

Exploring Bernardsville's Origins: A Journey Through Time

by PETER PALMER

BLOG POST #3

1910-1918

1910 - 1918

The township committee's 1914 decision to form a police department was a clear statement that the era of lawless behavior and public drunkenness in Bernardsville was to be ended. The committee chose a little-known local man, Peter Stryker, to be the chief. Stryker had worked for both the local electric and water companies in a management capacity. One of John Roebling's many contributions to Bernardsville's early development was to supply the nascent police department with the finest equipment available and to work with Stryker on his mission to straighten out the community. The two men became close friends and set out on that mission.

The Old Stone Hotel dates to 1849. It was known as Boylan's Tavern. It was originally built along with a stone barn, which was truly a magnificent structure. It was used to store a new fire truck in 1898. The barn was demolished in 1906, much to the chagrin of many. The stone was used in the construction of the Bernards Inn.



The Old Stone Hotel

The original train station was built to serve the arrival of the railroad in 1872. The building was moved to Morristown Road, adjacent to the Congdon Lodge, by Evander Schley in 1905. For many years it served as the home of the Bernardsville News. Its future is undetermined as of this writing. The current train station was built in 1901-1902. It was designed by famous architect Bradford Gilbert, who specialized in railroad stations around the country. It was paid for by real estate promoter Mort Schley. In those early days, the "flagship" of the railroad was the Millionaires Express, complete with a club car. After stops in Peapack, Far Hills, and Mine Brook, it was an express from Bernardsville to Hoboken.

The wealthy new arrivals to the Mountain contributed generously to the community by supporting churches, The Fire Company and library. The groundwork laid by the captains of banking, insurance, commerce, and industry in 1900, along with the support of the community, have lasted to a remarkable degree for 125 years. Despite world wars, the income tax, market crashes and depressions, the Mountain Colony, though on smaller lot size, is still "The Mountain."

In 1908 a serious discussion began about the three communities (Bernardsville, Basking Ridge and Far Hills) in the Township forming boroughs. In 1910 there was an attempt to create a "County of Bernards" with Bernardsville as the county seat. A petition with 200 signatures was gathered and Senate Bill 189 was put before the legislature and referred to the senate judiciary committee. The arguments were that the northern section of the county paid a disproportionate share of the county taxes without representation and there was no direct train service to Somerville. The senate committee never put the issue up for a vote and it died there.

In 1909 a movement began to build a separate high school structure on the Olcott Ave site. After an initial bond defeat, and subsequent approval in March 1911 for the awarding of contracts, the building was completed in 1915. It served as Bernards High School until 1926. St Elizabeth's school was constructed in 1916, a gift of the children of businessman James Cox Brady.



Bernards High School 1915



Bernards High School 1926



Bernards High School 1968



Train Station 1902

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In addition to the opportunity for the denizens of Wall Street to live in the beautiful countryside, the railroad accomplished another goal. Since the citizens of the villages of Peapack and Gladstone voted to secede from Bedminster Township in 1912 and form a new borough, the railroad served to unite the Somerset Hills. There were seven train stations between Lyons and Gladstone. The Far Hills train station is near the center of that stretch and close to the Far Hills Fairgrounds. Thus, any large outdoor event planned for the area was held at the fairgrounds and was accessible for many in the vicinity before the dominance of the automobile. Still to this day, high school students from Far Hills, Peapack, and Gladstone commute by train to attend Bernards High.

Students arriving by train



In this pre-war period, community spirit was demonstrated by the formation of several organizations, carefully selected to represent both the Mountain Colony and The Village. The first was the Business Improvement Society (B.I.S.) founded in 1907. B.I.S. and their first project and first donation of \$500 was for new sidewalks in the downtown. Other efforts included widening the main street and improving train service. Other organizations were the Italian Benefit Society (1905) with 100 members and the Board of Trade (1916) whose President was Frank Bergen, general counsel of the Public Service Corporation and resident of the Mountain Colony.

What is now the Congdon Lodge was built in 1910 as a Congregational Church. It was sold to the Masonic Order in 1929.

In October 1911, Governor Woodrow Wilson came to town and set up a headquarters at the Old Stone Hotel as he was campaigning for the presidency in the following year.

On August 22nd, 1912, a Grande Festival Italiana was held. It was a great day, and the observance thereof was a fine representation of the many church festivals by our Italian citizens in their native land. These events were celebrated here each succeeding year.

Shortly after the turn of the century, there was a plan to erect an appropriate symbol in the center of town. A contest for design was planned. When potential contestants learned George Post was going to enter, all others dropped out!

The resulting fountain was built inside a circle in The Square, but it was never connected to a water source! In 1913 there was a plan to replace the fountain in the circle with a triangle, with each side facing one of the surrounding blocks of buildings.



Fountain in the Square

Calvin Day Smith was one of Bernardsville's foremost citizens. His death was little if anything short of a public calamity. For more than half a century his name had stood as a synonym for honorable dealing and kindness in the community. He was very active in both the Bernardsville Methodist and Basking Ridge Presbyterian Churches. He passed away December 19, 1913, at the age of 73.

In 1914, a proposal to build a sewer system was voted down.

When Father Ryan departed for reassignment to a parish in Millville, New Jersey in 1914, he was feted at a large dinner before a grateful audience. The Bernard's Inn auditorium was filled with people of various denominations and of all classes united in their love and esteem toward one who has done faithful service for his churches and the churches of the community. The dinner was hosted by a young John McGuinness. McGuinness was subsequently active in Bernardsville's public affairs (particularly the board of health) for more than 50 years. At Father Ryan's departure, Father William McKean was appointed Pastor of Our Lady on October 2, 1914 and began a 33-year tenure at the parish. He was made Right Reverend Monsignor McKean by Pope Pius XI February 24, 1922.

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In January 1916 the Somerset Hills Country Club purchased a 200-acre site from the Olcott Estate and moved their facilities from Ravine Lake to their current location. Later in 1916, as a test case, a vote was held in Basking Ridge regarding the creation of a borough. It was voted six to one, no.



Somerset Hills Country Club 1916

In the early 1900s, "Chautauqua's" were very popular annual summer events throughout the country. They were three five-day outdoor conferences dedicated to the arts, music, education, religion and recreation. Chautauqua's were held at the Olcott School grounds each year from 1917-1925. My Grandfather Arthur Palmer was appointed Township Counsel in January 1918.

The First World War had been going on for more than a year when the United States entered with a Declaration on April 6, 1917. All men over the age of 21 had to register for the draft. The Bernardsville News published a weekly list of draft calls. The demands of war created shortages of food and fuel. The Bernardsville News reported that Bernards Township led the State in percentage pledging to campaign for food conservation, and that they had doubled their assigned quota for Liberty Bonds. The rationing caused a revision of school schedules. October 25, 1917 was National Service Night. It drew a crowd of 3,000 to Olcott Square and a parade led by the Chester Brass Band, a tableau, singing and a sham battle followed by appeals for Liberty Bonds, food conservation and additional recruits. By the following April Bernards had increased their Liberty Bonds purchases to triple their assigned quota.

On July 4, 1918 Bernards Township outdid itself with a demonstration of patriotism second to none in which every organization within its confines took an active and enthusiastic part. 150 flag draped cars paraded from Bernardsville, to Far Hills, to Liberty Corner, to Basking Ridge and back to Bernardsville. The Far Hills Fair was cancelled.

The end of fighting was anticipated in early November. When word came at 4:30 AM on the eleventh, "those who had been sleeping with their ears tuned for the first word of peace, lost control of themselves in their enthusiasm, grabbed the first firearm and fired it as fast and often as possible."

The Armistice was celebrated here in April 1919 by a Victory Ball in the Liberty Theatre attended by 600. The actual peace treaty was signed by President Harding on July 2, 1921, in Raritan while he was visiting here.

Bernardsville lost twenty men in the War. Their names are inscribed on the memorial near Borough Hall and are read as part of Memorial Day Ceremony every year.