

From Indian Trail to *Interstate*

A comprehensive plan for:
The restoration, interpretation and rehabilitation of the
Metlar/Bodine House
"Raritan Landing"
Piscataway, New Jersey

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The land presently called "Central New Jersey" has been a transportation hub since prehistoric times. Ten thousand (10,000) to fifteen thousand (15,000) years ago humans found their way to a substantial valley using a river as their path. The land was bountiful, teeming with game and located far enough inland to provide protection from inhospitable visitors and cold temperatures during the winter months. The river produced an abundance of fish and the aboriginal people traveled the waterway in canoes made from hollowed-out tree trunks, going as far as the river's mouth and into the mighty ocean beyond. Eventually, the people called themselves the Lenape and the river, the Rariton (later changed to Raritan). This prehistoric scene contained important trails the Lenape formed by constant use of the same pathways through the wilderness. A ford, or a place where rocks form a type of bridge and where the river is shallow enough, allowed the path to cross the river. Along the Rariton, the Minisink Trail enabled movement from the mountains of northwest New Jersey, and the broader Appalachian range, to the New Jersey shore.

When Europeans arrived in earnest in the 1600s to settle the valley, the river, now called the Raritan, was used as their primary conveyance. Colonists crossed the river at Innian's Ferry at present-day New Brunswick at the site of the Upper Road between New York and Philadelphia. Lumber, crops, livestock, etc. produced by the colonists, required movement from the interior settlements and farms to the more populated areas of New Netherlands, New England and the other coastal towns. Raritan Landing, located in the newly granted Town of Piscataway (1666) was a river port on the edge of the 17th century frontier. It consisted of warehouses, businesses, shops and homes and quickly became a bustling commercial center. The Minisink Trail was widened into a colonial highway called "The Great Road up the Rariton" and the Landing welcomed trading ships from New York, Boston, the Caribbean and Europe. Elegant homes on the east side (Piscataway) of the river proved the prominence of the Landing as one of America's most important river ports. Constructed at the beginning of the 18th century, Landing Lane Bridge replaced Innian's Ferry as a river crossing.

By the mid 18th century, New Brunswick was thriving and the city had become the Raritan River's most important inland port, rivaling larger communities on the Atlantic coast. The city's Queen College (Rutgers University) was established at this time as an important institution of higher learning; a reputation proudly maintained to this day. The Raritan and the area's roads played a significant role in America's fight for Independence. The third reading of the Declaration of Independence took place in front of a New Brunswick church; the British Army occupied the city from 1776 to 1777, and in July, 1778, Washington's men spent a week of rest along the banks of the Raritan. On July 4th of that year, the Continental Army moved from its

camp in Piscataway to high ground near Buccleuch Mansion, and gave a rousing celebration in honor of the Nation's second anniversary and of their victory in arms over the British at Monmouth Courthouse. Washington's headquarters at this time was at Ross Hall, an important mansion at Raritan Landing. During the war, many skirmishes were fought along River Road, and at Landing Lane Bridge, which sustained damage and was repaired and rebuilt numerous times.

After the American Revolution, the city of New Brunswick, now the county seat, served as the region's most important port. Hiram Market bustled with mercantile activities as newer types of ships, with deeper drafts, used the docks of New Brunswick rather than the shallower and smaller port at Raritan Landing. A highway linking Boston with Philadelphia and Washington cut through the city, bringing traders and travelers from all over the country.

The young nation concentrated on internal improvements, building roads, turnpikes, bridges, canals, railroads and tunnels. This public initiative to connect America's communities with a comprehensive transportation network resulted in: 1) new jobs for the increasing number of immigrants coming into the United States; 2) a strong foundation of federally supported and regulated commerce, to maximize economic growth; and 3) a modern transportation system for the flow of people and goods to and from the ever expanding American frontier.

The people and communities of Central New Jersey, in the heart of the connecting corridor between New York and Philadelphia, used their geographic resources to their fullest potential with a reliance on new modes of transportation as they developed.

In the 1830s, a canal linking New Brunswick with New Jersey's capital, Trenton (and also with Philadelphia) cut shipping time from New York to the City of Brotherly Love almost in half. The Delaware & Raritan Canal, with its double-outlet locks, assisted New Brunswick's entrance into the Industrial Age. Raritan Landing, long out of commercial use and virtually forgotten within a generation, disappeared from the landscape. While the shops and warehouses fell into ruins, the large homes remained: Ross Hall, once the headquarters of Washington; a beautiful Georgian stone mansion known as the Cornelius Low House; a small cottage built by one of the Landing's most prominent citizens, Peter Bodine; and all along River Road, a string of farmhouses with large tracts of fertile land. Some of these surviving homes, including the Bodine House, facing the river and in view of the new canal were improved and expanded as River Road became a suburb of New Brunswick. Although Piscataway, chartered in 1666, had lost much of its original land grant (when founded, it represented almost all of Somerset County and included land from New Brunswick to Princeton), the rural township retained farms owned by the descendants of the original settlers. The D&R Canal serviced these farms by cheaply transporting produce and livestock to markets in the region's larger cities.

Small villages such as Piscatawaytown, Stelton and New Market lay on the fringes of the farming community. By the middle of the 19th century, railroads became the primary means of transporting goods, and in keeping with the area's geographical location, most of Piscataway's population centers were located along the railroad lines.

During the Civil War, troop trains stopped in New Brunswick where soldiers disembarked for a short time to rest and refresh themselves. The "Hub City" was indeed a hub of activity as local merchants used these occasions to sell food, camp equipment and other necessities. The North's war effort offered expanded manufacturing opportunities to the city's industries including rubberized goods and metal-working. The city's strength was its accessibility to major modes of transportation, which brought raw materials to the factories and transported finished military goods. The canal, the deep water port, and available turnpike and railroad network were critical to the success of the War for the Union.

Central New Jersey was home to major commercial ventures spurred on by the 19th century's Industrial Revolution. With the transportation hub provided by the railroad, canal and highway system as exemplified by the New Brunswick-Trenton Turnpike, the region's industrial base grew dramatically. Major industries in the greater New Brunswick area included Johnson & Johnson, various rubber industries, and manufacturers of household products. With this industrial growth came an influx of cheap immigrant labor, and the concurrent rise of a new, more affluent middle class. The era was known as the Victorian Age and was characterized by a new level of building decoration modeled on the fashionable trends set in England.

As the 20th century arrived, Piscataway and New Brunswick were two very different communities of place. Residents in these parts of the ancient community wanted services that Piscataway's political leaders, descendants of the original founders, refused to provide. As a consequence, at the beginning of the 1900's, Piscataway once again underwent a period of loss as the neighborhoods along the railroad corridor broke away. Highland Park, Dunellen, Middlesex, South Plainfield, Edison and Metuchen each established their own identities centered on local railroad stations. The large station at New Brunswick was a major stop for trains traveling on the main line. Piscataway, or what had remained from the original 1666 land grant, was rural and had lost its former prominence. An early 20th century road map left Piscataway off of its listing of local towns, although the more settled areas of New Market and Stelton with their railroad connections were shown.

It was during this time period that southern blacks and immigrants from Eastern Europe moved to the area to work in local factories, particularly in New Brunswick. Life in rural Piscataway was similar to their homelands, so many of the newcomers settled here. Large farms in the town were subdivided for a variety of reasons, including the inability to compete with the more productive farmlands of the Midwest and the larger truck farms of South Jersey.

The newcomers to Piscataway were able to purchase small parcels of land on which they grew crops for personal use. The men found work in New Brunswick or other manufacturing centers including Somerville, Plainfield and Elizabeth and traveled to work by a new mode of transportation, the trolley. These first "light rails" crisscrossed New Jersey providing mass transit for a new generation of Americans.

Piscataway's available open space found a new use in the 1920s. Hadley Airport was the birthplace of commercial aviation. Many of today's large airlines started life at the small field in the middle of Central New Jersey. Economics and the changing character of the area led to the closure of Hadley Airport by 1970.

By the 1920s, paving roads for the newest mode of transportation, the automobile, became the major concern for transportation professionals. The nation quickly developed a love of the car and the freedom it offered. Mass production of the automobile enabled all Americans a chance to flee the confines of the cities and a chance to enjoy the open country. With the need to develop jobs, it was a natural policy for the New Deal programs of the Roosevelt Administration to create projects centered on the construction of roadways. Route 1 was constructed in the 1930s and the Morris Goodkind Bridge crossed the Raritan on the edges of New Brunswick and Highland Park. Already impacted by the failure of many of its industries due to the Great Depression, New Brunswick's industrial and retail market base continued to decline as many businesses moved to the more traveled highways outside of town.

When World War Two started, Piscataway was a sleepy farm community caught in the twilight of the Depression. Land was so plentiful that the United States Army opened Camp Kilmer on the Piscataway-Edison border. Camp Kilmer was activated in June 1942, the first staging area to

be built solely for that purpose in the entire country. It was also the largest staging area in the United States and handled more than two and a half million troops. Named for New Brunswick's poet laureate Joyce Kilmer, killed in combat in World War One, Camp Kilmer was the installation of the New York Port of Embarkation, part of the Armed Service Force's gigantic Transportation Corps.

Even though Piscataway was rural in nature, major mass transportation systems were nearby. By the 1950s, the New Jersey Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway located further to the south and east of New Brunswick aggravated the economic decline of the city. Piscataway, and especially the River Road area were affected by New Brunswick's problems.

Rutgers University, noting the availability of large, inexpensive tracts of land on the Piscataway side of the river, purchased many acres and a number of 18th century residences. Run-down homes, some that were remnants of the Raritan Landing community, met their demise with all of this new activity. Other historic homes were more fortunate: they were bought by owners who lovingly restored them.

The development of the Interstate Highway System was further boosted with the construction of Route 287 in the 1960s. Travelers could now go from northwest New Jersey to Central New Jersey and New York in mere minutes. Although a boon to commuters and new office parks, the presence of Route 287 in Piscataway had negative effects, just as the construction of Route One had negatively affected New Brunswick a generation earlier. As Route 287 was built and adjoining land developed into commercial strip malls, office parks and light industries, the character of Piscataway forever changed. The large farms with their original homesteads disappeared. Open spaces became parking lots and suburban tract developments. The town became a suburban outpost in the greater New York metropolitan area. The town celebrated its three-hundredth birthday in 1966.

During the 1970s, New Brunswick's premier industry remained Johnson & Johnson, the pharmaceutical and health care giant. The corporation was influential in many ways; not only was it a major employer, it also exerted great influence on the policy-makers of New Brunswick and helped lead the revitalization of the city during this time. The completion of State Highway 18, across the Raritan River, joining New Brunswick and Piscataway provides the final link in the age of the super-highway and easy access to communities in Central New Jersey. As a part of the environmental review necessary for the construction of Route 18, archaeological studies were conducted at the site of Raritan Landing. The significant resources discovered, analyzed and interpreted at this site once again bring the history and importance of this vanished port alive. The purpose of the Metlar/Bodine House Museum is to provide the linkage of the rich history of the area with the residents of today. The emphasis on the Raritan Valley's development, from Native American, pre-contact life, to the present, completes the circle of the influences of geography and modes of transportation on human occupation of this unique corner of the world.