

Historical Society of Scotch Plains and Fanwood

By FRED ROSSI
Specially Written for Our Towns

Founded in 1972, the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Historical Society currently operates the historic Osborn Cannonball House in Scotch Plains, while providing guest lectures at its monthly meetings and taking care to preserve some of the historic artifacts — and legends — from the area's early days.

The organization is a primary resource for information about the history of Scotch Plains and Fanwood, both of which retain many significant landmarks and memorabilia from the Colonial era to the 20th century.

The origin of the name Scotch Plains dates to George Scott, who was leading a group of his countrymen on an ocean voyage from Scotland to the New World in the 17th century when he died, according to Society President Richard Bousquet. The township was first settled in 1684.

The group memorialized him by christening the area they settled as "Scotsplain" in his honor. Over the years, the name evolved into its present form.

As for Fanwood, Mr. Bousquet said he prefers to stick to local lore, which says that the borough was named for Fanny Wood, the daughter of an area railroad executive.

He pointed out, however, that prior to Fanwood's establishment in 1895, the Scotch Plains governing body had, at one point, collected taxes under the name of Fanwood Township.

But he's comfortable with the Fanny Wood story, noting that other sections of Union County, namely Netherwood in Plainfield and Elmora in Elizabeth, were also named in honor of the railroadman's children.

The Historical Society meets at 8 p.m. on the first Tuesday of every month at the Fanwood Train Station, with the programs usually being of a historic nature, according to Mr. Bousquet.

During the Revolution, legend has it that when British Generals Charles Cornwallis and William Howe were in the area, they were drawn to the Frazee House by the aroma of freshly baked bread. When Betsy Frazee opened the door, the two men asked for some of her bread. She agreed to give them some, but told them she was doing it more out of fear than out of love.

Insulted by her remark, the two generals became angry, refused the bread and left.

Mr. Bousquet said his group would like to have some involvement once the property ownership question is settled. "We want to save the house," he said, adding that the two priorities for the Frazee House are to make sure it's not torn down and to keep it on its existing site, "because that's where the story took place."

His lifelong work in the construction business, coupled with his love of history, led Mr. Bousquet to the Historical Society. In the mid-1980s, his company began to specialize in historical restoration. Later, a friend referred him to the Historical Society, of which he was elected President in 1990.

A few years ago, Mr. Bousquet and his wife compiled a book, entitled "Images of America: Scotch Plains and Fanwood," which contains several hundred old photographs of Scotch Plains and Fanwood, as well as maps of the area dating back to Colonial times. The photographs and maps are supported by historical narrative.



COLONIAL KITCHEN...A centerpiece of the Saltbox Colonial home is its beehive oven. The Cannonball House got its name during the Revolutionary War when a cannonball aimed at British soldiers accidentally struck it.



STEP INTO MY PARLOR...A view of the Victorian parlor in the Osborn Cannonball House. The Historical Society of Scotch Plains and Fanwood is currently looking for additional volunteers to serve as docents for tours of the landmark home.

He said recent speakers have discussed such varied topics as presidential elections and ghost hunting, as well as home-grown legends like the Jersey Devil and the historic role of the Underground Railroad.

Every year, the group sponsors an antiques show that allows residents to bring in their articles for appraisal, similar to the popular "Antiques Roadshow" on PBS television.

The Historical Society's museum is the Osborn Cannonball House, located at 1840 Front Street in Scotch Plains. Built circa 1760, the house, which has been featured in *Smithsonian* magazine, was a private home when Scotch Plains purchased it in the early 1970s. The township then leased the property to the organization.

The first floor of the house was refurbished around the time the landmark was purchased, and Mr. Bousquet revealed that a Community Development Block Grant recently received from the county will allow additional interior and exterior renovations to be done.

Presently, three rooms in the house depict Colonial life in Scotch Plains, while a fourth room recalls the township's Victorian era. The museum also contains what Mr. Bousquet called "a renowned collection of antique garments," including bridal gowns dating back to the 17th century.

The museum is currently open on the first Sunday of each month from 2 to 4 p.m., or by appointment for groups. Openings were more frequent at one point, but Mr. Bousquet said there presently are not enough volunteers to allow this.

"We need more docents," he remarked, referring to the name for volunteer tour guides.

Mr. Bousquet described the original occupants of the Osborn Cannonball House as "an incredible family" whose sons served in the American Revolution and whose matriarch was "sympathetic to the colonists."

Legend has it that when George Washington and his small army of men hastened to retreat from a much larger British contingent, one of his men decided to lob a farewell cannonball at the English army. "Well, something happened," Mr. Bousquet said, "and the cannonball hit the Osborn house."

While the Historical Society doesn't operate any other properties, it is keeping its eye on the Frazee House, located on the former site of the Terry-Lou Zoo, later known as the Scotch Plains Zoo, on Raritan Road.

Currently, the township is in litigation to settle questions regarding the ownership of the site. The Frazee House, which Mr. Bousquet termed "an incredible example of pre-Colonial construction," was built in the 1680s by "incredibly great craftsmen."

The Historical Society of Scotch Plains and Fanwood always welcomes new members. An annual membership is \$10. For further information, please call Scotch Plains Township Hall at (908) 322-6700, or Society President Richard Bousquet at (908) 232-1199.

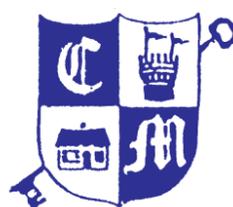


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