



HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWS

SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER 1993

GENERAL MEETING TO BE AT MEADOW LAKES

The Society's next general meeting will be held at 7:30 P.M. on Monday, September 20, in the auditorium at Meadow Lakes Retirement Community. Past president David Martin will speak about Clara Barton's experiences as a school teacher in East Windsor in the year 1851-52. Miss Barton, who was still not settled on her life's goals, came to East Windsor to live with her friends in the Norton family, and was ten years away from achieving her fame as a nurse during the Civil War. Most of her biographies do not say much about her stay in East Windsor, even though much information is available through her own writings and local recollections. Dr. Martin, who is the Archivist at The Peddie School, is preparing a booklet for publication on the subject. The program will run less than an hour, and refreshments will be served.

UNIVERSALIST CHURCH BOOK COMES TO SOCIETY

The Society is proud to announce that it has received through donation the minute book kept by the Sunday School of the Hightstown Universalist Church. The volume covers the years from the forming of the Sunday School in the 1850s until the church closed in 1918. The book is the most important record of the local Universalists that has come to light.

The book reveals the names of pupils and teachers, the titles of books bought for the church library, and much other information about the running of the school. It also tells much about the membership of the church. As early as 1844, a visiting Methodist minister remarked that Hightstown was "remarkable for the number of Universalists that are in it." This book offers the first opportunity to find out who the Universalists were.

The history of the Universalist congregation in Hightstown is generally

known from a variety of sources, including a history of the denomination published in the early 1870s, and from individual manuscripts scattered among several of the Society's collections. In addition, the Society has a collection of correspondence documenting efforts to dispose of the church building after the congregation disbanded. But the minute books and financial records of the church are believed to have been destroyed in a fire at another church. The Sunday School book evidently survived because it was kept, apparently by a teacher or superintendent of the school, and thus was not among the records that were transferred.

The Society thanks Muriel and Robert Sutton and Joseph Locke for the donation. The Suttons moved from Hightstown last year to Bonita Springs, Florida.

TRAIN SHOW OCTOBER 23rd

The Freight Station committee will be co-sponsoring a Train Show on Saturday, October 23rd at the Hightstown Elks Lodge on Hickory Corner Road, from 9 AM to 3 PM. A portion of the proceeds will be going to help support the freight station project. Admission will be \$3.00 for adults, and children under 12 will be admitted free. So bring the kids to what will be a popular venue for Christmas shopping ideas!

As with the Doll Shows that the Society has sponsored, volunteers will be needed to help set up before the show, clean up afterward, and staff a table during the show to solicit contributions for the Freight Station project. Volunteers should call John Kilbride, 443-4746, or Alan Probasco, 448-8536.

The freight station restoration project took a step forward during the

summer with the extension of electrical service to the freight station. As a result, several lighting and electrical outlets in the building are now functional. This step will facilitate volunteer efforts to record the building more fully, and make it easier to perform repairs to the building.

Dolls To Be Featured at Open House Oct. 24th

An open House at Ely House will be held on Sunday October 24th from 2 to 5 PM. Doll houses, both old and new, will be featured. If you wish to exhibit your own doll houses, miniatures, or shadow boxes call Robin Smith, 448-8487.



CALENDAR of EVENTS

SEPTEMBER

- 13 Executive Committee (7:30)
- 20 General Meeting (7:30 at Meadow Lakes)

OCTOBER

- 4 Executive Committee (7:30)
- 23 Train Show at Hightstown Elks Lodge (9AM - 3PM)
- 24 Open House (2-5 PM)

JOHN & MARY HIGHT: THEIR LIFE AND TIMES

(Editor's Note: This is the second installment of the talk given by Robert Craig at the March 1992 general meeting; it is continued from the May-June 1993 newsletter.)

John Harrison Jr., formerly of Flushing, NY, may have encouraged some of the Hights to settle along the Millstone River as he himself had done. As a merchant, a land investor, and the original owner of the house known as "Rockingham," Harrison Jr. had already sold a large tract of land near the present Griggstown to a group of Long Island Dutchmen, and he had built the first gristmill at Rocky Hill, which helped encourage farming up and down the river. Jonathan and David Haight evidently settled permanently in the Harrison, New York area, but Hoyt was unable to figure out where either Nicholas or John went. He looked for them in New York but not in central New Jersey. Evidently he did not look in the right place.

John Hight may have come to the Millstone Valley, either with or following his brother Nicholas. In Ida Martin Pullen's 1896 account, *The Family History of John and Mary Hight of Hightstown, New Jersey*, she noted that John Hight's supposed 3,000 acres lay alongside land owned by William Penn, the great founder and namesake of Pennsylvania. Wherever she obtained this information, it is an apparent reference to Penn's Neck in West Windsor. First Penn and then his sons had owned Penns Neck from 1693 until 1737. But Pullen was unwittingly defeating her own argument. John Hight could not have lived in two places at once. If his land were situated at Penns Neck, then he could not have been living at Rocky Brook.

The Hightstown Area in 1721

John and Mary Hight did not own a 3,000-acre tract of land at Rocky Brook. What is known of them strongly suggests that they were landless until the 1740s. Beyond that, the ownership of all land in the Hightstown area from the 1690s until well after 1740 is known. Research conducted in the 1970s identified all of the actual owners. The Hights could not even

have occupied a 3,000-acre tract because there were no parcels of that size along Rocky Brook.

Hight's Family & Early Career

The shadows over John's origin extend also to his wife Mary and to their early years together. Nothing whatever is known of Mary Hight's early life: not even her maiden name or where she was born. She almost certainly came of age during the 1720s, and she and John may have married during that decade. Pullen states that their oldest son, John Jr., was born in 1731. She found that he married in 1758; he was very likely in his mid-twenties at the time. According to Pullen, another son, Joseph, was born in 1739. Recently, a third son, Thomas, has been identified. John and Mary may have had other children as well. Pullen mentioned that two, whose names are unknown, died in childhood. It seems likely that they also gave birth to one or more daughters, but if so, all record of their names has been lost. Probably all of their children were born before 1745.

Where the Hights spent their early married life is unknown, but by 1744 they were living in central New Jersey. In September of that year, "Jno. Hide" was baptized into the Baptist congregation that met at the "Old Yellow" meetinghouse in Upper Freehold. Mary Hight's name also appears in the record. The appearance of her name is significant, because it shows that she was not reared in this church, but only joined it with her husband after marriage.

Even though their congregation met in Upper Freehold, the Hights do not seem to have lived there. The following year, they were among a group who asked to be dismissed to form a congregation at "Cranberry" (Cranbury). When the Cranbury Baptist Church was organized on November 1, 1745, John and Mary were two of its seventeen original members. Circumstantial evidence suggests that by this time they had moved to Rocky Brook in what is now Hightstown Borough. Rocky Brook lay within what was then known as the "Township of New Windsor," the

southernmost township of Middlesex County, which extended south almost to Allentown. What is certain is that the Hights were already living in "New Winsor" when they bought their first land at Rocky Brook in 1747.

How John and Mary made ends meet during these years is also unknown. The only evidence of his career during this period is a single reference to him as a "wheelwright." His subsequent construction of the gristmill at Hightstown suggests he might have helped build other mills in the region. Several were put up during the 1730s

EXECUTIVE BOARD MEETINGS NOT JUST FOR THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

Have you ever wanted to become active in the Society but didn't quite know how to get started? Have you ever wanted to find out more about what is going on but didn't know whom to call? Come out to the Executive Board meeting each month.

The Executive Board (or "Executive Committee") meetings are the business meetings of the Society, where all the various goings on are discussed and decided. All the activities and events held by the Society are planned and approved there. Coming out is the easiest way to find out what's happening, long before you read it in the newsletter.

Despite the name, the meetings are not for the Executive Board alone. Though officers, trustees, and committee chairmen are expected to attend, the meetings are really for all interested members. So don't feel that you're not invited. The meetings are usually held the first Monday evening of each month, October through June, and on the second Monday in September due to the occurrence of Labor Day on the first Monday. Meetings are at 7:30 PM at Ely House.

and '40s, and in each case a wheelwright was needed to build and set into place the large overshot or breast wheel and the internal gearing that transmitted power to the millstones. As a wheelwright, Hight would probably have worked with a carpenter who had overall responsibility for the project.

One man for whom Hight might have worked was Isaac FitzRandolph of Princeton. Some of the gristmills being built in the Millstone valley in the 1730s and '40s can be attributed to him. He built one at the confluence of Millstone River and Stony Brook before 1735. He also appears to have built in 1742 what would later become known as Wyckoff's Mill in East Windsor.

Mills were expensive, much more costly than a house or a barn, and to finance them, the contractor frequently took an ownership position. FitzRandolph evidently built the latter mill with a 50-percent stake. After the building was completed, a miller would be found to operate it. But the miller was usually a tradesman who worked for a wage or a toll of the grain he ground. The mill itself would be sold to a prosperous farmer or merchant with enough resources to assume the capital burden. When a buyer could be found, the contractor would sell his interest, recover his investment, and make a profit. John Hight would soon follow this pattern at Rocky Brook. Whether he ever worked for FitzRandolph is unknown, but the two men certainly knew each other. When the Cranbury Baptists built their meetinghouse in 1748, they chose FitzRandolph as their contractor.

Hight's Mill and the Origin of Hightstown

1747 was a watershed year for central New Jersey, as a new governor, Jonathan Belcher, took over control of the colony. That year, David Brainerd's death put an end to his preaching to the Indians at Cranbury, a mission that became famous on both sides of the Atlantic when his journal was published. 1747 was also a year of land riots and the famous "Elizabethtown Bill" in New Jersey's Chancery Court. It was the year that Hightstown began.

By 1747, the eastern end of New Windsor already contained about two

dozen farms. But the neighborhood was without a center. It still relied on Cranbury, the nearest hamlet, three miles away, with its mills, churches, and taverns. On May 1, 1747, John Hight bought 80 acres on the north side of Rocky Brook, where the Old York Road crossed the stream and a gradual fall in its height were enough to create a battery pond that could drive mill machinery. Today, this pond is Peddie Lake. To impound all of this water, Hight had to build a dam of considerable extent: from the edge of the high ground near the First Baptist Church property to a point equally high north of the stream--perhaps 500 feet long altogether. He finished the mill by 1749, because in September of that year he sold it to a newcomer from Hunterdon County who had bought the adjoining tract of 600 acres on the south side of Rocky Brook.

The 80 acres was the only land that Hight owned, and he was not about to part with all of it. When he sold the mill, he conveyed only a couple of acres. But that small plot soon became crowded with buildings related to the mill beside the mill itself. Within fifteen years it included a "Dwelling-House two stories high, a kitchen, and sundry Out-Houses." By 1773 there were also "store-houses adjoining to the mills, [and] a good barn and stables." Hight kept the rest of the land and farmed it, planting an orchard on part of the property. In later land transactions he dropped his identity as a wheelwright and called himself a "yeoman"--a farmer. In the eighteenth century, farming was more prestigious than landless artisanry. Still, 80 acres was far short of being a substantial farm, so without more land Hight had to find another occupation to which he could add his small farming income. He became a tavernkeeper.

Hight's Tavern

As early as 1751, Hight opened his house as a tavern, the first at Rocky Brook. This house stood on the westerly side of the highway (now North Main Street), in front of where the Engine Company No. 1 firehouse now stands. Since it is unlikely that his existing house--probably a small dwelling--was large enough to serve both as residence and tavern, he apparently enlarged it, perhaps with

some of the money arising from sale of the mill. In 1767 this tavern was described as a "large Dwell house." In 1773 it was described particularly as a "very large two-story house well finished, good kitchen wherein is kept a public-house...."

Hight continued his tavern with interruption for almost twenty years. Tavernkeepers had to be licensed each year and the entire industry was regulated by the county courts. From 1751 to 1767, Hight got annual renewal to keep tavern "in the house Where now lives in New Windsor."

Hight as Constable

Tavernkeepers in colonial New Jersey were important figures, and their status was frequently enhanced by law enforcement responsibilities. They were often appointed to serve as constables, especially in their first years as licensholders. In 1751, the first year from which there is a record of Hight's tavern, he was serving as constable when he became embroiled in an incident with political ramifications to no less a person than the New Jersey governor.

It was on Sunday, August 4, 1751, "about One or Two O'clock" in the afternoon, when John and Mary Hight "coming home from [Baptist] meeting that they heard three men swearing outside of John Pridmore's tavern at Cranbury. The tavern stood at a short distance from the Baptist church on the opposite side of the road. Perhaps Hight could even hear the commotion beginning before he left the church. As it happened, the three were men of high social position, and one of them, Lewis Morris Ashfield, had been named by British colonial officials in London to sit on the governor's council in New Jersey, which then was the upper house of the provincial legislature. The appointment came despite Governor Belcher's expressed opposition.

At first Hight apparently ignored them, and went into the tavern. The patrons inside insisted he go back to try to quiet the men. As Hight approached them, one of the men on horseback, the other two were on foot, and each was holding a pistol in one of his hands.

Accounts of what happened differ, but Ashfield continued to

rudly, which was considered an offense both to God and to the King. The swearing was all the more confrontational, because the offenders were Anglicans outside a church of dissenters. Hight threatened to arrest Ashfield, but the threat had little effect on the swearing. Ashfield mistook Hight for a justice of the peace, thereby inflating Hight's social standing considerably, until a young man standing nearby unwisely admitted that Hight was only a constable. When the swearing again continued, now even more defiantly and arrogantly, with Ashfield insulted that he should be approached by a lowly constable, Hight put a hand to Ashfield's shoulder, and called out for help to transport him to the county jail in Perth Amboy. Ashfield at once pulled a whip out of the hand of his friend on horseback, and began to wield it against Hight. At that moment, two of Hight's friends and his wife Mary came to his aid. Ashfield accidentally struck Mary on the wrist, and when the fray ended and he was told of this insult to a

woman's honor, he promptly apologized and offered Mary a 30-shilling note as recompense, which she at first refused, but then reluctantly accepted.

An indictment was obtained a week later against Ashfield for swearing on the Sabbath and for assaulting Hight. He was charged with yelling at Hight the words "God damn you with your King's Laws." This turn of events gave a timely excuse for Governor Belcher to keep Ashfield, one of his political enemies, from taking a seat on the council. Belcher held that until Ashfield was acquitted of the charges, he would never sit on the council. Ashfield maneuvered to delay his trial until March 1752 (so that he could buy witnesses according to Belcher). Hight testified against him, and so did two other witnesses, but Ashfield produced several witnesses of his own, who contradicted Hight's testimony, and he was acquitted. His attitude apparently was that he could buy his way out of any mischief, and he quite possibly did.

(to be continued)

World War II Committee Planning Program

The World War II committee that was appointed by the Executive Board last year is planning a program for an upcoming general meeting. Look for details in a future newsletter. The committee is also planning a series of oral interviews of area veterans of the war. If you would like to take part in the committee's activities, contact Bernard Bush at 443-8654, or Dr. Harold Cox at 448-3332.

Gazettes are Microfilmed

Thanks to cooperation between the Hightstown Gazette, the Society, and the New Jersey Newspaper Project, the Hightstown Gazette has recently been microfilmed for the years 1942-1964. Together with a previous effort by the Society which filmed the years 1937-1941, these years are now available for purchase by libraries. Anyone interested should call Bob Craig, at 586-4702.

Hightstown-East Windsor Historical Society

164 North Main Street
Hightstown, New Jersey 08520

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Hightstown, NJ
Permit No. 11

Mr. & Mrs. Richard Hutchinson
100 Bennett Place
Hightstown, NJ 08520