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Hopewell ... An Important Little Old Forgotten Town

About This Article

The Trenton-Mercer County Board of Realtors wishes to express its appreciation for the cooperation which made this story possible. It was compiled by the Editor and Staff from several sources. Special mention must be made of the Hopewell Library, which generously made available the historical material from which this story was drawn, and of Russell K. Metz, who gave so freely of his time in procuring the photographs with which this article is illustrated. We hope that our readers will enjoy this short history of a small but rapidly growing community. Edward Foster, President

Long, long ago, long before the white man came to America, Jersey was a paradise for its few inhabitants. Rivers fringed the heavily wooded interior, and marshes and meadows, hills and mountains, and lakes and streams broke the somber pattern of the gloomy forests.

The nomadic Indians, moving as spirit and necessity dictated, left hardly a trace on the wild, untamed countryside. Consciously or otherwise, these early inhabitants were excellent farmers and conservationists, and after the men had cleared the small patches of ground needed, the women cultivated these communal gardens, which, thanks to the fertile soil, were sufficient to supply them with the maize, squash and other vegetables necessary for their existence. The forests abounded with game and the rivers teemed with fish. There was more than enough for all in any but one of the rare famine years. But no one site was occupied for any long period of time. The tribes would move on to a new area, which was in turn cleared and hunted, leaving the forest to reclaim the old camping site and the game to renew itself.

No one knows for how many hundreds of years the Indians followed their old customs—living from the land, and leaving it much as they had found it. But once the white man arrived upon the scene, conditions changed sharply and rapidly.

The advent of the white man spelt DOOM for all that had gone before—for the Indians, for the forests and streams, and for the wildlife. Certainly, some of the changes came about more slowly than others, and it is true that a persistent hunter can still find a deer or so if he looks hard enough, and an angler may catch a trout or a bass, but most of the game—animal, fish and fowl—vanished under the impact of the white man's intensive farming and manufacturing. The Indians, of course, were the first to be decimated and driven out, not by open warfare, but by white men's diseases and the "liquid lightning" of which they were too fond.

New Jersey was no exception to the familiar pattern of colonial settlement. For ease in transportation and communication, the land along the coast and the waterways was the first to be taken up and developed. Later, the more adventurous and the more farsighted began to explore the vast and unknown interior regions of the country. Sometimes these wanderers liked the looks of a region, and returned to take up land there or saw opportunities for business development. Thus new areas were opened up for future settlement, and so it was with Hopewell.

The Stout Boys

In October 1686, three sons of the remarkable Penelope Stout, left Monmouth where their father was one of the twelve patentees of New Jersey, with little thought of anything but a visit to the fall hunting lodges of the Lenni Lenapes, whom they had met earlier in the season while the Indians were on the shore. Apparently, it had been the annual custom of the Lenapes to visit this region during the summer months, where they dug and dried clams for the coming winter, salted fish, and literally, made money from shells. It was, of course, unavoidable that they meet the prolific Stout family, and natural that they take a liking to them; and it has been noted that Penelope Stout's relationship with these Indians was far more than an impersonal one, for the Indians felt an undying bond of friendship with this remarkable woman to the end of her long life.

Since so much of the history of Hopewell is bound up with the history of the Scouts, perhaps it will be apropos to give Penelope Stout's history here, even though she herself lived in Hopewell for only a short interval before her death, although she has lived on in legend ever since.

Penelope Vanprinces was born in Amsterdam about 1602, and sailed for New Amsterdam with her first husband, whose name is not known, about 1620. The ship was wrecked off Sandy Hook, and although all reached shore, Penelope's husband, injured in the wreck, could not march off to New Amsterdam with the crew. So he and his wife tarried in the woods, with the idea of giving his injuries time to heal before starting on the long trek to the small town of New Amsterdam. But it was not long before the pair was attacked by a band of roving Indians. The husband was killed immediately, and Penelope too was left for dead. Stripped of all possessions and exposed to the elements, it is almost unbelievable that this woman, with a fractured skull, a left shoulder so terribly hacked that she never again had full use of that arm, and an abdomen so slashed that her bowels had to be held in with one hand, managed to survive alone in the wilderness for seven days. Then, when two more Indians arrived upon the scene, she feebly called to them, hoping to be put out of her misery. One almost complied, but the other, probably motivated by hopes of a reward interfered and carried her to New Amsterdam, where she eventually recovered from her wounds. Here she met and married Richard Stout, and from this union sprang the large family of Stouts, whose descendants are still to be found all over southern Jersey, and especially in Hopewell.

It was, then, Penelope's three sons - Jonathan, James and David - who set off that brisk October day for what was to be a pleasant excursion, including some hunting, and a view of the unspoiled interior. But the trip was to be more momentous than that, for apparently two of the brothers liked the country so well that upon their return to the shore, they packed their belongings and made arrangements to return to the interior, where they settled and established large families. Although the records are not clear on the subject, it is to be presumed that other white families were living in the region, but it is also to be presumed that it was the impetus given by the Stout brothers that welded them all into a proper settlement, and established the first village. It must be remembered too, that in the early days the community was known as Columbia, and remained so until postal regulations made it necessary to change the name to avoid confusion.

But according to the old story, it is from the Stout brothers that both Hopewell Township and village, and Amwell Township derive their names. By the time the two brothers had established their homes, they were well known by their neighbors, who over a period of years became accustomed to the greeting of the two brothers, which never varied. Jonathan, catching sight of his brother would call out "Hope you are well, David!", to which the blustering reply was invariably "I am well, Jonathan!" It was not long before they were known as Hopewell Jonathan and Amwell David, nicknames which have come down co us as place names.

But whether or not the stories about Penelope Stout and her sons are true or apocryphal, the fact remains that the Stout name is still the most prominent in Hopewell. Hopewell's First Church

As far as the old records show, it seems that the first church services ever to be held in Columbia, or Hopewell as we shall call the settlement from now on, were those of the Old School Baptists, as they are called today. Originally, the meetings were held in the homes of the members, most often at one of the Stout's, but when it came time to choose the site for a regular meeting house, there is little doubt that Colonel Joseph Stout, a relative of the original settlers, dominated the scene. Joseph offered to donate the land, materials and labor for this first meeting house, but insisted that it be built on the top of the hill. However, while all the other members thanked him for his offer and appreciated his good will, it was pointed out that the location certainly was not central to the community, and would be difficult of access in the winter. Consequently, a valley site was chosen instead, which so enraged the Colonel that he swore never to set foot in the new meeting house - an oath which he kept. But he was a religious man and could not dispense with religious instruction, so as the story goes, he compromised by sitting on the church steps, where he could hear the service without entering the building. It is indicative too of the strength of the Stout clan that of the original fifteen persons forming the church, nine were Stouts.

During the colonial period, this church was the leading Baptist Church in America. The Reverend Isaac Eaton was its foremost minister, and it was under his direction that the Baptist denomination founded a school in Hopewell to train young men for the ministry. Under Isaac Eaton some of the country's great men received their training. Unfortunately, Hopewell lost this school and Baptist College because a charter could not be obtained from the state. In 1767 it moved to Rhode Island, and is now known as Brown University.

The Revolutionary War

It was on a Sunday morning in late April, almost forty years after the erection of the Baptist Meeting House, that a tired messenger arrived at the church with news for Colonel Joab Houghton. Colonel Joseph Stout, as was his practice, was either sitting on the steps or wandering about in the graveyard, where he could listen to the Reverend Benjamin Cole's sermon. As might be expected from this irascible gentleman, the messenger received a curt and annoyed reply, but was nevertheless able to find his man inside the building.

As soon as the services were over and the congregation dismissed, Colonel Houghton dashed out of the building and mounted the great stone block outside of the meeting house, calling "Men of New Jersey! The Redcoats are murdering our brethren of New England! Who follows me to Boston?" Every man present joined him, and by this act it appears that Colonel Joab Houghton became the first volunteer from New Jersey to enlist in the Continental Army. This he served with distinction and bravery throughout the war, and it was only natural that such a staunch supporter of the Rebel Cause who was not only a soldier, but active in the political life of the times, should be ardently hunted by the enemy. At one time, he barely escaped capture by the Hessians who had come to search for him, by climbing up into the chimney and remaining there until at long last the marauders left-not without first ransacking the house.

Joab Houghton's part in the war was for years largely forgotten even by the residents of his native Hopewell. It was only through the foresight of a few public spirited citizens that his burial place was located while there was still a faint memory of the sire, and a memorial erected to him. Far too little is known of the early history of this man who gave so freely of all he had to further the cause of his country. Still, in spite of the scantiness of the remaining records, enough of his history has come down to us to have caused several historians to claim that Colonel Houghton should rank in history with

Patrick Henry and James Otis, both of whom stirred large sections of the country to action when the need for it arose.

Better known to the annals of Hopewell's history is John Harr, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. He, like Houghton, had a price upon his head, but where Houghton was first of all a soldier, Harr was above all a statesman.

He served as a deputy in the Provincial Congress in 1775, and as well was a member of the Committee for Safety, and later was a member of the Continental Congress. No longer a young man, John Harr, although hunted from place to place, sometimes living in caves, sometimes hiding with neighbors, seeing his family afflicted and dispersed, his farm devastated and his property destroyed, never gave up his belief in the ultimate success of the revolution, even when things looked blackest. Nor did he ever regret the stand he had taken. When he died impoverished in 1780, he knew that his devotion had not been misplaced, and that the ideals he had so ably fought for had triumphed.

Hunt's house was the scene of the council of war which led to the battle of Monmouth. Here, on June 24th, 1778, a large number of important generals met with Washington to discuss the advisability of an attack upon the British forces under Clinton. Among those present were Generals Lee, Green, Stirling, Lafayette, Steuben, Knox, Poor, Wayne, Woodford, Patterson, Score and Duportail - all great names in American history. Unfortunately, the building still standing today, which so many believe to be the original one in which this famous meeting was held, retains little of the original structure, as can be seen from an old sketch. In fact, only the wagon house of today is part of the original.

It was not only during the Revolutionary War that Hopewell gave generously of her men and talents. Hopewell men have marched forth to every war since those early days. Her women have given their time and energy, and all have given freely of their money and support, so that the ideals fought for and won during that first great war might live.

The Frog War

An entirely different kind of warfare was waged in Hopewell during the 1870's - perhaps not of such universal significance, but affecting the community more directly than any national conflict.

By 1876, Hopewell had one railroad, a "dinky" branch of the Pennsylvania running from Millstone to Somerset. The service was poor, and connections even worse. Another line, the Delaware, now part of the Philadelphia and Reading, laid out a good line from Bound Brook to Hopewell, and from there on to Philadelphia. But the rub was that the line could not obtain permission to cross the Pennsylvania tracks at Hopewell. To prevent the new line from making a crossing at Hopewell, the Pennsylvania stationed an engine at the crossing, but this was compelled to run onto a switch line whenever a regular train came through.

One night when the engine had to run onto a siding to permit the passage of a through train, the working crew of the competing road managed to chain it fast, and then proceeded to lay the necessary crossing, or "frog," which would join the two sections of the "D. & B. B." Railroad, thus making it possible for the line to maintain through traffic.

In those rough days, it was feared that the two rival gangs might stage a pitched battle, and the militia was called out to maintain order. However, violence was avoided, and the "frog" remained in place. Naturally, this "Frog War" spelled great excitement for the inhabitants of Hopewell - perhaps as much as was occasioned by the British troops during the Revolutionary War, and certainly more than had been met with after that.

Within a few years, the excellent service provided by the new road contributed to the ruin of the old. And it was not only the fate of the old railroad, but that of Hopewell itself, that was changed by this "war."

While the new rails were being laid, the problem of housing and feeding so many men presented a great challenge to the inhabitants of the small village - at that time consisting of about twenty-four houses - a challenge which was somehow successfully met. Once that it was certain that the "frog" would remain, and that good service and connections would be maintained, the growth of Hopewell was assured.

Today and Tomorrow

Once rail service became rapid and dependable, Hopewell began to expand. From a small village of only about twenty four houses in 1876, it has grown into a modern town of approximately 1,800 inhabitants. There are at least three clubs - the Roundabout Club, the Garden Club and the Woman's Club. It has six churches which include three Baptist Churches, one Methodist, one Presbyterian and one Catholic Church. The Free Public Library was organized in 1914 by the Roundabout Club, and now holds about twelve thousand volumes. Connected with the library is the Hopewell Museum, which is known for the completeness of its collections. It boasts excellent schools, and St. Michaels Orphanage.

There are many small businesses, and shopping facilities are good. The banking facilities, too, are excellent. Besides this, larger industries are coming into the area, and Hopewell is now looking forward to an even greater period of expansion.

Before closing this too brief story of Hopewell, some mention of the Hopewell Museum must be made, for no history, however short, would be complete without it. The Hopewell Museum, closely connected with the library and operating under the "Hopewell Free Public Library and Museum Funding and Building Association," houses many more treasures than one expects to find in a small town, or often finds in a large one. The nucleus of the collection was started by Miss Sarah D. Stout, who very early in life began collecting antique articles of value, and especially those pertaining to colonial life in and about Hopewell. To catalog the contents of the museum would take a book in itself, but a general idea may be given of the many, many items which have been saved for posterity by the historically minded citizens of the community.

Here can be found old records, pictures, sketches and maps for those who wish definite information. A huge collection of wearing apparel is on display, including not only the "Sunday-go-to-Meeting" clothes which one sees in so many museums, but also the every-day work clothes. There are old text books dating back to the earliest schools in the area, and account books from which one can get a pretty good idea of the names, tastes and needs of the early settlers. There are name plates from coffins (customarily removed before the burial), collections of early china, homemade balances dating back to the early 1700's, sewing birds, Indian relics, grain shovels, needlework, stove plates, doctor's instruments which make the blood of modern man run cold, the iron lug-pole which Colonel Joab Houghton used when being hunted by the Hessians, kettles, candle-molds, and much more.

But to this writer's mind, the Hopewell Museum is far more than a dry reliquary for momentos of the past; it is a living organization in which not only those directly connected with it are interested, but the whole countryside as well. As time goes on, more and more people of Hopewell bring in the heirlooms of their families-priceless objects, which so often are thoughtlessly lost or destroyed. It is greatly to be hoped that this interest will continue, and that in time the museum will come to be an almost living reminder of the past - both distant and not so distant.

Hopewell has had a rich and varied past. It has grown, at first slowly, from a small settlement to a thriving, up-to-date community, keenly aware of its heritage, yet looking forward to a prosperous

future. It is certain that Hopewell, with its great American tradition to look back upon, will forge forward by following the plans already being put into operation for a large industrial expansion, and we are sure that when it is again time to feature Hopewell there will be another story to tell, just as interesting as this one of the past.

Rosa Acres

Rosa Acres, Inc., of Hopewell, New Jersey, has purchased 29 acres of land in the Borough of Hopewell from Hervey Hill, which was formerly a part of the J. B. Hill Estate. Rosa Acres, Inc., is now grading the site and has opened one section for the building of homes. Janee Construction Co. of Hopewell, N. J., has already built two houses and will start a third one soon.

Another section of the tract is being set aside for a commercial area. This tract will have a 400 foot frontage on Broad Street and a depth of 1000 feet and will make an ideal spot for a super-market and other stores.

Hopewell Savings and Loan Association / Over 40 Years of Service

During February of 1914, a group of civic-minded Hopewell citizens met in Firemen's Hall to form an organization which would contribute to the growth and prosperity of Hopewell and its neighboring communities by providing a plan for the safe investment of long term savings and by offering to home owners a plan which would permit the financing of a home on a monthly payment basis. This group was called the Hopewell Building and Loan Association. Just over a year ago the name was changed to the Hopewell Savings and Loan Association, but its objective remains the same-to serve the people of the community.

Of all of the original officers and directors, Director Russell W. Holcombe is the only one of the group still serving in an active capacity, and the bank has grown with him. From assets of about \$10,000 in 1915, there has been an increase to over \$338,000 today. Housed until 1922 in the Firemen's Hall, it moved from there into larger quarters on the second floor of the Hopewell Bank Building. By 1951 it was again necessary to move, for the Association had grown to a size where the old offices could no longer serve the public with the quick, efficient, up-to-date service desired, and so the present headquarters were established in the ground floor rooms of the former Post Office Building on East Broad Street.

There are many in Hopewell and its environs who have been able to build, enlarge and remodel their homes and businesses through the help of the Association, and in conjunction with this, many hundreds of people who have been able to invest their savings in a safe and profitable manner.

The future of the Hopewell Savings and Loan Association is bright, for the future of the organization is also the future of the community - a rapidly expanding one with everything to look forward to.

Milestones in the History of the Hopewell National Bank

1889 The Bank's organization certificate was dated October 5th.

1889 The first organization meeting was held October 12th.

1890 The Bank opened for business on March 17th. The original officers and employees were as follows: Joseph M. Phillips, President; John S. VanDike, Vice President and Attorney; John N. Race, Cashier; Theodore M. Hall, Teller; John E. Dalrymple, Secretary

1893 The first dividend was paid on January 15th.

1894 The first annual dinner was held on January 15th at the Peter Van Fleet Hotel and 26 diners were served and 8 horses were fed at a total cost of \$15.00.

1896 Mr. Joseph M. Phillips, the President, died in August.

1897 Mr. A. L. Holcombe was elected President on January 12th.

1899 On January 20th, the first telephone was installed.

1901 Wilmer Moore was employed as a clerk on May 27th.

1901 On August 30th, electric lights were installed.

1906 Theodore Holcombe was appointed Director on April 23rd, to fill the vacancy caused by the death of A. L. Holcombe, President.

1906 Mr. S. V. VanZandt was elected President on April 27th.

1906 On April 30th, steam heat was installed.

1913 The lot of the present bank site was purchased from C. N. Allen, Jr., on May 2nd.

1915 On January 18th, the first meeting was held in the new bank building.

1917 Raymond S. VanDyke was employed as cleark on April 27th.

1920 On May 1st, Wilmer Moore resigned.

1921 The burglar alarm system was installed on March 14th.

1923 Frank J. Holcombe was elected Director on January 9th.

1923 On January 29th, the capital stock increased from \$50,000 to \$100,000.

1931 J. R. Hunt was elected Director on January 13th.

1932 Raymond S. Van Dyke was appointed Cashier on April 12th.

1932 Russell K. Metz was appointed Vice President on June 1st.

1936 Russell K. Metz was elected a Director on January 14th.

1936 On July 31st, the surplus increased from \$50,000 to \$100,000.

1940 S. V. Van Zandt, President, died on January 16th.

1940 J. B. Hill was elected President on June 4th.

1943 On January 12th, George E. Pierson was elected President and Edward U. Hill was elected a Director.

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1943 Margaret E. Giese was employed as bookkeeper on March 15th.

1945 Joseph M. Pierson, Assistant Cashier, resigned. Joe received an appointment as Deputy County Clerk of Mercer County on March 31st.

1945 Mr. Joseph B. Hill, former President of the Bank, died on September 11th in his 85th year. Mr. Hill had declined to be elected President of the Bank at the January 12th, 1943, annual meeting because of failing health.

1946 Mr. George E. Pierson, President, passed away on November 19th.

1946 Mr. David L. Smith, solicitor of the Bank, was elected a Director on December 24th.

1947 Mr. George T. Wells was elected President at the Annual Stockholders Meeting on January 14th. Mr. Edward U. Hill was elected Secretary.

1948 Dr. T. A. Pierson, Director, passed away on Christmas Eve.

1949 On January 4th, Dr. J. R. Pierson was appointed as a Director to fill the unexpired term of his father, Dr. T. A. Pierson.

1950 Frank J. Holcombe resigned as Director on January 3rd.

1950 Lloyd M. Holcombe was appointed to fill the unexpired term of his father, Frank J. Holcombe, on January 3rd.

1950 George T. Wells, President, died suddenly of a heart attack immediately following a Board Meeting held on February 7th.

1950 Joseph R. Hunt was elected to fill the term of George T. Wells, President, on February 28th.

1950 G. Newell Holcombe was appointed to fill the unexpired term of George T. Wells, as a Director of the Bank, on March 7th.

1953 Herbert S. Rockwell was appointed as a Director on February 10th.

1953 Herbert S. Rockwell took the Oath of Director and attended his first meeting on February 17th.

1954 A Bell & Howe microfilm machine was purchased.

1955 Plans are now being made for the remodeling of the Bank.