History of South Brunswick Township

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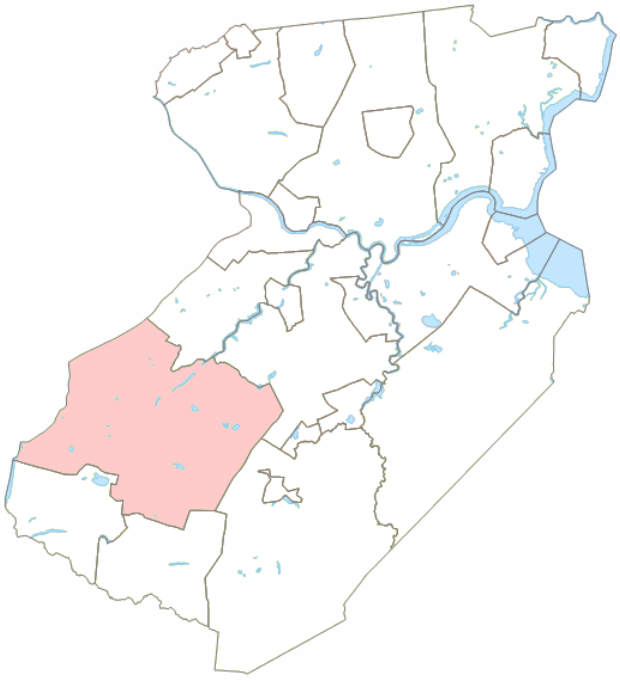
By Ceil Leedom

Former Local History Librarian and Township Historian



SOUTH BRUNSWICK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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While the Hundred Years' War was being fought between the English and French kings for control of France, the 14th-century inhabitants of the northeastern part of North America were living in relative tranquility with nature. The inhabitants, the Lenni-Lenape Indians, a branch of the Great Algonquin Family, had migrated to New Jersey via the Ohio River Valley. The Lenape lived in semi-permanent settlements and camps along river and stream valleys, cultivating crops and hunting. Although no specific sites have as yet been authoritatively documented, the Lenape camped, hunted, and traveled in and through South Brunswick. The Lenni Lenape (meaning Original People) were also known as the Delaware Indians by the later European settlers. Their population was relatively small: a 17th-century estimate puts it at approximately 8,000.

The lifestyle of the Lenape remained unchanged until the coming of the first European settlers in the early 1600's. The influx of Europeans began to accelerate during the 1660's and their sheer number and determination to settle and possess the land resulted in the decline and virtual disappearance of the Lenape. The differences between the Lenape and European cultures were irreconcilable, most critically in regard to land ownership. The early British Proprietors' intent, and that of the settlers, was to permanently purchase the land and establish settlements for agriculture and trade. Instructions from the East New Jersey Proprietors to then-Governor Lawrie were that "no opportunity be omitted of purchasing more land from the Indians until the Whole Province be bought from them." **1** The land purchases were made, generally with trade goods in exchange for an Indian's mark on a deed. However, the Lenape "simply could not imagine that the deeds alienated lands from them and theirs forever. By the time the Lenape understood the full impact of European settlement and land purchase, their number and powers had greatly diminished and their desire for and actual dependence on European trade goods had grown." **2**

The Lenape had a significant impact upon the Europeans and the patterns of growth and settlement that came in their wake. The Lenape altered the flora and consequently the fauna by their widespread burning (for clearing forest areas for agriculture, and for creating optimum habitats for deer and other game). "Indian croplands and old fields were utilized as indicators of agricultural fertility… Indian crops were readily accepted, as were Indian techniques, not only in agriculture but also in woods lore… Lenape trails served to encourage the development of routeways by the settlers. Trails and old fields helped to determine many initial sites of settlement." **3**

The new inhabitants had to adapt to a completely new environment. Over a relatively short period of time, trails became roads, farms and settlements were established, and important knowledge was gained through experience and interaction with the native

populations. The new farms and settlements were often located along travel routes and waterways, similar to the practice of the Lenape.

In 1872, the Legislature first reduced the size of South Brunswick with the creation of the separate Township of Cranbury from the southern portion of South Brunswick. In 1885, it redefined and enlarged the boundaries of Cranbury, and in 1919, the size of South Brunswick was further reduced with the formation of Plainsboro Township. The present boundaries of South Brunswick date back to this last change. South Brunswick consists of 41.9 square miles.

Colonial settlement of Middlesex County and South Brunswick first developed along the trails and waterways used by the Lenape; many of the roads used today were originally Indian trails. The Assunpink Trail of the Lenape became the first road in New Jersey and the primary overland route between New York and Philadelphia, initially running between the Raritan River in New Brunswick and the Delaware River at Trenton. It has been called, at various times, the King's Highway, the Post Road, and the Upper Road, and is presently known as Lincoln Highway or Route 27. The Crosswicknung Trail became an important road connecting Inion's Ferry in New Brunswick to George Rescarrick's tavern in Cranbury and to towns further south. This road was first known as The Road to George's and later simply as George's Road. Now it is called Old Georges Road and forms part of Route 130. From 1875 to 1900, it was a toll road, called the New Brunswick and Cranbury Turnpike. A third important road dating from this early 18th-century colonial period ran from South Amboy to Cranbury and towns further south. It was called Lawrie's Road (after Gawen Lawrie, a 17th-century Deputy Governor who resided in Perth Amboy) and later the Amboy Stage Road, and is now the Cranbury South River Road. These three thoroughfares were connected by present-day Ridge Road, originally known as the road from Barefoot Brunson's in Kingston to the South River, which ran across the Township from Kingston to Lawries Road just below Rhodes Hall, intersecting Georges Road at Cross Roads.

The initial 18th-century settlements in South Brunswick were located along these roads. Hamlets and towns developed around the locations of taverns. Taverns at Kingston, Rhode Hall, and Cross Roads (now Dayton) served both the travelers of these first roads and the early farms and scattered agricultural settlements of the Township.

The 18th-century character of South Brunswick became that of a rural agricultural township with small clustered settlements located on major transportation routes. The early settlers quickly took advantage of the fertile soils and favorable growing conditions. Important crops were grains, potatoes, hay, apples, and peaches. Saw and grist mills were located along waterways. At Deans, an agricultural settlement on

Georges Road, a mill was built around 1800 on Lawrence Brook. An earlier mill was built in the 1730's farther downstream, later known as Davidsons Mill. A distillery was built at Fresh Ponds around 1780. Natural resources of the forest, land, and water were developed as the population increased.

The rural nature of the Township continued throughout the 18th century, with increases in commercial and residential growth and development coinciding with the introduction of new transportation routes. The Straight Turnpike, now Route 1, was constructed in 1804 by the Trenton and New Brunswick Turnpike Company. It was operated as a toll road until the turn of the century. Taverns were built along this road, as with the other major thoroughfares, but with no villages or hamlets to accompany them. The introduction of railroads caused significant changes, particularly after the Pennsylvania Railroad (running parallel to the Straight Turnpike) and the Jamesburg and Freehold Branch were completed in 1865, supplementing the earlier Camden and Amboy Railroad of 1838.

Kingston's location on the Lenape Assunpink Trail, where it crossed the Millstone River, was the prime factor in its early prominence. Kingston was by far the most active and important village, being situated on both the heavily traveled King's Road and the Millstone River, combining the commercial activities of both mills and taverns. The Dutch used the trail as early as 1655 to go from New Netherland to their settlements along the lower Delaware, and by 1698 it had become a King's Highway. Kingston was one of the overnight stops on the trip from New York to Philadelphia, and several inns were built to accommodate and provide services to the travelers. George Washington and the Governors of East Jersey were known to stop here on their travels, and an oft-quoted story relates that at one time 49 stages, loaded with passengers, halted at the Withington Tavern, where more than 400 horses were standing in front. Other commercial enterprises developed here throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, and one historical account describes "a Presbyterian church, an academy, a common school, five stores, three hotels, a large grist mill, a saw mill and woolen factory, driven by the Millstone River." **4** The construction of the Straight Turnpike in 1804, designed to facilitate travel, bypassed Kingston and marked a gradual decline in the town's bustling activity, although the construction of the Delaware and Raritan Canal in 1834 and the Camden and Amboy Railroad in 1838 stimulated a renewal of commercial traffic and businesses. An extensive number of dwellings from these 18th- and 19th-century times still stand in Kingston, in good condition and retaining much of the ambiance of this earlier period.

The nucleus of Rhode Hall was a tavern established in about 1730 by a Scottish settler named David Williamson on the turnpike to Amboy, "Lawries Road." Other families who

settled here were also from Scotland. A store was later added to the hamlet, and sometime between 1850 and 1876, a racecourse known as the Rhode Hall Driving Park was located nearby. Later proprietors of the tavern were Thomas McDowell in the 18th century and the Smock family in the 19th century. Little remains of this settlement and its early activity.

Fresh Ponds is located in the same general vicinity as Rhode Hall, at the intersection of Davidson Mill and Fresh Ponds roads, to the north of Pigeon Swamp. The first distillery of the Township is reputed to have been established there in about 1780 by Samuel Combs. Later, a store, a school, and a church were built in the 18th century, and approximately a dozen houses were clustered there. The old church and school still stand, with an old cemetery in the churchyard. In the past, Fresh Ponds was called Woodside or Woodville. An early attempt to drain nearby Pigeon Swamp was begun in 1780 with the construction of the Great Ditch. The ditch was maintained by the State until the 19th century. The name Pigeon Swamp is said to have come from an 18th-century owner of the swamp area, Ann Pidgeon, daughter of East Jersey Governor Jerimiah Bass. The swamp was also a nesting place for a number of passenger pigeons until their extinction early in the 20th century.

Dayton was first known simply as The Cross Roads, where James Whitlock built a tavern on Georges Road, around 1750. Another tavern was added later in the century by Thomas Wetherill. Early enterprises included a brick manufacturer and a large nursery. The crossroads nature of the village was enhanced with the construction of various railroad lines from 1833 to 1865, the last of which culminated in the extension of the Freehold and Jamesburg Agricultural Railroad to connect with the Penn Railroad, resulting in the construction of a depot south of the Five Corners intersection. In 1866, the name was changed from Cross Roads to Dayton, in honor of William L. Dayton, an attorney for the Freehold and Jamesburg Agricultural Railroad. Dayton had helped settle disputes arising from the location of a railroad right-of-way. He was later a U.S. Senator, Vice Presidential nominee, and Minister to France.

Although the population of Dayton had reached 300 by 1865 (the 1870 census reported a total population for South Brunswick as 3,779), the nature of its business establishments–farm implements, two hay dealers, a general store, a nursery and a harness maker–attests to its agricultural identity. Its manner of growth, spreading out from a crossroads, makes it typical of the hamlets of South Brunswick and, in general, of the southern part of Middlesex County.

Deans originated from its location on both the Crosswicknung Trail (Georges Road) and Lawrence Brook. Dams were built on the brook, creating Deans Pond, and mills were

constructed for lumber and grain around 1810 by the Dean Family. Like Dayton, the hamlet slowly grew, serving the local agricultural area, spreading along the crossroads, and being influenced by the construction and location of the railroads and a depot on its western edge. The name of Martinsville appears on an 1850 map for this village. An 1882 history explains the change as follows:

About 1845, John H. Marin had built several houses and opened a store there and from that time onward until after the erection of the depot and the establishment of a regular railway station there to supersede a flag station, the hamlet was known as Martinsville; but when the station was opened (about 1866) the railroad company named it Dean's Station, and from it the hamlet received the name by which it is commonly known. **5**

In 1852, a distillery was built, a hay press in 1873, and according to the New Jersey State Gazetteer of 1875, the population of Deans was 100, with two flour mills, two saw mills, three grocers, a blacksmith, a wagon maker, a shoe maker, a justice of the peace, and daily mail delivery.

Monmouth Junction was created as the junction of three rail branches: the New York Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad, the Rocky Hill, and the Jamesburg and Freehold. Before this time, as one can see from the 1850 map, all that occupied this area was Longbridge Farm, dating back to the original owner, Thomas Lawrence, in the 18th century, and several other properties on Ridge Road, many of them belonging to the Rowland family. The existing railway at that earlier time was the Rocky Hill branch of the old Camden and Amboy Railroad, located to the northwest, with a depot to the north serving Martinsville and Cross Roads. The present integrity of Monmouth Junction is due to its virtual creation as a railroad center in the 1860s and 1870s. It is more urbanized in its closer siting of the houses than the agricultural crossroads communities, such as Deans and Dayton.

John Martin, the entrepreneur mentioned above, built a public house in 1871, and by 1882, the village included a church, store, and post office, a railway station, and fourteen dwellings. A local account gives an excellent portrayal of the character of Monmouth Junction, a few decades later, at the turn of the century:

The picture of the village and the rail line at the close of the Civil War was one of extreme activity. A second pair of rails had been added, making the Pennsylvania a two-track line over which ran 201 daily passenger trains and 24 freights. Locomotives were wood-burning, and brakes were hand-operated. It was a favorite stopping-off place for salesmen; revelers came by horse-drawn vehicles, and by the early automobiles from Princeton University to drive and celebrate in the village. **6**

Twentieth-century South Brunswick has seen extensive transformation with the impact of American industrial technology. The New Brunswick and Trenton Fast Line began operation in 1900, a trolley line running parallel to the Old Straight Turnpike of 1804 (Route 1), intersecting George's Road just to the north of the Five Corners intersection in Dayton. This trolley provided daily passenger and freight service, stopping at a local crossroads. In 1930, the line was closed, unable to compete with the automobile. This line is now a utility right-of-way owned by Public Service Electric and Gas Company.

Other local railroad station stops were also phased out over time. With the automobile, hamlets and villages became more accessible to one another and to surrounding areas. The New Jersey Turnpike was opened in 1951, again roughly parallel to Route 1, on the eastern edge of the Township. One typical effect of the Turnpike was the transformation of the agricultural area in the southeast corner of South Brunswick into a burgeoning industrial development.

With increased mobility and a growing population, the suburban-style residential development was born after the Second World War, and Kendall Park was begun in 1955. Kendall Park is located right off of Route 27, the old Indian trail and major thoroughfare of earlier centuries. Other residential developments have since been constructed and, like Kendall Park, have mostly followed the dispersed hamlet pattern. Commercial, residential, and industrial growth has developed mostly along major thoroughfares and turnpikes, like the developments of earlier days. However, unlike earlier centuries, the growth of the past decades has been so extensive that it has significantly modified the rural and agricultural nature of the Township. **7**

In 1980, the Township population approached 18,000. In 1990, this figure reached 25, 792, with a 1994 estimated population figure of 30,932. With the increase in population has come an increase in employment and industrial growth. Overall, the Township expects its enviable position in the Central Jersey / Middlesex County region to continue through planned and controlled development.

Compiled and updated in 2026 by Kelan Amme, Local History Librarian. Some details and original sources may be unconfirmed. If you have questions, please email **kamme@sbpl.info**.

Footnotes:

1. Wacker, Peter O. Land and People, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1975.
2. Wacker, Land and People.
3. Wacker, Land and People.
4. Evert and Stewart. Combination Atlas Map of Middlesex County, 1876.
5. Clayton, W. Woodfred. History of Union and Middlesex Counties, New Jersey. Everts and Peck, Philadelphia, PA, 1882.
6. Stout, R.M. Monmouth Junction, The Town We Live In, manuscript, 1962.
7. The Foregoing was taken from the Natural Resources Inventory, compiled by the staff of the Planning Department and Environmental Commission and rearranged for this calendar courtesy of Bruce H. Jones. (NOTE: All of the above text was taken, with several minor modifications, from the 1982-83 South Brunswick Township Municipal Calendar and Report.)