

Gem of the Mountains



Fall 2009 • Edition II

The Boonton Historical Society & Museum

Boonton Historical Society Celebrates 50 Years

The Boonton Historical Society, located at 210 Main Street, in Boonton, celebrated its 50 year anniversary in April. The Society was first organized in April, 1959, when a founders' meeting was held in the directors' room of the Boonton Trust Co. A slate of officers and a board of trustees were elected to serve and the society's attorney, David Young III, was authorized to seek a charter from the Secretary of State in Trenton. The society was funded by memberships.

Oscar P. Myers, president of the Boonton Trust Co., was elected president of the society. Named to serve with him were: Charles A. Norris, Jr., 1st vice-president; Peter C. Wendt, Jr., 2nd vice president; Alex J. Martancik, treasurer; Alex D. Fowler, recording secretary; and Bruce Dixon, corresponding secretary.

The board of trustees included the officers as well as: George W. Ross, Harry P. Haldt, Lewis M. Hull, Earl Salmon, Palmer C. Dawson, Gerald Reynar, John B. Howell, all of Boonton; also, Thomas Capstick and Oren F. Browning, Jr., of Montville

Township; Charles A. Norris, Jr., of Denville, and Stephen H. Condit, of Troy Hills.

The name of the society was chosen after long debate as that best suited to the purpose of the society, since Boonton was geographically the hub of the area whose history, legends, and provenance the society aimed to study and preserve.



Illustration by Melinda Sinatra

The Boonton Trust Co. continued to serve as the headquarters of the society. Any items or historic artifacts that were donated to the society were kept at the bank or in individual members' homes. In 1963, the Holmes Library offered the use of one of its rooms to the society for permanent and temporary exhibits, as well as for storage of the many items that the society was accumulating.

In 1980, the society moved its burgeoning collection to the second floor of the Dr. John Taylor Building at the invitation of the American Legion. Some of the hard working members of the society through those years were: Pearl Clark, Ruth Wootton, Jean Lee, Arline Dempsey and Evelyn Eckardt.

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Letters to the Editor

At the conclusion of our article in the Winter 2009 Edition entitled “Outgrowing the Little Red Schoolhouse” extracted from the Boonton Years 1867 to 1967” by Pearl Clark, we noted that the author was also a local artist who had been a founding member of the Sunnybank art group. Candace Grant and Laura Lee Linder led us to Susan Schanz Connelly who kindly sent us a picture of some of the members of the Sunnybank Art Group (c 1956). Their first exhibit was held at Scerbo’s Buick showroom on Main Street before moving to the Boardwalk for what was to become an annual event. Throughout the years more than 80 area ladies participated in Sunnybank, with some members exhibiting at other venues in New Jersey and New York.



*Members of the Sunnybank Art Group at their art exhibit on Boonton's Boardwalk
Seated L-R: Pearl Clark, Mary Ann Schanz, Virginia Hammond
Standing L-R: Jean Lee, Ruth Boyd
Photograph: Courtesy Susan Schanz Connelly*

Our article about the Kramer house published in our November 2008 issue still brings us mail. We were thrilled to receive a letter from England from Jeffrey Geiger, grandson of Elizabeth Heitmann Geiger and nephew of Betty Geiger.

1 August 2009

Re: Boonton Historical Society newsletter, “Investigating History,” November 2008

Dear Boonton Historical Society,

My grandmother and aunt (Elisabeth Heitmann Geiger and her daughter Betty Geiger) lived at 406 Fanny Road for most of their lives. My father, William Geiger, was raised there before going off to college in the late 1940s. I want to thank you for taking an interest in the house and its history, which during the last years of lying unoccupied went so rapidly and shockingly into decline. Only someone who has seen a beautiful family home fall into such a state can imagine how heartbreaking it is to see a photo like this one in your newsletter.

In the past I’ve wondered with regret, and distress, at how beautiful old houses could be allowed to fall into the hands of developers and lost. In spite of the neglected state of the house and the image in your newsletter, you should not think that the house was unloved or that those attempting to find solutions (after my aunt’s unexpected death in 2002) had no respect for the house’s integrity and history. It was my grandmother’s home for over 80 years, and the history of the house, at least over the first 40 years of my life, was also in many ways my own. Every corner of the house and property as they were are still keenly etched in my memory.

Between my aunt’s sudden death in 2002 (she was living in and managing the property) and my grandmother’s over a year later (when she was nearly 103), the house stood in limbo. It was a frustrating

situation—an iconic but declining house with no official historical designation, ultimately worth more to potential buyers as developers' land. In spite of everything, the house was thought too expensive to be made structurally and cosmetically sound. These are surely the kinds of endangered buildings that the Historical Society must be familiar with—houses, often already in precarious condition, left empty when elderly occupants pass away. Most of the family no longer lived locally and were scattered across the US and beyond, and none had access to funds needed to rehabilitate such a property. The town taxes on the empty house alone were so high they had to be paid on credit against an eventual sale.

Going back many decades, the house had been divided into apartments, first occupied by family members such as my great grandparents, and later by tenants. My grandmother and aunt occupied a two-bedroom unit on the ground floor, with two apartments on the second floor and one on the third. Two further rooms on the third floor were accessed by a back 'hidden' staircase.

As long as I can remember the house was in a failing state of repair. An old house is extremely expensive to keep up through winters, and the heating bills alone ran into the thousands. The rent on the apartments (which was unpredictable, depending on occupancy) no longer covered taxes, bills, and repairs, and my aunt, who had retired to care for my grandmother, struggled against financial losses (I only discovered this afterwards, going through papers). The roofs constantly sprung leaks, pipes cracked and rained water on the furniture and carpets; raccoons, squirrels, and skunks broke through all attempts at defenses in the attics, basements, and under floors. The hillside location also is a natural runoff area, with a tendency to flood in hard downpours. The grounds, mostly woods (with its well-loved and widely recognized stand of huge pine trees at the front), became a

nature preserve of sorts, with wild deer and turkeys so much at home they would come right up to strangers—even challenge them. Yet this was also my grandmother's home and, matter-of-factly, she expected to live out her life there; my aunt would never seriously consider selling it and worked hard to keep it together.

Family visits to Boonton usually meant I was up on the roof patching holes, replacing boards on the



Circa 1940



porches, or climbing ladders to paint the exterior in all kinds of weather while my aunt, well into her 60s, held on at the base. Often my job was setting anti-animal devices in the attics (clever squirrels were a constant source of tenant complaints). My grandmother, a devout Christian who treasured every plant and animal on the property, was partial to mothballs (apparently squirrels hate them) and catch-and-release traps.

There are many stories I could tell about the house; as children we spent long summer weeks and most

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2009 House Tour

Across The Thresholds of Historic Boonton

This year's house tour included eight private homes, hosted by costumed docents, six churches, the work of four artists, the Darress Theatre, the museum at the New Jersey Firemen's Home and the United Railroad Historical Society's Boonton Restoration Yard. In addition an organ recital was given at St. John's Episcopal Church and the PresbyAires performed at the Presbyterian Church. Because of the diversity and scope of the tour visitors had the option of taking a "Tour Within the Tour" organized to meet specific interests and which fea-

tured, homes, churches, and artists as separate groupings. Although we presented a self guided/self drive tour, we were grateful to the town and to Geri Carcich for use of the senior transport which was a great success with guests from out of town.





Photos: Lloyd Charlton, Jennifer Coultas, Pamela Hance

Boonton's Bakeries

By Arline Dempsey

Past President of the Boonton Historical Society

As long ago as 1860 there were two bakeries in Boonton. We find ads back to 1872 of the first bakery on Church Street owned and operated by James Casey. It was a brick building used as a home along with the bakery. Mrs. Casey sold hot rolls, corn cakes, confectionaries, jelly and canned fruits. By 1878 Andrew D. Speer had taken over.

In February 1882, Mr. Speer's sleigh broke down in Rockaway Valley in a bad storm and as a result fingers on both hands had to be amputated. Davenport and Knott took over the bakery. In 1895 John Greser bought the property and ran the Greser Bakery. It passed into the hands of Sam Gemunder in 1905 and he ran it until 1911 when it was sold the Hyman Fischler, the last baker. The house still stands and is a private home.

The City Bakery and Restaurant was built in January, 1873 by Thomas MacNeish and was located on Mechanic Street. With his breads and caked he served, in his dining room, oysters in every style, tea and coffee. He made how own ice cream and roasted peanuts every day. He sold his business to John W. Martin in 1880. Martin added a large addition to the bakery with larger ovens. By 1891 the bakery passed

into the hands of . H. Best. He was there only a year when he sold to William S. Corwin in May, 1892.

Corwin was known to serve large parties (such as the Lowantic Tribe after their meeting at the Wigwam) with food such as corn and venison.

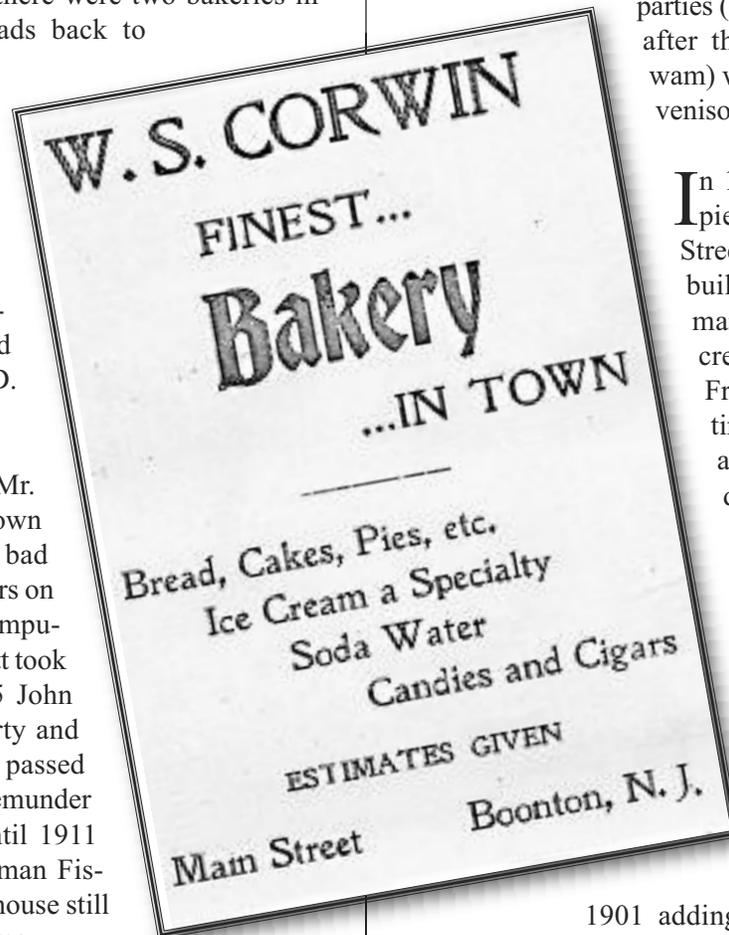
In 1897 Corwin purchased a piece of property on Main Street near Division Street and built a new bakery. Here he manufactured his own ice cream. One of his bakers, Fred White, enjoyed the distinction of three first prizes at the World's Fair for cake decorating.

Corwin has a bake wagon which travelled and served the people of Boonton, Powerville, Parsippany and as far away as Pequannock.

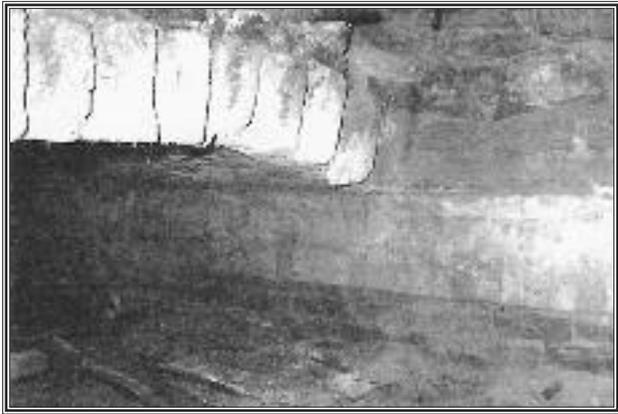
Corwin rebuilt his building after fire destroyed it in 1901 adding another small building next to his bakery which he made into an ice cream

parlor. He cut his own ice from the canal in back of his building. In April of 1912 he bought his new auto delivery car Remaining on Main Street until his death in 1919, his property was later sold in 1920 to Edward Edwards and was used as a

pool room. Remnants of the bake ovens still remained and could be seen in the basement in the 1970's. Unfortunately, future renovations of the building have obscured them from view today.



One of the bakers, Fred White, enjoyed the distinction of three first prizes at the World's Fair for cake decorating.



Remnants of Bake Oven at 310 Main Street c 1978

When Corwin moved to Main Street the bakery building on Mechanic Street went up for sale. Not being sold, it was rented to Augustus Bruny, an Italian baker. He remained but a short time when Angelo Crestura took it over. Mr. Crestura was the last to operate in that building. He bought a piece of land next door and built a new bakery and home in 1907 (119 Mechanic Street). Mandredonia took over the business in the 1920's in the same building. He also built a new building at 121 Mechanic Street (a third site) and still had an Italian Bakery there in the 1970's.

The first record of the Brook Street Bakery was in 1889 by Butler and Knott. Fred Coram took over in 1893 also serving ice cream along with his bread, cake and pies.

George Looker bought out the bakery in May, 1897, and operated into September 1903, when it was purchased by John Drennan. Will May took over in May, 1907, and in 1909 the Lewis Brothers advertised they made Italian bread.

In 1913 Peter C. Wendt opened the business and the name changed to the Cottage Bakery. They used Bridal Veil flour and specialized in Holland Butter Cookies and Crumb Cakes. James Van Vliert's Cottage Bakery came into existence in 1931 and in 1936 he completely remodeled the bakery. They are remembered for their miniature bakeries that they made and displayed every Christmas. When they closed their doors in the 1960's another bakery building faded into the past.

They also will be remembered for their specials, such as the famous Ginger Bread House.

The Colonial Bake Shop once owned by C. Estler was remodeled and opened by Theodore Schuster in July of 1939. They also will be remembered for their specials, such as the famous Ginger Bread House. Their building was demolished to make way for the new post office.

Another old bakery was started by John Husk at 900 Main Street. He is listed in Boyd's Morris County Business Directory in 1883. The bakery remained in the Husk family for many years. Later, in 1939, it was run by Harry Van Kourteren and known as the Sunshine Bakery.

The M.K. Tillotson's Bake Sho was started in 1919. It later was run by Jean Adams and called the Woman's Exchange Shop. This shop was at 502 Main Street. Later it moved to Cornelia Street, then to William Street. Local women baked their specialties at home, delivered them to the shop and Mrs. Adams paid 25% to her consignors. The shop was eventually taken over by Ann and Josephine Walkley, and then by Mrs. Marion Cronk.

Other bakeries came and went: The Boonton Baking Company at the corner of Main and



310 Main Street Today

Division Streets, started about 1918. There was a bakery in the Van Orden building in 1879 and Trauner's Bakery at 818 Main Street in 1923.



The old Boonton Times Building on Main Street - 2008

Read All About It: More Pages From the Past

Continuing our series on the early years of Boonton as described in *The Boonton Times* of 1941 (see below) which offered readers glimpses into the early history (circa 1830) of our town.

Editor's Note: The account of Boonton from the 1830's to the coming of the railroad in 1867 was written by Miss Cora Hammond, granddaughter of one of the Hammond families who were induced to come from England by the New Jersey Iron Company. Miss Hammond lived in the octagonal house on the south side of Cornelia Street. Her account was read before the Parsippanong Chapter of the D.A.R. in October 1918, was published five years later in October, 1923, in Vol.8, November 4, of the Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society, and again published in the Boonton Times Bulletin on September 2, 1941, and in installments in 1971. This account also formed the basis of a program entitled "Read All About It: Pages From The Past" held by the Boonton Historical Society in January, 2006.

Day and night the blast furnaces and puddling mills were operated. At all hours of the nights the men on the different shifts were going to or returning from work. So the little town slept in peace and felt safer

than the most perfectly policed town. When wakeful or caring for the sick, it was a comforting sound to hear the heavy friendly tread of the men in the lonely hours of the night. And you always knew whose tread it was for everybody knew the names of the day shifts and the night shifts. And it was the boast of early Boonton that a woman would ne safe any hour of the night to walk from Peer's lock to the pond bridge. There was something almost paternal in the attitude of the B.I.W. to Boonton.

There were no nurses in those days, trained or untrained, and at first no doctor closer than Parsippany, so the women had to meet many emergencies of life and solve many problems by there native wit and wisdom. Motherly women gave their services when the babies came; neighbors sat up with the sick and the same friendly hands performed the services when death came. Miss Lathrop said of those early times "The little community seemed like one family and I never remember thinking of class distinctions – we all seemed alike and close in sympathy."

In 1957, advertisements for take out food orders, automobiles and television sets, were undreamed of in the early days of our town. One wonders what would have been the reaction to the homes for sales in 1957 with all their conveniences for everyday living.

Continued from page III:

Letters to the Editor

holidays there, and my family lived there full-time for several years in the 1980s. There were two basements (one at the front was warm, where the oil heater was housed, and the one at the back cold storage—but increasingly a no-go area after raccoon infestation in the 1990s). Except for some interior doors and the main staircase there was little original detail left inside the house, having undergone many conversions over the years. It was believed, and there was some possible interior evidence, that the 19-room house (as it stood post-1960, not including 2 bathrooms on each floor and storage spaces) was extended from an older farmhouse (the two basements, for example). In recent years the interior was faded, damp crept in, kitchen cupboards were hanging at frightening angles, and plaster peeled away from walls and ceilings—but still it was lived in, and always maintained the feel of a comfortable and welcoming family home.

The original property included the two small, more recent houses to the northwest as mentioned in your article (the front one has long been in separate ownership), and beyond toward the Boulevard there was (perhaps still is) a large collapsed chicken coop/farm building in the woods. For many years animals were kept there—sustainable organic farming before it came back into vogue. The puddingstone remains of a disused road running from Essex Avenue went along the top of the property, roughly parallel to Fanny Road. The coach house behind the main house, mentioned in your article, had been torn down long ago—before my memory, so had not existed at least since the 1960s (though my aunt did remember it).

As your article mentioned, in the 1920s my great-grandfather (Gustav Heitmann, from Bochum, Germany) and family moved in, having purchased the house from the Heides. In the late 1920s possibly into the 1930s the house was run as a Christian health resort—the poet Sara Teasdale, in poor health in the early 1930s, might have stayed there. Starting in the 1920s, my grandmother was a well-respected doctor of naturopathy with a practice on 55th street in New York, where she treated women patients with natural

cures, or ‘drugless medicine’ as she called it. They included Broadway and opera stars and society types—Gwendolyn Bolger (wife of Ray), Mary Rockefeller, and Gertrude Berg of the ‘The Goldbergs’ were among patients she mentioned.

Circa 1930



Photographs courtesy
Jeffrey Geiger

She retired from her practice to the house on Fanny Road in 1960 (the same year that her husband, who worked in banking, died at home). As many remember she was strong willed, confident, and outgoing: she was active in the Reformed Church, sang in the choir, taught Sunday school, and spent her time running the house. Well into her eighties, she could be seen down on the front lawn in summer, cutting the grass. The house on Fanny Road was a lively and sociable place, full of people and rarely quiet. My aunt and grandmother were very generous and skilled hosts, and loved to have friends and family over for large summer cookouts, sleepovers, and holidays. The Geigers who lived at 406 Fanny Road—Gottlieb William Geiger, Elisabeth, and her two children (William and Betty) are buried in Greenwood cemetery in Boonton. If I recall, the Heitmanns are as well (though my grandmother’s sisters, Hilde and Emma/ Emmy, are buried elsewhere).

Continued on next page

So the story of this house is perhaps less mysterious than your article suggested, though in the end no less unfortunate. The house holds many personal memories and physical traces of my own and my family's ongoing labors to sustain it. It was certainly close to my grandmother's heart and soul for the 80 years that she lived there. Thank you again for taking an interest in tracing the story of this beautiful house; it is missed terribly, but missed even more are the family members who created so many fond memories there.

Yours sincerely,
 Jeff Geiger
 Colchester, UK

Continued from page I:

BHS Celebrates 50 years

In the early 1990's, the building was deemed unsafe and was closed to the public. A group of citizens formed The Committee to Save the John Taylor Building and sought funding to renovate the building. A large portion came from a state grant and sizeable contributions from the American Legion Post 124 and the Boonton Historical Society. More money came from individuals who were interested in seeing this portion of history kept alive in Boonton. The building was reopened in May 1997. We owe a tremendous debt to the foresight of these individuals,

Today the Historical Society is a vibrant member of the community offering not only a museum with a permanent exhibit of the history of the town's origins, but changing exhibits throughout the year which provide a glimpse into the day to day life of Boonton's past. Programs of historical interest are offered at the Boonton Senior Center from October through May, as well as fund raising events during the year. Special programs this year included the ever popular Afternoon Tea at the Museum, a Dinner with Sherlock Holmes and an historic House Tour which this year included, in addition to beautiful private homes, houses of worship, the Darress Theatre and the United Railroad Historical Society's Boonton Restoration yard. Walking Tours of the town are offered during the summer months and a well stocked gift shop of Boonton-related books, gifts and other treasures is open at the museum every Saturday from 1:00-

4:00pm. Visits to the museum by students, scouts, and other interest groups are welcomed and private visits can be made by appointment during weekdays.

"We are proud of our accomplishments and work hard to encourage new members to participate in keeping history alive in Boonton. We think that joining the Historical Society is the best deal in town. For as little as \$15.00 (seniors) a year, we offer free educational and entertaining programs, assistance with family research, and an opportunity to volunteer and be involved in our community." said Jennifer Coultas, Vice President. "We invite everyone to join us in our commitment to preserve our history for future generations."



The Boonton Historical Society & Museum

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2010-2011

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Opinions expressed in the Gem of the Mountains are not necessarily those of the society.



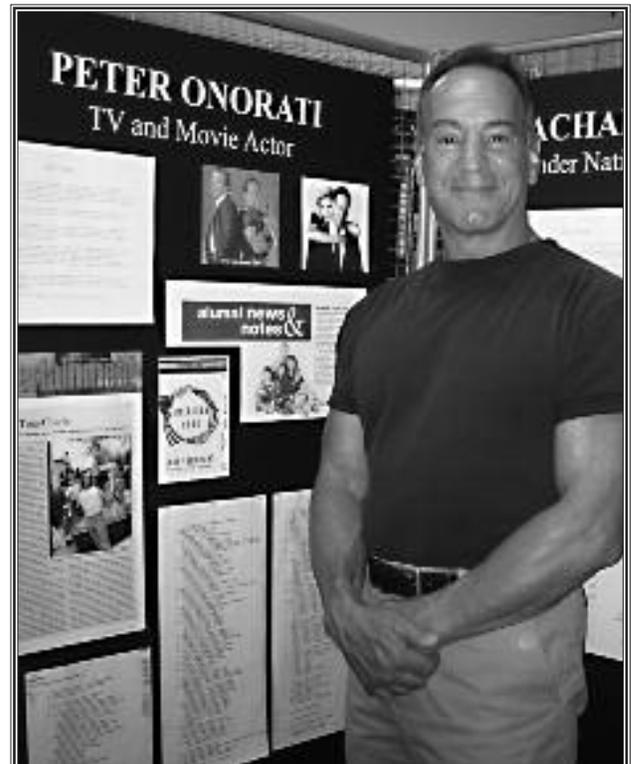
The Boonton Historical Society & Museum

210 Main Street
Boonton, New Jersey 07005

The Boonton Historical Society & Museum
Our New Exhibit

Boonton High School Hall of Fame The Hall of Fame honors graduates who have distinguished themselves in their career, military service, politics, community service, or sports. It was established in 1996 by the Alumni Association of Boonton High School. Since its inception, 150 graduates have been inducted into the Hall of Fame. The selection committee adds new members every few years. There is a name plaque for each honoree at the high school on the wall outside the auditorium.

Our current exhibit consists of twenty-four individuals who have distinguished themselves in many walks of life includes a movie actor, an environmentalist and a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist,



Open Saturdays from 1:00 – 4:00 p.m. and by appointment.
