

Retro Robbinsville IV – Becoming Robbinsville Township: Forgotten Names of Robbinsville Part 1

From Hungry Hill to Newtown, Stumptown to Centreville, the question this month is What is our identity? How did centuries of name and border changes reflect what is now Robbinsville Township?

How did Robbinsville, and even New Jersey, get its name? Early colonists named far-from-home acquired lands honoring their homelands – New England, New York, New Amsterdam. So, what was Jersey, and why are we the “new” Jersey?

As a British colony, the land between the Hudson and Delaware Rivers was given to two royal supporters: Lord Berkley and Sir George Carteret. Carteret, a military man, was a key figure in the 1643 British defense of the Isle of Jersey in the English Channel, hence, these river-bounded Jersey lands were named in tribute to his military skills.

However, long before European colonization, these lands along the river were home to the Lenape native people. Along the banks of Robbinsville’s Assunpink and Miry Run Creeks can still be found caches of Lenape arrowheads, tools and remnants of societal living. European colonization of this area began with the Dutch, and a 1655 Swedish nautical chart refers to the Delaware’s tributary as the “*Asin pinck*” using the Lenape word for “stony, watery place” or “rocky creek.” The area along Old York Road, from Doctor’s Creek to the Cattail Creek, is well documented as being the Old Indian Trail, rich with fertile soil, life-sustaining hunting and fishing and a perfect setting for community.

The Dutch surrendered their American colonial interests to England in 1674, and Jersey land names took on a distinctly British feel – Windsor, Nottingham, Elizabeth. In 1701, the Robbinsville portions of the British lands were granted to Augustine Gorden, Robert Burnet and Andrew Hamilton. This was part of Piscataway and New Brunswick Townships, and crossed the lines between Hunterdon, Burlington, Monmouth and Middlesex Counties, prior to border changes with the establishment of Mercer County.

It would be decades before technology and legislation would warrant the necessity of the creation of our Robbinsville (Washington Township), but by 1710, area landowners were selling large tracts. Hamlets and small villages arose with the earliest of these being Magrilla, Cattail, Stumptown and Hungry Hill. During this time, it was mainly farming families that dotted the landscape. The southern portion of the Township, along the Old York Road, included families such as Applegate, Robins, Silver and Story. The western portion were the families of Cubberly, Foord (Ford), Hammell, and Tindall.

The Chambers farmed along the area of Old York Road known as Cabbagetown. A story from Chambers family history relates that a Chambers' descendent hid in a cabbage barrel on a ship from Scotland to the colonies to evade British officers. A fun, plausible story as to how the name Cabbagetown came to Robbinsville.

The earliest local farmstead on record is also from the Chambers family. John Chambers came to NJ from Scotland. His son bought 271 acres along the Robbinsville-Edinburgh (traditional spelling) Road. While the Chambers House is long gone, the farm eventually came into possession of the Scheidler's until the arrival of the current Saran Woods housing development.

The proximity of the larger towns of Allentown, Hamilton (Nottingham) and Hightstown filled the needs of the residents. There was no central place within "Robbinsville", and the small hamlets supported their local farmers. Cattail, so named due to its situation on the Old York Road at the crossing of Cattail Creek, became a thriving hamlet. Today, both the creek and the hamlet are known as Sharon. Cattail became a tavern stop in 1747, when stagecoach service over Old York Road was popular. A Methodist Church was established, and, while long gone, the church's cemetery remains with many colonial gravestones, including a revolutionary war veteran.

The Robbinsville-Edinburgh Road area (Main Street) was known as Hungry Hill, reportedly because the local tavernkeeper was unable to provide food for his patrons - something that was expected for travelers through the region. The villages of Cattail (Sharon), Newtown (previously Hungry Hill), Centreville (Windsor) and Stumptown were the main hamlets in the area with flourishing businesses, and merchants and farmers from families of Yard, Hutchinson, Voorhees, Applegate and Perrine. By 1819, the creation of two Post Offices (Newtown and Centreville) brought legitimacy and recognition to the area. Over time, these developing settlements forged distinct identities.

Major turnpike roads crossed through this area as travel and trade from Philadelphia to New York increased. These 1800s turnpikes (not the present NJ Turnpike of today that bisects the Township) brought stagecoach traffic to the area, encouraging further settlement. Turnpikes ran through New Canton and Sharon (Old York Road) and the Bordentown-South Amboy turnpike (roughly along what is now Route 130) ran through Newtown and Centreville.

This month wraps up our coverage of the mid-19th century - a time when local villages forged their own identities. Key infrastructure such as main roads, taverns, and post offices set the stage for major transformations in the area. As you can see, the expansion of Robbinsville Township was well underway!

Next month, we delve into the industrial growth and legislative actions that ushered in Washington Township, defined its boundaries and name, and established the community we know today as Robbinsville Township!

Written by Ellie Calcagno, Robbinsville Township Historian

Maps and other related historic articles are available for view at the Archives Office at 2298 Route 33 by appointment. Call 609-259-3600 Ext. 1121.