

The Metlar-Bodine House Museum

Historical Research Guide

Piscataway Township's Historical and Cultural Museum

Introduction

The Metlar-Bodine House Museum stands as one of Central New Jersey's most significant historic sites. Located along River Road in Piscataway Township, the structure represents nearly three centuries of local, state, and national history.

Today, the museum preserves and interprets the story of the Raritan River Valley, the historic river port community of Raritan Landing, and the people whose lives shaped Piscataway and the surrounding region.

This guide provides researchers with a comprehensive overview of the house, its owners, its role in local history, and the museum's collections.

Quick Facts

Location: 1281 River Road, Piscataway, New Jersey

Original Construction: 1728

Builder: Peter Bodine

Historic Community: Raritan Landing

Current Use: Historical and Cultural Museum

Historic Designations:

- New Jersey Register of Historic Places
- National Register of Historic Places

Significance:

- One of only two surviving structures associated with Raritan Landing
- One of New Jersey's finest examples of a vernacular farmhouse
- Repository for more than 1,000 artifacts documenting Central New Jersey history

Timeline of the House

1728

Merchant Peter Bodine constructs a small one-room dwelling with sleeping loft and root cellar overlooking Raritan Landing.

1700s

The house serves as part of the thriving commercial community of Raritan Landing, one of Colonial America's earliest inland ports.

Revolutionary War Era

The surrounding region experiences troop movements, battles, and military occupations while serving as an important strategic corridor.

1850s

The home is expanded and renamed "Sunnyside" by George Knapp of New Brunswick. A Greek Revival addition significantly alters the appearance of the building.

1870s

Victorian-era renovations further modernize the property.

1890

Real estate entrepreneur George Metlar purchases the property.

1914

John Metlar inherits the house and moves his family into the residence.

Mid-1900s

The home becomes known locally as the "Metlar House."

1950s

The property is sold to Rutgers professor Dr. John Newton.

1970s

The New Jersey Department of Transportation acquires the property for a proposed Route 18 interchange.

1979

Local preservation efforts successfully save the house from demolition. The Fellowship for Metlar House is formed and the museum opens to the public.

Early 1990s

The site officially becomes known as the Metlar-Bodine House Museum, recognizing both the Bodine and Metlar families.

July 17, 2003

A devastating fire destroys approximately one-third of the building and damages portions of the museum's collection.

2004-Present

Extensive restoration efforts restore the structure and preserve its historical integrity.

Raritan Landing

Raritan Landing was one of Colonial New Jersey's most important inland river ports. Located along the Raritan River, it served as a commercial hub connecting local agricultural producers with markets in New York, the Caribbean, and Europe.

Peter Bodine was among the community's leading merchants. His warehouse stood approximately one-quarter mile from his residence, allowing him to participate directly in the commercial activity that made Raritan Landing prosperous during the eighteenth century.

The port gradually declined during the early nineteenth century as transportation routes shifted and neighboring New Brunswick emerged as a regional commercial center.

Today, the Metlar-Bodine House is one of only two surviving structures connected to this once-thriving community.

Piscataway Township: Historical Context

Founded in 1666, Piscataway is among the fifty oldest communities in the United States.

The original township encompassed nearly 300 square miles, including areas that later became:

- New Brunswick

- Plainfield
- Somerville
- Portions of Middlesex County
- Portions of Somerset County

Throughout its history Piscataway has been influenced by:

- Native American transportation corridors
- Colonial settlement
- Revolutionary War activity
- Canal transportation
- Railroads
- Trolley systems
- Highway development
- Industrial expansion

The township evolved from a rural agricultural community into one of Central New Jersey's most diverse suburban municipalities.

Architectural Evolution

The house reflects more than two centuries of changing architectural styles.

Colonial Core (1728)

The original structure consisted of:

- One-room dwelling
- Sleeping loft
- Root cellar
- Timber-frame construction

Greek Revival Addition (1850s)

George Knapp expanded the house with:

- Front porch
- Symmetrical design elements
- Circular attic window

Victorian Modifications (1870s)

Additional decorative features and interior improvements reflected changing tastes and increased prosperity.

These successive changes make the building a valuable architectural record of evolving American domestic life.

The Museum Collection

Since opening in 1979, the museum has assembled a collection of more than 1,000 artifacts related to Piscataway Township and the original 1666 land grant.

The collection includes:

Native American Artifacts

- Stone tools
- Archaeological materials
- Evidence of early transportation routes

Colonial and Revolutionary War Materials

- Coins
- Documents
- Ammunition
- Needlework
- Land deeds

Agricultural Artifacts

- Farm tools
- Equipment
- Household implements

Transportation History

- Canal memorabilia
- Railroad-related artifacts
- Trolley-era materials
- A circa 1868 velocipede

Household Collections

- Furniture
- Decorative arts
- Textiles
- Kitchen equipment

Archival Holdings

- Maps

- Photographs
 - Letters
 - Deeds
 - Artwork
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The Ross Hall Wall

One of the museum's most significant artifacts is the Ross Hall Wall.

In July 1778, General George Washington was headquartered at Ross Hall in Piscataway. While there, he issued the first official military order directing the celebration of American Independence Day.

The celebration included:

- Approximately 11,000 Continental soldiers
- A ceremonial rifle salute along the Raritan River
- Public festivities commemorating the nation's independence

Although Ross Hall was demolished during the twentieth century, a section of its original wall was preserved and ultimately entrusted to the museum.

The museum's long-term goal is to create a dedicated interpretive gallery highlighting this nationally significant artifact and the historic events it witnessed.

Saving the House: The Preservation Story

By the late 1970s, plans for a Route 18 interchange threatened the future of the Metlar House.

The Piscataway Historical and Heritage Society launched a campaign to save the building. Through extensive community support, advocacy, and collaboration with local and state officials, preservationists successfully prevented demolition.

In 1979:

- The Fellowship for Metlar House was established.
- A long-range preservation plan was developed.
- The State transferred stewardship of the property.
- The museum opened to the public.

This effort remains one of the most successful grassroots preservation campaigns in New Jersey history.

The 2003 Fire and Restoration

On July 17, 2003, the museum suffered a catastrophic fire that destroyed approximately one-third of the structure and damaged many artifacts.

Subsequent restoration efforts involved:

- State funding
- Municipal support
- Private donations
- Volunteer contributions

More than \$2.5 million was ultimately invested in restoring the building and preserving the collection.

Today, the restored museum continues to serve as a center for education, preservation, and community engagement.

Research Opportunities

The Metlar-Bodine House Museum offers researchers opportunities to explore:

- Colonial commerce
- Raritan Landing archaeology
- Revolutionary War history
- Local genealogy
- Historic architecture
- Transportation history
- Agricultural development
- Community preservation efforts

Researchers are encouraged to contact the museum regarding collections access, archival materials, and educational resources.

Conclusion

The Metlar-Bodine House Museum preserves a unique record of Central New Jersey's development from Colonial settlement through the modern era. Through its historic structure, artifact collections, and educational mission, the museum continues to connect present and future generations with the stories that shaped Piscataway, the Raritan River Valley, and the nation.