

Hightstown



East Windsor

# *Historical Society News*

Spring 2021

## Historic Snowstorms in the Hightstown Area

By Ken Pickering

Snowfall amounts per winter are highly variable from one year to another in the Mid-Atlantic States. The occurrence of large snowstorms in Hightstown is dependent on exactly the right combination of conditions: a source of cold air, a source of copious moisture, and a storm track that passes just to the south or east of our area. Often, the large snowfall amounts are associated with intense storms that track just off the Mid-Atlantic coast, the so-called Nor'easters. It is only occasionally that all of the ingredients come together at the same time. When they do coincide, snowfall amounts of a foot or more can occur, and very rarely storms of historic proportion take place with accumulations of much greater amounts that can bring our area to a standstill. This article reviews some of these historic storms from Colonial times to the present day. During the Colonial era, as well as through most of the 19th century there was no official snowfall measurement in Hightstown. In the 18th century and early 19th, the only records are those noted in journals kept by individuals in such nearby cities as New York and Philadelphia and a few towns in New Jersey. In 1849 the Smithsonian started a weather observation network that eventually included 29 stations in New Jersey and lasted for 25 years. The US Army Signal Service was authorized to operate a weather observation and warning network by Congress in 1870. Many of the Smithsonian stations were transferred to the Army network by 1874. In addition, Rutgers University initiated a New Jersey State Weather Service in 1886. Therefore, official government records were kept in New York, Philadelphia, Trenton, and New Brunswick by the latter part of the 19th century. The respon-

sibility for weather observations was shifted to the newly-established US Weather Bureau in 1891 (then under the Department of Agriculture). The official observations in Hightstown began in 1893.



Main Street - 1941

The history of major snowstorms in the Hightstown area in this article is limited to those storms with 17 inches or more with a couple of exceptions. Some of these storms are officially designated as blizzards and some are not. To be called a blizzard, the storm must have sustained winds or frequent gusts greater than 35 miles per hour and sufficient snowfall or blowing snow to reduce visibility to less than ¼ mile. Sometimes blizzards contain gale force winds (39 to 54 miles per hour). From the Colonial Era through the 19th century, major snowstorms struck without warning, making the impact far worse than today. In the first half to two-thirds of the 20th century, forecasting had become sufficiently rigorous to enable warnings to be issued for some storms, but others were missed due to errors in the forecast track or error in the placement of the line between rain and snow. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, weather forecasts had greatly improved, such that all major storms were

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## President's Message

Dear Members and Friends,

I write as I look out the window observing the worst snowstorm of the year, the decade and maybe based on Ken Pickering's article (herein), the biggest since 2003! We will not know until after I send this to our expert layout artist, Greg Ciano (among many other talents he contributes). You will recall Ken's previous articles. He "volunteered" to submit this one on Hightstown snowstorms. Ken's father was Hightstown/East Windsor weather observer/recorder for many years. Ken watched and helped his dad and always wanted to be a weatherman. Well, he became an Atmospheric Scientist with many Degrees (large Ds), worked for NASA Goddard, and is a research professor at the University of Maryland. He knows weather stuff. I had to sit next to this guy for twelve years of school in Hightstown. What happened to me? We had the same teachers! You will enjoy his article. Thanks Ken.

Our own Pat Donahue continues her search for Ben but as many of us find out, searches lead us on many tangents due to the numerous great stories we uncover about those who were here before is. You will be familiar with many of the names in her articles about the Pullen, Ely, and Hancock families. Also, you can virtually watch her webinar about her search for Ben. February 24, 12pm [www.njstatelib.org/events](http://www.njstatelib.org/events). You need to register.

It appears I need to be more cautious and circumspect in my choice of newsletter topics. In 2018 I did the article on the 1918 Pandemic. This issue has an article written by Ken about Hightstown snowstorms. He wrote it for me in November! Enough said.

Thank you all who have paid your dues AND those life members and others that have made special separate donations. For those who have forgotten, I check the mailbox daily.

This is Ground Hog's Day eve and spring will be more welcome than ever. I hope

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you are all healthy. Hopefully, soon we will all be able to be together ....in person, not Facetime or Zoom.

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## Historic Snowstorms... (cont.)

forecast, and by the 1980s and 1990s, some were forecast even several days in advance. This advancement has allowed significant preparation to take place prior to a major storm.

For the Hightstown area, the Blizzards of 1888 and 1899 produced the largest snow accumulations (21 to 25 inches). The largest snowfall since 1899 was in the December 11-12, 1960 storm (18 inches). Five storms since then have dropped between 17 and 18 inches. The effect of changing climate on the frequency and magnitude of large snowstorms is uncertain. Temperatures before, during, and after major storms are not as cold today as a century or more ago. But, on the other hand, with warmer temperatures, the air can hold more moisture, potentially leading to greater snowfall, if other conditions are right.

Colonial Era through mid-19th century: Weather historian David Ludlum wrote two books published by the American Meteorological Society in the 1960s on early American winters from 1604 to 1870. Much of what we know about snowstorms in those years has been compiled in those books. The most notable of these storms in Central New Jersey are listed below:

**March 24, 1765:** A severe snowstorm affected the region from eastern Pennsylvania to Massachusetts. A Philadelphia report indicated that the storm was accompanied by strong winds and snow accumulations were two to two and a half feet.

**December 4 – 10, 1786:** A series of three individual storms over this period dumped over two feet of snow from Pennsylvania to New England.

**January 5 -7, 1821:** An extensive storm spread snow from Virginia to New England. Accumulations were 18 inches in Philadelphia and 14 inches in New York.

**January 14 -16, 1831:** This storm produced heavy snow over the largest area of any storm discussed by Ludlum, stretching from the Ohio Valley across much of the Atlantic Coast from the Carolinas to southern New England. Accumulations ranged from 18 to 36 inches in the Philadelphia area and 15 to 20 inches in the New York City region.



*Main Street - 1941*

**January 8 – 10, 1836:** While the Philadelphia and New York areas received 15 to 18 inches, the interior regions of New York and Pennsylvania were hit with 30 to 40 inches.

**January 18-19, 1857:** This storm was accompanied by severely cold temperatures near or below 0oF and high winds, producing blizzard conditions from North Carolina to Maine. Accumulations were in the 12 to 18-inch range. This was the first major snowstorm to be reported in Hightstown newspapers, in this case, the Hightstown Village Record: “The violent snowstorm, which commenced here on Sunday and continued through the night cut off for some days all communication with any and every habitable part of the globe. Accompanied by such intense cold and such high winds, it was one of the most severe storms ever witnessed. All the railroads were completely “snowed under,” and no mails were either received or sent out”

Detailed descriptions of the weather conditions associated with major storms affecting the northeastern states from 1888 until 2003 are presented in the book, *Northeast Snowstorms Volume II: The Cases* by Paul Kocin and Louis Uccellini, published by the American Meteorological Society. Information from this book is summarized below along with a description of the effects of the storms on transportation, schools, and life in the Hightstown –

East Windsor area.

**March 11-14, 1888 (The Blizzard of '88):** This storm is one of the most infamous in the northeastern United States. Over 400 deaths in the Northeast and offshore were blamed on this storm. Precipitation began as rain on Sunday, March 11, but much colder air moved eastward to the Atlantic coast overnight. A storm system strengthened rapidly off the North Carolina coast and rain changed to snow. By early morning on Monday, March 12 blizzard conditions prevailed over New Jersey and New York with temperatures approaching 0oF. In central NJ snow continued until the morning of Tuesday, March 13. This was the heaviest snow on record for eastern New York, western New England, New York City, and northern New Jersey, with depths of 30 to 50 inches common. Philadelphia only received 10 inches, but snow totals increased rapidly farther north with 21 inches at Trenton and 25 inches at New Brunswick. There was no official measurement at Hightstown at that time, but we can assume it was likely between 21 and 25 inches.



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The Hightstown Gazette reported that “Hightstown’s unsuspecting citizens, who went to bed on Sunday night with the knowledge that it was then raining hard and that the air was warm, could scarcely believe their eyes in the morning, when they beheld ton upon ton of snow lying in the streets, banked up against every door and hiding the fences from view. The oldest inhabitant could remember nothing like it and ..... in many places the drifts were higher than a man’s head. All day the snow kept falling, and the wind blew a gale, piling up the drifts in immense walls everywhere. Only the bravest of citizens dared venture out and they found that they might as well have stayed at home, for business of any kind was not thought of.” One train managed to get from Hightstown to South Amboy on Monday, but the train from Hightstown to Pemberton did not make it far before being forced to give up. The Gazette reported “no other attempts at railroading were made here and no train has arrived here from

either direction for the past three days. To complete the isolation a large number of telegraph wires were found to be down and the operators here have been able to get only the most meager news.” An attempt was to be made to run a train to Bordentown on Thursday, but there was a 12-foot high snowdrift across the tracks. “Nothing was done on Monday and on Tuesday, little else besides shoveling snow. Paths were cut wherever it was possible and by Tuesday night traveling was possible nearly all over town. The roads, however, were impassable for horses and it was not until yesterday (Wednesday) that anyone ventured in from the country in a sleigh.” However, Hightstown was reported to have been generally well supplied with coal and provisions, and the Gazette reported that everyone in town accepted the many inconveniences caused by the storm in good humor!

**February 11-13, 1899 (The Blizzard of 1899):** Eleven years after the Blizzard of ‘88, a storm dumped snow of similar depth on Hightstown. This was the first major storm with an official snow measurement in Hightstown. U. S. Weather Bureau Cooperative Observer, C. M. Norton, of South Main Street recorded 24 inches of snow, although according to the Gazette “outside of town there was certainly 3 feet on the level and drifts as high as 9 feet”. The weather leading up to this storm had been extremely cold, and there had been two small storms leaving 6 inches on February 5-6 and 4 inches on February 8. With temperatures remaining below freezing during this entire period, the snow on the ground totaled nearly 35 inches. Ludlum has called this period the “greatest Arctic outbreak in history”. Temperatures fell to 0oF even to the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. In Hightstown, the daily low temperatures were -5 on the 9th, -9 on the 10th, and -8 on the 11th. A storm system developed in the Gulf on February 11, causing snow in New Orleans, Mobile, and Pensacola, and even into central Florida. The storm

center reached the Atlantic coast of Georgia by the evening of February 12, and the North Carolina coast by the morning of the 13th, producing heavy snow from South Carolina to New England with temperatures below 10oF and gale-force winds. Blizzard conditions persisted all day on the 13th, ending overnight.

Different from the Blizzard of '88 in which the heaviest snow was well to the north of Hightstown, this storm produced the heaviest accumulations to the south of Hightstown with 34 inches at Cape May, and over 30 inches in many locations in Northern Virginia, Maryland, and SE Pennsylvania. The Gazette reported that the snow began at 8 PM on the 11th and ended at midnight of the 13th, for a total of 52 continuous hours of snow. The extreme cold continued during and after the storm, with low temperatures of 5 on the 12th, 8 on the 13th, 7 on the 14th, -4 on the 15th, and 2 on the 16th. The Gazette noted that "the week just ended will go on

of snow". Communication with the outside world was almost completely cut off. The only outside newspapers that arrived in town between the 11th and 15th were a few that came in on a train on the 13th. Many roads were completely blocked. The Gazette reported that "On Monday (the 13th) the milkmen succeeded in forcing their way into town and supplied their customers, and quite a delegation worked their passage from Etra. In the afternoon Edward Pickering (my great-grandfather) broke a road from his farm to town with a sled, coming after Dr. George L. Titus, whom he carried back with him. Later on, three men on horseback ploughed through the snow from Cedarville coming after Dr. William L. Wilbur, who returned with them and did not get back until the next day. Aside from these, there has been little travel, except that once in a while some daring outsider will get to town on horseback. Dr. George H. Franklin tried to get to the William Jewell farm on Tuesday (the 14th) but was obliged to give it up and turn back. Yesterday afternoon (the 15th), however, many of the roads were broken and woodsled communication was established with nearly all neighboring villages." The Gazette reported that only four trains came through Hightstown on the Camden-Amboy line on Monday, the 13th, and no others until Wednesday, the 15th. The passenger station and telegraph office were closed down. Train service on the U. T. line was partially restored on the 15th, although trains ran considerably late.

Another effect of the extreme cold and the blizzard was the "almost complete extermination of all game (animals)".

**March 1-2, 1914:** A relatively weak low-pressure area along the Carolina coast on Saturday evening, February 28, 1914, interacted with a major outbreak of Arctic air to become a huge storm system with blizzard conditions that moved up the coast to Long Island by Sunday evening, March 1. The Gazette headline said that the Sunday – Monday, March 1-2 storm was the worst since 1888. However, there is some doubt that this statement is true, at least in terms of total snow accumulation. The Gazette writer neglected to recall the Blizzard of '99, which was roughly similar to the Blizzard of '88

in Hightstown. There was an unfortunate gap in the Hightstown weather observer record in March 1914. Snowfall observations at Trenton and New Brunswick were only about 11 inches from this storm. There was much more snow along the northern portion of the Jersey Shore, with 24 inches measured at Long Branch. Therefore, a rough estimate is that there was unlikely more than 16-17 inches in Hightstown from this storm, which



Main Street - 1914

record as the bitterest, harshest, cruelest week of winter ever known in this section. Beginning with a long stretch of biting cold it included the greatest blizzard of the century and leaves the country locked in snow and ice. Never before has there been so much of cold, never before so much

is considerably less than the 24 inches received in the 1888 and 1899 storms. Regardless of the absolute magnitude of the snowfall, this storm had major impacts on the region. The storm produced very wet, heavy snow, accompanied by very strong winds (gusting to 84 miles/hour in New York). No trains came through town until Tuesday afternoon. Electric wires were down in many parts of town by Sunday night. Telephone service was partially restored by Thursday, and telegraph lines were expected to be in operation by the following weekend. Country roads were impassible until Wednesday.

The Gazette reported that “One of the largest drifts in this section was near the P.R.R (Pennsylvania Railroad) water tower at the woodsheds. This big snowdrift occurred beside a line of freight cars standing on a siding. After a cut had been made through the snow on the main track, the banks on either side were in many places about eight feet high and extended for a quarter of a mile. Crews from Bordentown and South Amboy were at work all day Tuesday, clearing the snow from the tracks. They were assisted here by the local crew. A large snowplow, to which were attached five locomotives, was used to cut through the big banks.”

The Gazette reported that a train from Philadelphia on Sunday afternoon could make it no farther than halfway between Windsor and Hightstown. It had to back itself to the Windsor station.



Many telegraph poles were down across the tracks. The 50 passengers on this train were accommodated at the hotel in Windsor. However, food supplies ran low by Monday evening. A hotel employee walked from Windsor to Hightstown and brought back baked goods from a Hightstown bakery! A train from Trenton was able to take these passengers on to their destinations on Tuesday afternoon. The Gazette story indicates that “the passengers were a good-natured lot, and everyone seemed to try to make

the best of the unusual experience”.

The Gazette also reported that a U. T. train that had left Hightstown on Sunday afternoon had not been found by Hightstown train workers as of Thursday. Apparently, the train had stalled in deep snow just beyond Wrightstown. The conductor walked from Wrightstown to Pemberton to report the location of the train, but the 18 passengers and members of the crew found accommodation in the hotel and in private homes in Wrightstown. The train proceeded on to Pemberton with difficulty on Wednesday with drifts as high as 10 feet along the tracks.

Many greenhouses in the Hightstown area were damaged by the weight of the heavy snow. Glass roofing on these buildings was broken in sections ranging from 20 to 70 feet in length. Food shortages persisted through the week following the storm. The bakery ran out of fuel oil for its baking ovens, and meat markets ran out of meat due to delays in deliveries.

**January 22-24, 1935:** A series of weak storm centers over the Southeast on the 22nd consolidated into a strong storm off the North Carolina coastline on the 23rd, resulting in increased snowfall rates. Snow began in Hightstown on Tuesday, January 22nd with 2 inches of accumulation, followed by 10 inches on Wednesday the 23rd, and 5 inches on Thursday, the 24th for a total of 17 inches. By 1935, official school closures were declared, and in this case, school closed at Noon on Wednesday and remained closed through the end of the week. The Gazette reported that “there was very little travel in or out of Hightstown on Thursday and Friday when state highways, as well as county and country roads, were blocked. The New York and Philadelphia buses operating via Hightstown did not resume operation until Saturday afternoon.” A severe cold wave followed the storm with the temperature dropping to 16 degrees below zero on the following Monday morning, a record cold that still stands. The official observer in

Hightstown at that time (Braun Brothers Florist on Grant Avenue) was located in town. I recall my father saying that the temperature fell to 20 below zero in the surrounding countryside on this day.

**March 19-21, 1958:** This storm is included in this article even though it did not accumulate 17 inches or more of frozen precipitation because of the severity of the icing and winds that occurred, which wreaked havoc on power lines and structures. In terms of damage to utilities, this was one of the worst storms New Jersey has experienced. This storm caused massive damage to New Jersey Shore communities due to the strong winds and high waves. As reported by US Weather Bureau Cooperative Observer, James Pickering (my father), the storm began in Hightstown in the evening of Wednesday, March 19 with 0.5 inches of snow, followed by 8 inches of heavy wet snow on Thursday, March 20, and 3.5 inches of primarily sleet and freezing rain on Friday, the 21st, for a total of 12 inches of frozen precipitation. As an indication of how wet the snow was and how much of the precipitation was in the form of ice, the total melted precipitation was 2.07 inches (which under average conditions would translate to approximately 20 inches of snow). The Gazette stated that “most power went out here at Noon on Thursday and was restored to many areas by early Saturday afternoon. The wet snow lashed by heavy winds deposited ice as thick as 5 inches on service facilities. The weight of the ice caused poles to break, hundreds of wires to snap, steel crossarms on transmission towers to buckle, and other damage.” Complete power restoration to the outlying areas was not accomplished until the following Wednesday. The telephone central office switchboard was kept in operation by emergency generator power, but thousands of telephones were out of service in Hightstown and surrounding communities. Most telephone service was restored by the Tuesday following the storm. This

is the first major storm of my childhood that I can remember, primarily because of the power outage (three days at my house). I remember my family cooking on an old kerosene stove that we had out in a shed.

**December 11-12, 1960:** This was the largest snow storm since the 1899 blizzard to hit the Hightstown area. Despite winter having not yet “officially” begun, accumulations of 16 inches or greater were common from Maryland to New Hampshire. Snowfall was the heaviest in this blizzard in a southwest to northeast band from Burlington to Bergen Counties, New Jersey. The storm dumped 18 inches of snow on the Hightstown area with snow beginning in the early afternoon on Sunday, December 11 and continuing through mid-afternoon on Monday the 12th under blizzard conditions. The temperature fell to 6 degrees on Tuesday, the 13th, which combined with strong winds hampered the effort to clear roads and sidewalks. Schools were closed Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Most of the streets in town were clogged with snow and abandoned cars. Drifting snow blocked sections of Rt. 33 and Rt. 130. One of my memories of this storm is the truck full of crated live chickens that became stuck in a snow drift on Rt. 130. All of the chickens perished in the freezing cold.



*Blizzard of 1914*

**January 13-14, 1964:** This storm system was large and slow moving, producing blizzard conditions throughout the middle Atlantic states and southern New England. The 11 inches of snow that fell in Hightstown on Monday, January 13, plus the additional 6.5 inches on Tuesday, yielded a 17.5-inch total, which rivaled the magnitude of the December 1960 storm. The snow was accompanied by gale force winds. Schools were closed Monday and Tuesday, but reopened on Wednesday.

**February 6-8, 1978:** This was one of the more intense storms to occur in the 20th century in the northeastern United States, and it was well predicted several days in advance by the weather models. Snowfalls of 30 to 50 inches occurred in Rhode Island and eastern Massachusetts. A total of 17.1 inches was recorded in the Hightstown area from this storm by National Weather Ser-

vice Cooperative Observer Richard Lee, with 2.1 inches by early Monday February 6, 14.5 inches more by Tuesday morning, the 7th, and an additional 0.5 inches on the 8th. High winds piled snow in drifts up to 9 feet high in some areas. At the height of the storm, visibility on streets in town was down to 200 feet. Schools were closed Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. The Windsor-Hights Herald noted that forecasts for this storm were accurate and allowed planning ahead for snow removal, which aided clean-up efforts. Also, with plenty of forewarning, people stayed off the roads in the Hightstown area and few motorists were stuck, thereby allowing the plows to get through. The snow did not start in the New York City area until the middle of the Monday morning rush hour, and as a result thousands of people were stranded in their cars in that region.

**February 11-12, 1983:** Another 17-inch storm hit the Hightstown area on these dates. According to the Gazette, snow began at around 10 AM on Friday, the 11th and at times fell at the rate of 2 to 3 inches per hour, before ending late in the overnight hours. Thunder-snow occurred between 6:40 and 6:50 PM on Friday. "Thunder-snow" is a relatively rare event caused by strong upward air motion in the clouds combined with ice particles that become electrified and eventually discharge as lightning flashes and thunder. Thunder-snows typically are accompanied by a period of exceptionally heavy snowfall. The storm had been predicted for several days, again allowing for considerable advance preparation. However, according to the Windsor Hights Herald, as many as 75 abandoned cars had to be towed in East Windsor to allow plows to get through. Otherwise, the plowing operation went well, with most roads open by Saturday evening. Those commuting home from New York City had major problems on Friday evening, with the trip taking as much as 8 hours, and some never made it home until the following day. This storm has been nicknamed the "Megalopolitan Snowstorm" because the heaviest snow was oriented near a line through Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston.

**March 13-14, 1993:** This was one of the most paralyzing storms of the 20th century, producing snow over much of the eastern United States, affecting over 100 million people. Hence, it has been named the "Storm of the Century". Heaviest snow was in the Appalachian Mountains, where accumulations of 30-40 inches were common from West Virginia to New England. The storm set record low barometric pressure readings in many locations, especially from Richmond, VA to Philadelphia. Forecasts of the storm five days in advance proved accurate, allowing for considerable preparation. The "Storm of the Century" did not drop anywhere near the snowfall totals on the Hightstown area as did the 1888 and 1899 storms. There were 11 inches total of snow and sleet recorded, compared with 20 to 24 inches in those two major storms. In the 1993 storm much of the


precipitation overnight (particularly the early morning hours of the 14th) changed from snow to sleet and to rain. The total melted precipitation amounted to 2.16 inches, which if it had remained all snow would have likely amounted to approximately 20 to 24 inches, making it comparable to those storms from a century earlier. Schools were closed on Monday, the 15th and had a delayed opening on Tuesday, the 16th.

**January 7-8, 1996:** The Blizzard of '96 ranks as one of the most significant snowstorms of the 20th century, as many of the large population centers of the northeast urban corridor were hit with 20 inches or more of snow, running up more than \$2 billion in damage. This storm was of long duration, with many areas having 36 hours of continuous snow. Snow began in Hightstown in the very early morning hours of Sunday, January 7 and did not end until mid-morning on Monday, January 8. The Blizzard of '96 dropped a total of 17.1 inches of snow on the Hightstown area, which actually was spared the worst of the storm. One did not need to go far to the north or west of Hightstown to find accumulations of 25 – 30 inches. The Gazette reported that Hightstown Borough, East Windsor Township, and Mercer County road crews did an excellent job of clearing the roads. However, the Hightstown post office was closed on Monday and Tuesday. But, many areas of the Northeast were paralyzed for nearly a week.

### **The 21st Century:**

Only one storm of greater than 17 inches of snow has hit the Hightstown area since the year 2000:

**February 17-18, 2003:** President's Day II storm - 17.9 inches (there had been a previous President's Day storm in 1979 with "only" 12.6 inches.

No storms with 17 or more inches of snow have occurred since 2003! 



## Who Was He?

by Pat Donahue

When we purchased the Mount Ely Hancock House, we were provided with background materials on its history as well as a large portrait of a man. We hung the elaborately framed visage over the fireplace mantel in the parlor – after all, he had lived here – and we call him Grandpa Pullen based on notes written on the back of black and white photographs of him with this portrait. But who was he? I decided to find out.



*Photo that hangs over Pat's fireplace*

According to the excellent history on the home written by Clark J. Hutchinson in 1980, we know that the property was sold on April 5, 1882, to Ella J. Pullen of East Windsor Township. How curious! The purchase was made by a woman! Who was she? How was she related to the man in the portrait? (I later determined that she was only 25 when she bought my house!)

The 1860 census shows Sam Pulin, age 33, living with Sarah Pulin, age 23, in Hopewell, NJ with Ella, age 3, and Emer-

son, age 1. Several other household members appear. Three are listed as having been born in NJ, while two were born in Ireland. Their occupation is listed but not written clearly. According to Cappy, it could be “helper” or “hind,” the latter being a farm laborer. Given that Sam is listed as a farmer, I believe these other persons worked on the farm and were provided room and board.

I found only one newspaper entry for Samuel Pullen. The September 11, 1862 edition of the Hightstown Gazette listed articles forwarded by the Ladies' Aid Society to Miss C. H. Barton, at Washington. They filled two large boxes. Samuel Pullen donated “bundle papers.” Mrs. James Pullen donated one bottle of wine and one bowl of jelly. Mrs. Charles Pullen donated two bowls of jelly, one can of fruit, and one sheet. During my research, I learned that there were several Pullen families, some quite large, which explains why the name appears frequently in records and in local cemeteries.

Ella's mother, Sarah P. Slack, was born in Trenton in 1836. She died in 1868 at the age of 31 and was buried at Cedar Hill Cemetery. Ella was only 11 when her mother died. Sam was now a widower with young children.

The census of 1870 shows Ella, age 12, living in Hightstown with Jane Pullen, age 64, and going to school. Jane was married to Isaac Pullen, Sam's parents. Ella's middle name is Jane, undoubtedly after her grandmother. My guess is that after the death of his wife, Sam sent Ella to live with Jane. I found her headstone in the Cedar Hill Cemetery. Jane died in 1893. Isaac had already died in 1867.

According to Reflections from the Shrine by John Orr, Ella was employed at the East Windsor Academy in 1874. The school was housed in what was most recently the YMCA on Mercer Street and is

now slated to become Hightstown's borough hall. Ella was only 17 at the time.

The 1880 census has Ella, age 23, living in East Windsor. She is a teacher and daughter of S. F. Pullen who is listed as a 53-year-old widower, farmer born in 1827. (A careful look at the photograph of this census page indicates that the F was likely a T.) Included in the household are Emerson Pullen, age 21, Winfield Pullen, age 19, who is a nurseryman, Lilia A. Pullen, age 17, who is a dressmaker, and Irene Pullen, age 14. (Irene was born in 1866. She died in 1962 in Manhattan. Irene married Sam Ely and had a daughter, Adele. Adele Ely provided the black and white photographs of Sam with his portrait. Adele died in 1995 at the age of

98.

The 1885 census shows Ella, Winfield, and Lorena Pullen all in the S. T. Pullen household. At this point, they would have been in what is now my house, having purchased it in 1882! The Hightstown Gazette newspaper for October 1, 1885, printed that “Miss Estella Fryer is teaching in the public school during the illness of Miss Ella Pullen.” Ella next appears in that newspaper on November 28, 1889.

*Principal Greene, of the public school, informs us that the scheme of getting up an entertainment for the benefit of that institution is progressing finely... It is so long since anything like amateur theatricals has been given in Hightstown that the occasion of their production here will be looked forward to with more than ordinary interest. The play selected is Bronson Howard's famous "Young Mrs. Winthrop." Mr. A. M. Palmer, of the Madison Square Theatre, having kindly given his consent to its production here. It is a pretty domestic drama of the strongest kind ...The title role will be taken by Miss Sadie Pearce who will be ably supported by Professor and Mrs. Greene, Miss Luelia Reed, Miss Ella Pullen, Dr. Wm. L. Wilber, and others...*

Young Mrs. Winthrop debuted on Broadway at the Madison Square Theatre on October 9, 1882, and ran for 183 performances, closing on April 7, 1883. Blanche Whiffen starred on stage as Mrs. Ruth Winthrop, the part played by Ella Pullen.

On December 26, 1889, the Hightstown Gazette reviewed the local production.

*It is so long since we have had any serious attempt at theatricals by local amateurs that it is hardly fair to contrast the presentation of "Young Mrs. Winthrop" as given last*



*"Grandpa's at Etra" from Adele Ely: (L-R) Ella J. Pullen, Grandpa Pullen, Helen Holcombe*

*week with previous efforts; but it is safe to say that the oldest inhabitant does not remember that it has ever been excelled. The audiences were not as large as they would have been, had the roads permitted any comfortable travel, but on both nights the hall was well filled with just such people as would most delight a company of amateurs. The setting of the little drama was as near perfect as taste and skill could make it. The music was all that the high reputation of the orchestra had led us to expect. The piano solo composed by Miss Reed, entitled "Confessions," eliciting its share of applause. The play itself is one of those bits of pretty sentiment which occupy the middle ground between the sensational drama and the directly moral play, its home scenes and society misunderstandings offering a good field for fine acting...Dr. Wilbur was really tragic in many of the most serious crisis of his misunderstood and complicated situations, but probably did his best work in the scene with his mother. This reminds us to say that if "Aunt Ruth" was written as a minor part in the drama, Miss Ella Pullen brought out of it something that gave it a place well toward the head of the list. In point of proper inflection and emphasis she was excelled by none, and her naturalness in the lullaby scene, when the curtain rose, set the seal of success upon the piece.*

I found a quote in an advertisement for a printed copy of the play, which includes a line that Ella Pullen likely spoke during her performance: “Mrs. Ruth. Douglas (looking up and laughing quietly.) ‘Yes. I had forgotten my gray hairs. I was a child again, like Rosie. We old folks grow young again in our grandchildren.’” While she was acting the part of an older woman, Ella herself was only 32. (It is possible that the weather in December 1889 contributed to the

poor conditions of the roads. Nevada and Oregon experienced one of the snowiest and coldest winters on record while in NJ, that winter is considered among the warmest on record.)

The Gazette's description of the play, while verbose and laudatory, did little to reveal its plot. I discovered more in a description of the silent film adaption from 1920. As described in a film magazine:

*Constance Winthrop and her husband have drifted apart through her devotion to social events and his work. The birthday of their five-year-old child draws them together and they plan to drop their outside engagements and devote the day to little Rosie. However, Mrs. Dunbar, an eavesdropping neighbor, after overhearing a message on a party line, has her maid impersonate Mrs. Winthrop and telephone Mr. Winthrop to not come home as she has changed her mind about the party and is going out. Douglas, deeply hurt, stops by Mrs. Dunbar's house on business and is seen by his wife. Thinking that she has been deceived, Constance rushes off to a Jazz party. That evening the child Rosie contracts membranous croup and dies. When Constance arrives home late that night, Douglas refuses to let her into the room, and she says "I am a thousand times more fit to be with her than you." The two drift further apart and, upon the verge of a formal separation, the old family lawyer so skillfully plays upon their feelings that a reunification results.*

Helen Dunbar, a star of the silent film era, starred as Old Mrs. Winthrop, the part played by Ella Pullen. Unfortunately, Ella did not live to see the film.

Another reference in John Orr's book indicates that Ella taught at the Milford (Etra) Schoolhouse from 1898 to 1900. I was not

able to determine when she switched schools but have been told that it was not uncommon for teachers to travel to different assignments.

The 1900 Census lists Ella as 40 years old – close enough – working as a schoolteacher, who owns the farm – and my house – but has a mortgage on it. With her are Sam, her father now 73 years old, Helen D. Holcombe, a niece, born in September 1884, and now age 15, and Harrold Holcombe, a nephew, born in August 1888, now age 11 who is at school. These children appear in



From Adele Ely (L-R): Samuel B. Ely (b. Jan 9, 1864), Ella J. Pullen, Grandma Jane Pullen, Adele Ely (child), Helen Holcombe, Irene Pullen Ely with baby Irene, Grandpa Pullen, and Harold Holcombe

several of the black and white photographs given to us when we purchased the house. I believe that Helen and Harrold's mother was Lillie Pullen who married Harold Holcombe. She died in 1891 at the age of 28.


The November 18, 1904 edition of the Cranbury Press includes a small piece that mentions Ella. "A Literary Society has been formed by the High School and Grammar departments. The meetings are held every two weeks on Friday at 2 P. M. The Thanksgiving Program includes Current Events, Humorous Reading, Recitation, Reading, Singing, Debate. Ella Pullen is listed for Recitation. She next appears in the newspapers on February 28, 1906, in the Red Bank Register misidentified as a married woman. "Winfield Pullen of Hightstown; Mrs. Ella Pullen and Miss Helen Holcombe of Chapel Hill" and many others attended a surprise birthday party for C. E. Boughton at his home on Pinckney Road.

The census of 1905 shows Ella living in Monmouth. She is working as a schoolteacher and living with Helen D. Holcombe, age 20, who is a dressmaker. Both are single and renting the residence. Sam, her father, is living in East Windsor with Lydia

Jane Pullen. Apparently, Sam remarried around 1902. The 1910 census shows that he has been married to Lydia Jane Pullen for 8 years, a second marriage for each of them. He is now 83 and she is 78. They are renting their home in Englishtown because, by this time, Ella had sold my house. The pair also appear in the 1915 census. Perhaps Ella did not wish to live with her stepmother.

On June 5, 1907, the Red Bank Register prints that “Miss Ella Pullen, who for a number of years has taught in the Chapel Hill school, was married yesterday morning to James Wilson of Middletown. Mr. Wilson is a New York commission merchant and is the son of Daniel Wilson of Middletown village. He was a widower, his first wife having died about a year ago. The ceremony was performed at Grace church parsonage, Red Bank, by Rev. B. C. Lippincott, Jr. Mrs. And Mrs. Wilson left for a driving tour through South Jersey.”

On March 2, 1908, Ella and her husband, James S. Wilson, sold the farm. She had owned it for 26 years. By 1910, Ella was 53 and living with James, age 64, in Middletown. Included in the household is Addie B. Borden, age 42, who is James’ widowed daughter. The 1920 census lists only Addie and Samuel, now 72, because Ella died on June 13, 1915. She was only 58. James died in 1920. Samuel Thompson Pullen, Ella’s father – my Grandpa Pullen – died on October 23, 1920, at the age of 93. He is buried at Cedar Hill Cemetery.

Which leaves me with one unanswered question. When Ella Pullen sold the house in 1908, how is it possible that her father’s portrait remained and now hangs over my mantel? Did Adele Ely return it? A final thought, often in antique stores I’ll find portraits and wonder why their families abandoned them. How did they get separated or lost? I feel bad for these strangers. Perhaps they should be adopted. My grandparents are long gone, but now I have a Grandpa Pullen. 



## The Hancock Part of the Mount Ely Hancock House

by Pat Donahue

According to the history on the Mount Ely Hancock house written by Clark J. Hutchinson in 1980, we know that on December 31, 1855, William W. Conover and his wife, Angeline, sold the farmhouse with 87.58 acres to Elijah Hancock of Monroe Township, Middlesex County. Elijah and Lydia Ann, his wife, moved onto the farm no sooner than April 1, 1856. Little else is known about Elijah Hancock except that he built, or had built, the third part of the present-day house. This last part was added between April 1, 1856, and April 1, 1869, when the property was sold to William R. Norton.

I was surprised that “little else is known” about Elijah Hancock, particularly since he added significantly to the structure. In fact, there isn’t any proof that Elijah Hancock actually added the third part of the house! In note #38 of his manuscript, Hutchinson explains why he thought that Elijah was the likely builder:

It is very doubtful that Abijah Ely, who owned this house from 1841 to 1855, added the third part because he and his wife were childless. It is equally doubtful that William W. Conover, who owned this house from 1855 to 1856, added the third part because of the short period of time in which he owned it.

The construction of the last portion of the home is therefore estimated to be around 1860 when Elijah Hancock owned the property. Although he only had two children, and a servant, perhaps he hoped for a larger family and wanted the extra space.

Elijah Hancock was born in 1817. There are many Hancock relatives in the East Windsor Cemetery, which provided helpful hints in my search since, as warned, I was unable to find out much about Elijah. I did not discover where he came from, but I suspect Mansfield, Burlington for two

reasons. It is the location of the only other Elijah Hancock in NJ during that timeframe, but this evidence is sketchy, and his wife was born there in 1822 and is buried there, which is slightly better evidence.

Elijah married Lydia Ann Bryan on March 3, 1847. The census of 1850 lists Elijah as a farmer living with his wife and a daughter, Anna Maria, who is 2 years old. The only mention of Elijah in the press is in the Village Record on September 26, 1856. This issue includes a list of prizes "Awarded by the Mercer County Mechanical & Agricultural Association, at its 2d Annual Exhibition, held at Hightstown on the 17th and 18th of September, 1856." Under the Vegetables Second Division section, Elijah Hancock appears for having won \$1 for the "best three citron melons." He was living in my house at the time!

laborer. Anna Briant, age 12, a white domestic who cannot read or write, also lives with them. The value of the real estate is now \$8600, and the value of the personal estate is \$1025. It is unclear what property is being referred to since the Hancock's supposedly sold the farm and house in 1869.

Oddly, I could not find Elijah in the 1880 census. His son, Watson, is now a 28-year-old farmer living in Monroe with his wife, Emma C., also 28, and their 1-year-old daughter Ethel. There are also two boarders, Anna Hancock, age 31, who is Watson's sister, and Anna R. Dey, age 35. However, in the column headed "Is the person (on the day of the Enumerator's visit) sick or temporarily disabled, so as to be unable to attend to ordinary business or duties? If so, what is the sickness or disability?" Watson has "chills" and Emma has "consumption."

Although I could not find a record of Emma's death, that she did so is evident because on April 11, 1883, in Hightstown, Watson married Sarah Matilda Polhemus. Sarah was born on July 11, 1860, in Upper Freehold. By 1885, Watson is living in Upper Freehold with his parents, Elijah and Lydia, his second wife



Mount Ely Hancock House today. Special thanks to Nancy & John Laudenberger

The Census of 1860 lists Elijah as a farmer in East Windsor living with Anna Maria, age 13, and Watson, age 9, both of whom attend school. The real estate he owns is worth \$5000, and his personal estate is worth \$350. Ten years later, the census lists him as a farmer, living in East Windsor with Lydia, age 47, who is keeping house, Anna, age 23, who has no occupation, and Watson, age 19, who works as a farm

Matilda, his daughter Ethel from his first marriage, a son Willis, and "Hancock." The census records are replete with "Hancock" entries - no first names. Apparently, these are for children still-born or who died in infancy. Watson and Matilda lost at least four children. (The cemetery contains a headstone for Roger Hancock who died at the age of two, but I did not find out anything else about him.)

The 1890 census was destroyed in a fire in 1922 at the Commerce Building in Washington, D.C. Elijah next appears in written records in the August 29, 1895 Hightstown Gazette, which

printed his obituary.

Elijah Hancock died Sunday morning aged 78 years. He was a farmer, and had successfully carried on that business in this vicinity for many years, holding the respect of his neighbors. Some time ago he retired from business and made his home with his son, Watson Hancock, at whose residence the funeral was held on Tuesday, with interment at East Windsor Cemetery. His wife survives him.

Elijah's wife, Lydia, moved to Burlington to live near, and then with, her sister. Lydia died there in 1921.


The census of 1900 lists four of Watson and Matilda's daughters (Ethel, Mary, Emma, and Anna) and four of their sons (Willis, Elmer, Earnest, and Harry). Sara Matilda Polhemus Hancock died in 1901. She is buried in the East Windsor Cemetery. By 1905, Watson is a 54-year-old widowed farmer. With him are Ethel, who is a teacher; William R. (This is an error and should read Willis.), Elmer, and Ernest who are farm laborers; Mary, Harry, and Emma, who are at school; and Anna and John, who are 8 and 4 years old, respectively. The list is the same in the 1910 census, but in the 1915 census, Ernest does not appear. He likely set up his own household as there is some evidence that he married. By 1920, Emma disappears from the list, and by 1930, only Watson, Elmer, and John remain.

I have only circumstantial evidence that Elijah probably built the last part of my house. The Red Bank Register of March 29, 1911, published a list of recently recorded deeds. One in Millstone Township transfers property from Elizabeth Butterworth to Watson Hancock "4 lots, \$750." The purchase of property implies that he is in the real estate business. The Cranbury Press for June 30, 1922, printed a wedding announcement, which includes an additional clue.

Hancock-Ely: A beautiful June wedding was solemnized Wednesday afternoon at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph J. Ely, at Hightstown, when at 4 o'clock, their daughter, Evelyn Mount, became the bride of Willis Hancock, son of Watson Hancock, of the York Road. The Rev. Harry E. Owings, pastor of the Hightstown Baptist Church performed the ceremony before a large number of invited guests from among the relatives and friends of the young people. Miss Huldah Ely, sister of the bride was the maid of honor and the bridesmaids were Miss Helen Applegate and Miss Mabel Smith, both of Hightstown. Abijah Mount acted as the best man and the ushers were Addison Ely, a brother of the bride, and John Hancock, a brother of the bridegroom. Kenneth Groendyke was the page. Miss Bertha Ayres, of Hightstown, played Mendelssohn's wedding march and Miss Helen Ely, a cousin of the bride, sang "O! Promise Me." The bride wore a beautiful cream colored gown of lace and satin trimmed with

pearls and a veil caught up with pearls and carried a large shower bouquet of bride's roses and lily of the valley. The maid of honor was attired in a gown of gold lace and georgette and carried a bouquet of pink roses. The bridesmaids were gowned in torquoise blue georgette and carried sweet peas. Upon their return to Hightstown the young couple will take up their residence in a house which Mr. Hancock has just erected on South Main Street. Both of the young people are well known in Hightstown and vicinity and Miss Ely was a member of the faculty of the Hightstown public schools. Mr. Hancock is a building contractor.

Given the purchase of deeds and the reference to employment as a building contractor, I conjecture that Watson became interested in the real estate or building business when his father, Elijah, added the third part of the farmhouse. This interest or experience passed to his son, Willis. According to Cappy, the house referred to in the wedding announcement above is now the home of Nancy Laudenberger, an active member of the historical society.

Watson Hancock died in 1930 and is buried at the East Windsor Cemetery. His son, Willis, Sr., died in 1959. Willis' obituary identifies him as a builder. He had married Evalyn Ely. They are both buried near Watson along with brothers Elmer and Harry, and Harry's wife Bertha. Willis' son, Willis R. Junior, was also a builder. He died in 2005 and is buried in the family plot. At the writing of this article his wife, Shirley S. Hancock was residing in the house they built on Old York Road. Sadly Shirley, a longtime member of the Society, passed away on February 2nd in her home, age, 94. She will be buried in East Windsor Cemetery next to Willis. The Hancock children and grandchildren married into many of the area's established families, such as Conover, Perrine, Mount, Ely, and Groendyke. 

## Hightstown East Windsor Historical Society

Founded 1971 to educate while preserving for future generations, our people and our community's history.



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