Historic Highlights of Washington Township

Funded by the Morris County Heritage Commission, Morris County Board of Chosen Freeholders, and the F.M. Kirby Foundation, Inc.
Welcome to Morris County

The Leni Lenape Indians were the first inhabitants of this area, with Dutch and English settlement beginning around 1685. Log cabins provided the earliest form of shelter for the new settlers, followed by English-style clapboard houses, and Dutch and German stone houses.

Morris County, established in 1739, consists of 39 municipalities, carved from the four original townships of Hanover, Morris, Pequannock, and Roxbury.

Morristown became the Military Capital of the Revolutionary War when Washington’s army encamped there for the winter of 1777, and again during the winter of 1779-80. Morris County's rich iron deposits and many forges produced shot and cannon for the Continental Troops. The newly built mansion of Jacob Ford, Jr. became Washington's headquarters.

Completion of the Morris Turnpike in 1804, the Morris Canal in 1831, and the Morris & Essex Railroad in 1837, ushered in a century of growth for rural, sparsely settled Morris County. By the 1850's, the Gothic Revival, Italianate, and other Romantic architectural styles were popular, with front-gabled workers' houses gaining in popularity in industrial towns such as Boonton and Dover by the late 1800's.

In the 1890's, wealthy New Yorkers discovered Morris County, and the Gilded Age began. Working farms became estates, and elegant mansions - some inspired by British manors and castles - changed the landscape around Morristown. Growth remained stable until the post-war boom of the late 1940's, when housing developments sprang up, providing affordable new houses.

The 1980's saw a new wave of unprecedented growth with the accelerated construction of corporate offices, homes, and residential condominiums. Yet, much of Morris County has retained its traditional charm and many of its historic neighborhoods remain almost unchanged.

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1832; Congregation organized in the 1740’s. Route 24 north, on the west side.

Washington Township

Early in the 1700's, a ship headed for Long Island's shore strayed off course, sailing, instead, into Philadelphia's port. The German Moravian farmers on board disembarked and engaged Leni Lenape Indians to guide them to their intended destination. Perhaps it was sheer exhaustion or possibly the beauty of an eight mile stretch of fertile river valley, surrounded by steep mountain ridges - that swayed them to cut short their journey and to settle in what would become the Southwest corner of Roxbury Township in 1740.

Called German Valley for many years, the area's name was changed to Long Valley at the outset of World War I. Changing the name, however, could not obliterate the pronounced German architectural influence apparent in well over 100 sturdy stone structures built between 1750 and 1825, nor erase the legacy of the early German families, the Weises, Nachbars, Schwackhammers, and Sharpensteins, who had made the valley their home.

Other settlements whose names are still visible followed: Middle Valley, Upper Valley, Drakestown, Schooley's Mountain, Naughrightsville, Pleasant Grove and Valley Brook. Within each hamlet, churches, schools, stores, smithies, creameries and mills were established, and in some villages, mines, forges and tanneries, too. Eventually, English and French settlers also staked their claims and Washington Township evolved, officially carved out of Roxbury Township in 1798. It remained primarily agrarian well into the 20th century.

Mineral springs high on Schooley's Mountain attracted the rich and famous to vacation there, spurring the construction of guest houses and grand hotels, long gone, whose guests increased in number with the coming of the railroad in the mid-1800's. Sadly, pollution of the springs by a nearby foundry brought resort activity to a halt by 1900.

Most residents of Washington Township say they're from Long Valley regardless of where they live in the township, but a drive through serene valleys, across quaint bridges, and up steep mountains, reveals signposts proclaiming the township's origins: Springtown, Flocktown, Stephensburg, Fairmount, Parker, Four Bridges, and Fox Hill. In spite of recent residential growth, the township has been spared the intense commercial development prevalent in neighboring communities. Its winding roads - some bounded by the South Branch of the Raritan River, others bordered by farmland accentuated by old and new barns and silos, grazing horses and livestock - retain a pleasing measure of rural character, nurtured by an effective Historic Preservation Commission and treasured by the townspeople.

To learn more about Washington Township you will want to read:

- Early Germans of New Jersey, Theodore Frelinghuysen Chambers, 1895.
Historic Highlights of Washington Township

Here are several of the hundreds of historic sites to be found throughout Washington Township's 45 square miles. A tour of the area will unveil fascinating landscapes and streetscapes, and individual noteworthy structures. Please respect the privacy of the homeowners.

1. PHILIP WEISE HOUSE  "The Fort," ca. 1774
25 East Mill Road
As you drive west (as slowly as you can) on East Mill Road, on your left is the stone "Fort," so named because Revolutionary war materials and officers were housed there. Additions in 1876 probably included the porch, center gable and slate roof. On your right, note the 1767 mill, being restored by the Land Trust Commission.

Just west of the crossroads, look for Tavern Antiques, originally Nitzer's Tavern, ca. 1750, owned by J. P. Nitzer whose uncle, Wm. Nitzer, built the 1740's stone house, still inhabited, at 358 Fairview. Municipal parking is available, making possible a closer look at the crossroads.

4. SCHOOLEY'S MOUNTAIN GENERAL STORE AND POST OFFICE  ca. 1830
250 Schooley's Mountain Road (908) 852-9733
Schooley's Mountain residents drop in to pick up their mail, select a greeting card, or to bring home a fresh loaf of crusty bread. Sandwich specials attract local workers and passers-by, who might also choose a piece of commemorative pottery or a pint of Schooley's Mountain maple syrup. Open 7 days a week, the store has been in continuous operation for over 160 years. Seasonal offerings on the inviting porch include a profusion of bedding plants in the spring and an array of pumpkins and Indian corn in the fall.
2 JACOB W. NEIGHBOR HOUSE ca. 1830
143 West Mill Road
Built by a descendant of Leonard Nachbar (Neighbor), with front to back center hall, a graceful, curved mahogany banister, double parlors, and eight fireplaces, this Greek Revival style house (uncommon in this area) served for 100 years as the homestead of several generations of Neighbors. In 1941, Joseph and Marion Decker chose it as their home, living in it and loving it for almost 50 years. Now a bed-and-breakfast (908-876-3519), it continues to radiate warmth and hospitality. The late 1700’s L. Neighbor house is adjacent at 177 West Mill.
Go back to the crossroads, turn left for a steep climb up Schooley’s Mountain.

3 PHILIP DERNBERGER HOUSE ca. 1799
West Springtown and Wehrli Roads
Perched “catty-cornered,” keeping a watchful eye on westbound traffic on what was the main route from Morristown to Easton, Pa., this typically German stone house, enhanced by clapboard additions, gardens, arbors and picket fencing, is picture-perfect. Built on 224 acres, it remained in the Dernberger family until 1903, when it was conveyed on about two acres to George Fowler.
Continue on Wehrli to Pleasant Grove Road, where just across the intersection stands the eye-catching M. Hann Farmhouse. Of possible 18th century origin, its frame and clapboard construction is contrary to the more prevalent local stone mode of that period. Turn right toward Route 24.

5 THE FLOCKTOWN SCHOOLHOUSE ca. 1880
Corner of Flocktown and Naughright Roads
In 1798, six schools existed in the township, including one in Flocktown, named for several Flach families who settled this area. This building replaced two previous schoolhouses on this site, and served as a school until 1929. Now a residence, it provides a nostalgic touch at these crossroads.
As you descend into the valley, down Naughright Road, you will pass vintage structures banked into the mountainside, as well as several striking 18th century homes that are, unfortunately, hidden from view. Drive the length of gently winding Bartley Road and see many old buildings, some stone, some clapboard, including what was the Naughright General Store (now apartments) on the corner of Bartley and Coleman, next to the old German Valley Cemetery.

6 THE UNION SCHOOLHOUSE ca. 1830
Fairview Avenue
Home of the Washington Township Historical Society (open Sundays, 2 to 4 p.m.), this building was originally a school and in recent years served as the township library. Providing a dramatic backdrop are the ruins of the 1774 Old Union Church, built to replace a 1747 log church. Both church buildings served the Evangelical Lutheran and German Reformed (Presbyterian) congregations until 1832, when separate churches were built: the Zion Lutheran Church on Schooley’s Mountain Road, north of the bridge, and the German Valley Presbyterian Church on West Mill, destroyed by fire in 1954. For further information call the Washington Township Historical Society (908) 876-9696.
The MORRIS COUNTY HERITAGE COMMISSION promotes public interest in local history through its historical markers program, historic sites surveys of the 39 Morris County municipalities, Highlights of History slide show, and its walking and driving brochures. Please call or write to the Commission for additional copies of the brochures and for further information about Morris County historic sites.

HISTORIC HIGHLIGHTS of WASHINGTON TOWNSHIP

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Cover Map, History of Morris County (W.W. Munsell, 1882)