facts, particularly with respect to Bernardsville. He can recite the nearly dozen name changes that the original Bernardsville Bank has had up to becoming Wells Fargo; he knows exactly how many gas stations were in the borough 30 years ago, before most of them closed down.

When the local history book, *"Among the Blue Hills,"* was revised in 1999, Palmer wrote the chapter on business and industry.

"In Olcott Square, every one-story building you see is a former two-story building destroyed by fire," he noted.

He said he's probably marched through the borough's downtown in close to 50 Memorial Day parades, dating back to "my freshman year in high school when I was in band."

Born in 1936, Palmer has spent his entire life in his borough. His family has deep roots here; his father, Arthur A. Palmer Jr., served on the Bernardsville school board and as borough attorney, while his grandfather, Arthur A. Palmer Sr., was the borough's magistrate.

Palmer graduated from Bernards High School in 1954 as valedictorian and had maintained his connection to the school by volunteering with the marching band for 50 years, until 2006, and still regularly attends graduations. After earning a degree from Cornell University, he pursued a career in finance, eventually becoming a vice president and actuary at Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company before retiring in 1991.

In 1962, Palmer was elected to the Bernardsville school board, later transitioning to the Somerset Hills Regional school board. During his tenure, significant bond issues were passed to expand Bernards High and construct a new middle school. After more than six years on the school board, Palmer resigned in June 1968 to join the Borough Council, where he served for nearly 17 years.

In January 1985, Palmer became mayor following Mayor Michael J. Nervine's resignation due to health reasons. He would be re-elected three times, serving a total of 10 years. His tenure coincided with the residence of heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson in Bernardsville. Palmer even shared a memorable car ride with Tyson from Newark Airport to Bernardsville Train Station for a public birthday celebration, albeit enduring a three-hour delay, luckily with Oprah Winfrey's company.

Peter's interest in the the local history, prompted him to recant these events including his own personal recollections and are memorialized in these blogs.

1740-1878

The township of Bernards was created on May 24th, 1760 by a royal charter granted by King George II. The northern section of the township was a community known as Vealtown, a name whose origin was debated but never resolved. A smaller hamlet, Logtown, existed on Hardscrabble Road. The center of Vealtown was John Parker's Tavern (*"The Old Library"*) built in 1730 which certainly was very active during the revolution. George Washington spent two winters close by in Morristown. His troops were camped in Jockey Hollow. Munitions were manufactured a few miles south in Pluckemin.

The tavern was purchased by Roderick Mitchell in 1840. Mitchell began a one man's campaign charging that the Vealtown designation was offensive and should be eliminated. As a result of his campaign, Bernardsville became the official name.



Vealtown Tavern by Lucille Hobbie from the collection of Philip Grant-Kennedy

Bernardsville, as we know it, was born in 1872 when the *"Passaic and Delaware"* (later named *Delaware Lackawanna and Western*) railroad arrived. Rails were extended to Gladstone in 1890. The borough form of government did not exist until 1878 when it was defined and authorized by the New Jersey legislature. At that time Somerset County consisted of seven townships and now there are 21 municipalities.

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1760-1908

1890-1898



Lackawanna Station, Bernardsville, N.J.

What was the attraction of Bernardsville? Imagine a sultry, humid, July day with a temperature in the 90s in Manhattan, before air conditioning! Imagine you are a wealthy captain of finance or industry who needs to spend the day on Wall Street and can ride back and forth in a "members only", railroad club car to enjoy the clean country air. Also, it was often mentioned the added value of the 800 ft. elevation of the Bernardsville Mountain.

The development of the Mountain Colony was best summarized by a quote from the book "Among the Blue Hills." "Bernardsville offered the super-rich the opportunity to have a "country house" along with their "townhouse" on Fifth, Park, or Madison Ave., their summer spot in Newport or Southampton, or a distant getaway such as Pinehurst, N.C. The country house had to be a place which would enable a man of wealth and power to live in the style which the landed gentry of Victorian England had established for men of that caliber. The men who built the Mountain had a great kinship with Victorian England.

The first two residents of what became the "Mountain Colony" were George B. Post and George I. Seney. George Browne Post was a New York architect. He served as president of the American Institute of Architects. He was described as the master of American architects and was instrumental in the birth of the skyscraper. He designed the New York Stock Exchange building and Cornelius Vanderbilt's Fifth Ave. mansion. He is most famous for his work at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. He was called by many - the mastermind of this fair. That event was most renowned for the spectacular buildings which were built there.

The crown jewel of the fair was the manufacturers and liberal arts building which Post designed. It was called the largest building in the world. It was the biggest in area (covering 32 acres) and erected under one (200 ft. high) roof. *"It has yet been recognized by a triumph artistically not less than as a marvel of daring construction. it compelled the astonishment and admiration of the artists and architects of the world."*

George Post was more than simply a resident of Bernardsville. He designed the parsonage of the Methodist Church as well as both the chapel and parsonage of the Italian Presbyterian Church. He also designed the building or renovation of numerous Mountain Colony homes, including both Boulderwood and his own Kenilwood, and others which are still gracing the Mountain community.

George Ingraham Seney was the president of the Metropolitan Bank of New York. His first example of public generosity in Bernardsville was to pay for the construction of a new, wooden, Methodist Church, and release all the outstanding pledges of the members. The congregation offered to name the church after him, but Seney graciously declined.

In his early days in Bernardsville, Seney assembled several buildings on the Mountain and ended up constructing the Somerset Inn plus eight surrounding cottages and several outbuildings. The inn, completed in 1888, was five stories tall and over 200 ft long. It accommodated 400-500 guests. It was operated from June through September each year. George Seney passed away April 17, 1893. The Inn was sold to Grant Schley in 1895. George Jr. continued his father's generosity to the community and the Methodist Church. He participated in the laying of the cornerstone of the current church in 1913.



In June of 1898 the casino at the Inn was made available to the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, whose sanctuary had not yet been constructed, to hold mass.

The Somerset Inn was the centerpiece of the Mountain Colony and the attraction of many of the rich and famous to come to Bernardsville. The front page of the weekly Bernardsville News listed the guests of the Somerset Inn and all the activities which took place there. The ballroom was the scene of many community events. In June of 1906, one of America's earliest civil rights leaders, Booker T. Washington, was invited to present a lecture at the Inn, "Delving the Race Problem". The lecture was interesting and instructive from beginning to end. Every seat was taken. The lecture was for the benefit of the Tuskegee Institute and a neat sum was realized by a collection at the end.

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1760-1908

1888-1908

One of the early arrivals in Bernardsville was Frederic Pepoon Olcott, a native of Albany, NY, he was politically active, serving as controller for the city of New York. He was offered to be the democratic nominee for governor, but he declined. He was a very successful banker, it is written "his name will always be remembered as that of one of the most successful bankers New York City and the entire country would ever have".

Olcott began acquiring land in Bernardsville in December 1888 when he purchased a 126-acre farm from George Seney. The farm included what is now the Somerset Hills Country Club and was called Roundtop Farm. The Farm was known for raising trotting horses and propagating exotic plants and flowers. Olcott befriended Father Joseph Ryan, first pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. As a result of their close friendship, Olcott, though a Protestant, agreed to match all donations for the construction of the new church in 1900. In addition, he also paid off all the other debts of the church. Father Ryan had been appointed by Bishop of Trenton, James McFaul, to be pastor here in 1898. Father Ryan celebrated mass for the first time on June 26th, 1898, that year in the casino of the Somerset Inn and continued to do so there for the rest of the summer. After that first service a dinner was given at the Somerset Inn where Mr. Olcott learned there was no property for the rectory, so he purchased it and donated it to the church. Father Ryan served Our Lady with distinction until 1914. The sanctuary was consecrated by Bishop McFaul and the first mass was



Somerset Hills Country Club

At the same time, the Episcopal congregation formed in 1896. They acquired the property the following year and the cornerstone of St Bernards Church was laid, also in 1897. The sanctuary was designed by Napoleon Le Brun, the designer of the Manhattan Life building in New York. In November 1899, Reverend Thomas Conover became Rector and began a remarkable 40-year career serving not only St Bernards but leading the creation of four other area parishes, including St John on the Mountain, all of which became known as the "Conover Parishes." The church initiated a nursing service in 1903. It expanded and separated into the Somerset Hills Visiting Nurse Association in 1906. St John on the Mountain was built in 1907. Percy Pyne and John Roebling were two of its early strong supporters. The Italian Presbyterian Church, on Maple Street, was designed by George Post and built in 1910. Its first Pastor was Thomas Barbieri who served until 1916 and again from 1929 to 1942.

Olcott was the major supporter of the Fire Company and First Aid Service, which had been formed in 1897. He donated a new fire truck and was the largest contributor to the new Mill St Fire House and its furnishings in 1908.



Firehouse on Mill Street

His most significant contribution started with a 26-acre purchase along Wolfe Ave where he paid for the construction of a new \$100,000 school building and contributed to the school community in 1905. Thus, Bernards High School was born! As a result of all of this, the street, the school building and accompanying athletic field, the town square and a pair of Bernards High annual scholarships all bear his name.



Dedication of Olcott School in 1905

The Olcott School building was designed by Bernardsville resident, architect Henry Hardenberg. Hardenberg is famous for his designs of Manhattan's Plaza Hotel on Fifth Avenue and the Dakota Apartment building on Central Park West. He also designed the parish house of St Bernards Church and several homes in the Mountain Colony.



Olcott School with Buses