

The Birth and Growth of Cranford Part I:

From 1609 until the Rail Road Came to Town

By Vic Bary

The Early Beginnings

The story of the land that would one day become Cranford Township is a tale of original peoples, disputed ownership of the same land, the struggle for religious freedom and self-government, and struggles between major European sea powers.

The original inhabitants of our area were the Unami tribe of the Lenni Lenape nation, which occupied all of what we now know as New Jersey. (Lenni Lenape translates as “the original people”). A gentle hunting and fishing people, the Unami (“the people down the river”) occupied the central part of New Jersey, including what is now Union County.

The first European recorded to have encountered these Native Americans was English navigator Henry Hudson in 1609. Searching for a passage to China and India, Hudson first landed at Sandy Hook, where he encountered Lenni Lenape peoples. He then sailed up the narrows between New Jersey and Staten Island, and into the “Great North River” which would later bear his name. On the West bank he found the peaceful Algonquin tribe of the Lenni Lenape, and on the East-lying island, the unfriendly Manhattan tribe of the warlike Mohicans. When the Great North River turned out not to be the sought after “Northwest Passage”, Henry Hudson lost interest and went home. In the years that followed, the Dutch settled the area and set up a fur trading post on the Manhattans’ Island, naming it New Amsterdam.

The Dutch showed little interest in developing agriculture in their new world, and had generally tense relations with the Native Americans. Their rule under Governor Peter Stuyvesant allowed religious freedom to new European arrivals, but not self-government. English settlers from the New Haven Colony, fearing loss of religious freedom if taken over by the Colony of Connecticut, flocked first to Long Island, where they found the soil poor for farming, and then into good farm lands west of Staten Island and Newark Bay. Peter Stuyvesant welcomed this settlement as a bulwark “against the savages on the Raritan and the Minnisink”, allowing the new arrivals religious freedom, but not the self government they sought. In 1664, English/Dutch sea power rivalries would change all this.

1664, the Year of Change

In the spring of 1664, the Duke of York received from his brother, King Charles II of England, a grant of Long Island and all the land from the west side of the Connecticut River to the East side of Delaware Bay. The grant was partly to reward his efforts, as Lord High Admiral of the Royal Navy, to wrest control of trade routes from the Dutch. Within a few weeks, the Duke of York dispatched a fleet of four war ships which reached the New Amsterdam in August. The Dutch promptly surrendered, and the Duke of York appointed Col. Richard Nicholls as Governor of his new territories in New York, Long Island and New Jersey. Within a month, the English settlers requested a charter for self-government from Nicholls, who granted it in September. The grant covered “the unoccupied territories of the Duke of York, on the west side of the Hudson River”.



Flushed with success, the settlers then reached out to the Lenni Lenape, signing a treaty with three chiefs to “purchase” a large tract of land from the Raritan to the Passaic Rivers, and westward for over 30 miles. The Native Americans, having no concept of “land ownership”, understood the treaty to simply allow the English settlers hunting and fishing rights on the land the Lenni Lenape would continue to inhabit, and fish and hunt themselves. It was a type of treaty they had signed with other Native American peoples. The resulting deed granted John Bailey, Daniel Denton and Luke Watson 500,000 acres for themselves and their “Associates”. It was approved and recorded by Governor Nicholls December 1, 1664. The tract of land was henceforth known as the “Elizabethtown Tract”.

While all this was occurring in New Jersey, back in England, the Duke of York sold his entire territory west of the Hudson to English Lords of Council John Berkeley and George Carteret. They soon began selling tenancy rights to their new lands to Englishmen who referred to themselves as the “Proprietors”. The two Lords appointed a relative of George Carteret – Phillip Carteret – as Governor of their new lands. Phillip Carteret and a group of settlers and their servants arrived in the new world in early 1665. They were entirely unaware of the Elizabethtown Tract and its purchase from the Lenni Lenape by the “Associates” approved by Duke of York’s Governor Nicholls the prior fall. On August 1, 1665, Governor Phillip Carteret and thirty individuals established a colony they called Elizabethtown within the larger Elizabethtown Tract. Elizabethtown would be officially chartered in 1693. Areas west of the Rahway River in time would come to be referred to as the “West Fields” of Elizabethtown.

Thus, as the 18th Century was about to dawn, three disparate groups all thought they had rights to the same land – the Associates who “bought” it from the Native Americans, the Native Americans who thought they had simply sold “hunting and fishing rights” to the Associates, and the Proprietors who had purchased the right to farm and settle lands owned by Lords Berkeley and Carteret.

The Development of the West Fields and Crane’s Mills

In order to settle disputes between the Associates and the Proprietors, the West Fields land between the Rahway River and The Watchungs was laid out into 171 farm plots of 100 acres each. (The lines of these plots still determine the overall street pattern of present day Cranford, West Field, Scotch Plains, Fanwood, Mountainside and Springfield.) The Associates drew lots for these “undivided lands”, some of which would form what would ultimately become Cranford.

These plots, lying west of the Rahway River, were considered completely wild and the winning Associates were slow to try and actually live on them. Different sources credit either John Denman or John Crane as being the first to actually settle their new holdings. Denman is credited with being the first “permanent settler” in 1720. The farm he developed remained in the Denman family for 250 years.

An original Associate, Stephen Crane, bequeathed his plot to his son John. John would construct a saw mill and a grist mill on separate sides of the Rahway River between 1716 and 1722, while still living in Elizabethtown until 1724. The Crane homestead and saw mill were located on the site of what is now Gray’s Funeral Home and Memorial Park, and the grist mill on what is now Riverside Park.

For the rest of the 18th Century and well into the 19th Century, the future Cranford (then referred to by locals as Crane’s Mills) remained an agricultural community, first farming wheat and other cereals. When the failure to rotate crops exhausted the soil, farmers changed to fruit orchards (primarily apples) and sheep farming. The apples were often turned into cider and applejack – “Jersey Lightning”. The river remained a source of power for upwards of eight mills.

Crane’s Mills would furnish soldiers, and blankets and grain from its mills, for the Revolutionary War, and would serve as an advance outpost to alert Washington’s troops at Morristown of any marauding Red Coats coming out from Staten Island, but no battles were fought here.

In 1794, the West Fields (including Crane’s Mills) split off from Elizabethtown, incorporating as Westfield. The new township created a 10-district school system. District No. 2, covering Crane’s Mills, would see its first school – the “Old Red Schoolhouse” – built by locals using local materials in 1805. Used as both a school and for Sunday religious services for several denominations, it would remain the only public building until mid-century.

Subsequently, the Swift Sure Stage Coach Company would run service from the New York ferryboat landing to the ferryboat to Philadelphia along the old York highway, part of which ran through Crane’s Mills. In spite of this service, the town remained a sleepy, agricultural community.

Sources:

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