

Exploring Bernardsville's Origins: A Journey Through Time

by PETER PALMER

BLOG POST #2

1908-1914

1908 - 1909

Shortly after midnight on May 6th, 1908, a fire broke out at the Somerset Inn and quickly engulfed the entire wood frame structure. The firemen soon recognized that all was lost and turned to save the nearby buildings. All that was left of the Somerset Inn were 20-some lonely chimneys. Several attempts were made to rebuild the Inn, but nothing got past the discussion phase. It was truly the end of an era.

Frederic Olcott passed away at his beloved Roundtop Farm on April 15th, 1909. All of his many contributions to the community during his lifetime here created an expectation of further bequeaths upon his passing. Unfortunately, his love of Bernardsville was not shared by other members of the family, who left shortly after his death, without any further gifts to the community.

Percy Rivington Pyne (1857-1929) was a very successful banker and businessman on Wall Street along with his many interests in scientific research and health related organizations. He and his wife Maud came to Bernardsville with their five children in 1898. The Pynes' new residence on the estate overlooking Ravine Lake ultimately grew to 500 acres. One of their purchases was the original nine-hole Somerset golf course. A house was built there for their son Grafton and his wife. That site was later acquired by Charles Engelhard (the inspiration for Goldfinger!). The Pyne's new residence was built high above Ravine Lake between 1899-1901, it featured 20 main rooms, nine servants' rooms, cottages, barns, etc. It was named Upton Pyne after the family's ancestral home of the same name in the village of Upton, Devonshire, England.



Upton Pyne

Percy Pyne took a great interest in his estate and his community. He treasured horses, sheep and guernsey cattle. He supported the local schools, served as President of the Library Association and as a trustee of the Somerset Hills Country Club.

Another example of a captain of industry calling Bernardsville home was John Fairfield Dryden, a founder and third President of Prudential Insurance Company. He was called the 'Father of Industrial Insurance.' He purchased what is now called "Stronghold" in 1899 and retained George Post to redesign and expand the home to its current magnificence. Dryden managed to amass a tract of 10,000 acres in Sussex County. It was bequeathed to his daughter and her husband, Col. Anthony Kuser, himself a stalwart of the Mountain Colony. The Kusers gifted the land to the State of New Jersey in 1920 and it became High Point State Park.

Stronghold



Dryden served one term as U.S. Senator. At his death in 1911, Prudential established a memorial and placed a bronze statue of him in the rotunda of the corporate headquarters. His son Forrest Fairfield Dryden became the President of Prudential, a process reminiscent of the tradition of the British Royal Family. There were more captains of finance, commerce and industry who made the Mountain Colony their home and contributed to the aura of that special place.

A changing of the guard of the mountain colony was gradually taking place. It began when John Augustus Roebling II arrived in 1904, at age 36. He purchased Boulderwood which had been designed by George Post. John's grandfather, John A. Roebling, designed the Brooklyn Bridge and his father, Washington Roebling, oversaw the construction of the bridge. During his life here and up to his death in 1952, John II made many donations to the Fire Company throughout the years and was named an honorary chief. He picked up that responsibility after Frederic Olcott had passed away. John paid for an addition to the library. He provided all the equipment for the newly formed Business Improvement Society. He actively sought out local residents who were in need during the depression and helped the local bank in that financially trouble era. Whenever a public need arose John Roebling stepped forward to take care of it. He was truly a local hero in a challenging time. He even paid for other local projects including the stone wall in front of the train station and the chain link fence around the high school field.

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The changing of the guard continued when Frederic Olcott passed away in 1909 as did John Dryden in 1911 and George Post in 1913.



Boulderwood

While the activities of the Mountain Colony during the summer months was the genesis of Bernardsville early growth there was much more happening. Downtown Bernardsville grew up to service the Mountain Colony. The ambiance of accumulated wealth and power of the new Mountain residents created a demand for goods and services for the community. Staffs of 50 or more were not uncommon at each of the large estates. Artisans, shopkeepers, stonemasons, laborers and professionals from all walks of life were attracted to the downtown. My grandfather Arthur Palmer, an attorney, brought his family here in 1910 and opened his first office in downtown Bernardsville.

The largest group of new residents arriving downtown before and after the turn of the century was from Italy. They settled mostly in the Bernards Ave area, which has long been referred to as Little Italy. After helping to create the opulent mansions, they continued to raise their families here and many of them worked for the owners of the Mountain estates. Others started businesses in the village. The Italian Benefit Society was formed in 1905. Many descendants of those early families still call Bernardsville home. When Columbus Day became an official holiday in 1909 it was greeted here with great fanfare by the Italian community, as were each succeeding October 12th. In the spring of 1909 Father Joseph Antliff, who spoke Italian fluently, was appointed Curate at Our Lady of Perpetual Help. On his first day he held mass for a standing room only crowd in a rented barn and delivered a sermon in Italian. Through his efforts property was acquired on Bernards Ave and the Sacred Heart Chapel was built there, opening on Christmas Day of 1911. The Italian Presbyterian Church, designed by George Post, was built on Maple Street in 1910. Their first Pastor was Thomas Barbieri who served until 1916 and again from 1929 to 1942.

A significant, though smaller neighborhood, of Hungarian immigrants, developed along Claremont Rd., North of the five corners in the same era. They also served the Mountain estates. This community was deeply troubled by the Soviet repression of a popular uprising in their home country in October 1956.

Throughout the years, starting with the Martin Liddy family in 1863, many Irish families came to Bernardsville and became an important part of the fabric of the community. Don't forget St Patrick's day!

1900 is when conversations first began regarding the formation of separate boroughs within Bernards Township: Bernardsville, Basking Ridge and Far Hills.

In 1903 the then owners of John Parker's Vealtown Tavern, James and Mary Ballentine, donated the building to the library association. The Bernards Inn was built in 1906 and was bought and sold many times over the years. It was closed from 1917-1923. The Visiting Nurse Association moved into new headquarters on Olcott Ave., also in 1906, and was there for decades before moving to a new home on Mt Airy Road in Basking Ridge.



Bernards Inn

The Fire Company and First Aid Squad have served the community faithfully since their founding in 1897. In the early years, the company participated in annual competitive "inspections" with several other area fire companies. These events were well attended by the community. A particular celebration took place on July 4th, 1906. The celebration was the greatest event ever taken place here or in the vicinity. Five thousand spectators representing every village for miles around including New York, Newark and others who would come to spend the day with friends and observe the celebration. The Fire Company moved into new headquarters on Mill Street in 1908, thanks to a generous contribution from Frederic Olcott. The second floor of that building served as the courtroom for Bernards Township. It was referred to, sarcastically, as the "Mill St. Temple of Justice" by the Bernardsville News of that day.



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Up to and right after the turn of the century, any law enforcement that was called upon was provided by the Somerset County Sheriff. The relatively calm atmosphere of the community was about to change. A wake-up call was received on November 10, 1908. An article in the Courier News (1908 is the only year where the Bernardsville News records have been lost) wrote: The citizens of Bernardsville are indignant over acts by marauders, throwing beer casks at the fountain in the town square, smashing property, and defiling the train station platform. In April 1909 the Bernardsville News building was trashed. It reported that on March 18, 1910, the downtown was degraded by rail-birds hanging out on the sidewalk near the train station, shuffling and sparring with each other, rudely jostling ladies and children, and with a bold gaze they were ogling of girls and women.

On July 10, 1910 a posse of eighteen men from county and state law enforcement descended on Bernardsville to several illegal, tax avoiding brewers of beer. Several were arrested and taken to jail in Somerville. Not surprisingly, this coincided with a growing concern about alcohol abuse and public drunkenness. All the lawless behavior prompted calls for action. The first organization formed was the Board of Inebriate Protectors who sought to define and punish drunken activity. The township committee debated the formation of a police department but didn't want to spend the money. Finally, in 1914, it was agreed that a police force would be created and would be paid for one-half by the township and half by the Bernards Protective Association which had supplanted the Board of Inebriate Protectors.



Parade band and float