

THE FOUNDING OF OUR TOWN AND THE CREATION OF OUR COUNTY

By: J. Mark Mutter

The founding of our town – and later the creation of our county – is truly a remarkable story of re-birth and of re-building.

It is a story of the human spirit – of hope, of faith, of the better angels in all of us – it is an American story, and for us here in Toms River, it is our story.

Think about it: from complete ruin at the end of the Revolutionary War to designation as the county seat in the newly created Ocean County at the beginning of the Civil War - - the space of a lifetime – Dover Township, now Toms River - - rose, like the Phoenix, from out of the ashes.

TOMS RIVER ROSE LIKE THE PHOENIX

How did all of this happen in the short space of just 68 years?

It begins at the end - - at the end of the War for Independence.

The British had surrendered at Yorktown in October 1781.

Peace talks were in progress in Paris – to formally end the war.

Benjamin Franklin led an American peace delegation.

And while they were over there, over here in a tiny waterfront village, there was an effort to start the war up all over again.

We all know the basic story: Captain Joshua Huddy commanded a small rustic fort - - a life size replica proudly stands today in the park named in his honor – which was manned by 25 citizen soldiers.

The fort had been built to protect the salt warehouse located in the area behind what is now the Toms River Post Office on Water Street.

Salt was produced in several separate salt works up and down the coast in Dover Township – as our town, at the time, was over 400 square miles large.

The salt works at Shelter Cove – now home of one our popular municipal parks – was the best known salt producing site in all of New Jersey.

We must remember that salt was a much-needed commodity for the preservation of food in the 1700's and, as the saying goes: an army travels on its stomach.

Said George Washington to one of his generals: “The salt works are so truly valuable to the public; they are certainly worth your attention (to defend).”

THE BATTLE OF TOMS RIVER

So, on that fateful Sunday morning of March 24, 1782 – the battle played out here in Toms River.

Nine patriots were killed.

But, who were these men?

According to the British, those who defended our town were nothing more than a band of ungrateful “rebels.”

We were, so reported the Royal Gazette, a Tory newspaper published in New York, a “piratical set of banditti”: nothing but a gang of pirates and bandits.

When the British marched on the fort and demanded its surrender, history records Captain Huddy's shouted response: “Come and take it!”

John Farr was shot dead in the first volley of gunfire.

John Wainwright was felled by six bullets.

James Kinsley, stationed at one of the fort's swivel guns, was mortally wounded. David Dodge, Cornelius McDonald, and Thomas Rostoinder were killed in hand-to-hand struggle. James Kennedy died of wounds later that day. John Cook was bayoneted to death – after the patriots had surrendered. And Joshua Huddy was hunted down, captured, and brought to the infamous British “Sugar House” prison in New York, and later hung without trial.

THE IRONIES OF HISTORY

In one of the great ironies of history, it was William Franklin – Benjamin's son and the last Royal Governor of New Jersey – who authorized the attack on Toms River.

He had been put under house arrest when the war began, and later set free in a prisoner-of-war exchange.

William Franklin then became President of a group of armed Americans loyal to the King. They called themselves the Board of Associated Loyalists.

He encouraged the attack here – it was five months after the British surrender in Yorktown, hoping to somehow re-start the war.

And it is the same William Franklin who, as New Jersey's last Royal Governor, signed the charter creating Dover Township in 1767.

A replica of the charter and his signature hangs in our Town Hall meeting room.

It is dated June 24, 1767 – making our Township older than the United States.

So, as we look back, it is something of historic irony: William Franklin – the man who created Dover Township – then sought to destroy it.

The 19th Century historian Edwin Salter wrote of the destruction: “What a terrible day to the inhabitants of Toms River was that memorable Sabbath! Probably not less than a hundred women and children were rendered homeless. Some families were entirely broken up, the heads killed, mothers and children scattered, never as families meeting again.”

FROM OUT OF THE ASHES

But the town – our town – did meet again.

Soon after the battle, as the original Dover “Town Book” still on file in the Township Clerk's Office reveals, our Revolutionary-era forefathers were meeting and planning and re-building Dover Township.

Within the space of a lifetime, less than 70 years, this little hamlet, left in complete ruin with just two buildings left standing, would become the county seat of the newly created Ocean County.

No other town or county in America can say what we can say here: from utter destruction to becoming a county seat within the space of a lifetime!

Wrote Shakespeare: “There is a tide in the affairs of men which – when taken at the flood – leads on to fortune. We must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.”

THE CURRENT OF HISTORY

And so our Dover Township founding fathers “took the current” – and boy, what a current it was! Soon after the British attack, town officials were chosen and they were busy making decisions caring for the poor, supervising new roads, and collecting taxes.

Annual town meetings were held in private homes and in inns in the early 1800's.

By 1830, the village had grown to about 40 houses and boasted a Methodist-meeting house and two taverns. The taverns were located on Main Street and were meeting places and stopovers for a popular stagecoach run along the Jersey coast.

The 1830 census reported the Dover Township population as 3000 inhabitants.

Dover Township was becoming an important early 19th century location. New neighborhoods, schools, and churches tell the story.

It was proximity to early travel routes created by man and by nature that fed the Township's growth.

To the east was Cranberry Inlet—which provided easy access from the ocean to the northern part of Barnegat Bay and was used by whaleboats, sloops, and schooners until it was closed by a n'easter in 1812.

This inlet was located east of today's Shelter Cove Park area.

To the west lay an old Lenne Lenape Indian foot trail, which, through time, became a wagon path and later stagecoach run. Today, we know it as Old Freehold Road – connecting Toms River to Freehold.

CEDAR GROVE, SILVERTON, AND PLEASANT PLAINS

From these early transportation routes, neighborhoods began to spring up.

The oldest section outside the village is Cedar Grove along Bay Avenue where the old Methodist Church still stands.

This area dates back to before the War for Independence and was populated in the early 1800's with families still familiar to us today: Applegate, Irons, McKelvey, Wilbur.

To the north, mills sprinkled the Silverton section as interior waterways flowed into the bay.

The McKelveys and Allens ran sawmills along Kettle Creek, and a mill was operated along a tributary on what is now the campus of our county college.

With the production from these mills, a trading route developed. Today, we know it as Hooper Avenue.

To the west, today we call it Pleasant Plains, but 200 years ago it was known, simply, as "Clayton town."

It was here that William Clayton first settled about 1800. A freshwater spring fed the area, and a farming community grew up around it.

SCHOOLS AND CHURCHES

And 40 years before free public education was the law in New Jersey, the Dover Township Committee was busy supporting the local schools.

At the 1832 annual town meeting, \$300 was set aside for education and a citizens' school committee was appointed.

By 1842, four separate school districts had been established.

Neighborhood schools sprang up: a school for "young ladies" on Lein Street and one room schoolhouses on Whitesville, Cedar Grove, and Kettle Creek Roads.

With schools came churches. Before the Civil War, the Methodists, Presbyterians, and Mormons had congregations in the township.

After the Civil War, other denominations were established: the Baptists, Catholics, and Episcopalians.

A CITY ON A HILL

With this growth, in 1850, Ocean County became the 20th – and next to last – county created in New Jersey.

And with its bustling Toms River hub, our Township was chosen as the county seat.

As we look back on this remarkable story of re-birth – a miracle, really – it is no accident of history that over the shoulders of today’s town leaders are windows in Town Hall that overlook the river and the downtown village.

From those windows we see a river approaching a hill, and it reminds us of the story of our forefathers who arrived at Plymouth Rock in 1620.

It was John Winthrop – who would become the first governor of Massachusetts and who reminded his fellow Puritans on their tiny ship as they were about to land in the New World:

“The eyes of all the world were upon them, and that they must not forsake the mission that God had sent on them, and they must be a light upon all the nations of the world – “A Shining City Upon a Hill”.

And that’s our story, too, in Toms River: a shining city upon a hill.

Call it mysticism if you will, but it certainly can be said that some special providence placed our town here – to be settled, to be defended, to be destroyed, and then to be rebuilt, by a special kind of people from all corners of the globe – first the Lenni Lenape, then the Dutch and the English, and later, others, literally from ALL over the world, who had a special courage seeking peace and freedom and hope.

TRIUMPH OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

So, as history marches forward, let us remember our very special story here in Toms River.

Said Joshua Huddy moments before his death: “I die innocent and for a just cause.”

It was and still is a “just cause” – our town – and it is a remarkable story of the resilience of mankind, and the triumph of the human spirit.

It is the Toms River story. It is our story.

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SOURCES: Four Centuries in the Making by Pauline S. Miller; Dover “Town Book”; Monmouth County Archives; Salter’s History of Monmouth and Ocean Counties