

# HISTORY AND EARLY CULTURE OF BASS RIVER TOWNSHIP BURLINGTON COUNTY, NEW JERSEY

## FORMATION OF BASS RIVER TOWNSHIP

Bass River Township as a political entity was created by an act of the legislature of the State of New Jersey on March 30, 1864. It contained a part of Washington Township but most of its territory was taken from Little Egg Harbor Township. The bounds were defined by a supplement to the original act which described them as follows:

*“Beginning opposite the mouth of Bellanger’s Creek, in the division line of Burlington and Ocean Counties, thence running a northerly course up the said Bellanger’s Creek, the several courses thereof, to the bridge on the main stage road from Bass River to Tuckerton, thence in a northerly course to a point on the county line between ocean and Burlington counties, when a due west course will strike a bridge known as Laurie’s Bridge, on the east branch of Wading River, thence down the said stream to the mouth of Harrisville canal, thence along said canal to the Speedwell stream, thence along said stream to its mouth, thence down Wading River to the place of beginning.”*

The name is derived from Bass River which rises in the northeastern part of the township. The first settlement appears to have been made on Daniel Mathis’ Island on the east bank of Bass River in 1713. The early settlers were for the most part Quakers who came from England. They bought large tracts of land upon which they built their homes and farms. They were resourceful, independent people, skilled in hunting, fishing, blacksmithing, coopering, carpentering, tanning and shoemaking. The women spun wool and flax, made the dye for the yarn and wove it into cloth for bedding and wearing apparel. Many persons living in Bass River Township at the present time are descended from the early settlers. Some still possess articles made from the homespun.

Leah Blackman in her definitive genealogical work History Of Little Egg Harbor Township, originally published as a part of the “1880 West Jersey Surveyors’ Association Report”, presents a brief history of Bass River Township. The following are her words as they appear in the 1963 re-issue of her work as published by the Great John Mathis Foundation. Her work is remarkable as she had first hand knowledge of many of the persons discussed in her work and had access to people who had first hand knowledge of prior generations. These invaluable primary sources are lost to today’s historians.

*Great John Mathis appears to have been the first white man who settled in Bass River. In the year 1713 he purchased Daniel Mathis’ Island, and soon after settled on it. John Mathis was the wealthiest man and the greatest landholder that Little Egg Harbor produced for three or four generations after its settlement. He became possessed of thousands of acres of the best lands in or about Bass River and several of the most valuable farms in that section were formed into farms under his superintendence, and he presented his six sons with more than six thousand acres of land, besides what he sold to strangers and devised when he made his will. The stage road from Tuckerton to Bass River and on to Bridgeport for a space of five or more miles runs through lands that once belonged to John Mathis, and he owned large surveys in other sections.*

*In the fore of this work I have not recognized Bass River as a township, for most of this history belongs to a period when Bass River was part of Little Egg Harbor township. Bass River township was set off from Little Egg Harbor in 1864.*

*I think the first white neighbor John Mathis had after he settled at Bass river, was Robert Allen, who came from Shrewsbury, and in the year 1721 married Edith Andrews, sister to John Mathis’ wife, and about the same date John Cranmer married Mary Andrews, and settled in Bass river. Robert Allen at what is now [1880] called Allentown, and I think John Cranmer settled somewhere between Bass river and Bridgeport. [pages 217-218]*

*In the year 1716, Robert Allen, of Shrewsbury, Monmouth county, N.J. came to Egg Harbor and married Edith, daughter of Edward Andrews, of Tuckerton. They were married in the Friends’ meeting house at Tuckerton, and were the second couple married in that primitive edifice. Allen settled at Bass River, on the west side of the river, at the place called Allentown. He had two sons whose names were Peter and Edward, and also a daughter named Edith, who married a man by the name of Story. Allen might have had other children, but if he had there is no one now living [1880] who has any knowledge of them. [page 365]*



We are indebted to Leah Blackman for much of the historic and genealogical information of our area. (Photo courtesy of Arnold Cramer.)

## **DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR**

Much of the underlying turmoil of the Revolutionary War along the Atlantic coast was caused by conflicts between British cruisers and local privateers throughout the bays and rivers. Any British ship that ran aground in these shallow waters so well known to the local men was soon relieved of its cargo. Several area salt works were targets for the British to destroy since salt was indispensable in those days as a preservative for meat and fish and also as a gun powder ingredient.

Many privateers used the Bass and Mullica Rivers for shelter, supplies, and to unload contraband. Cargo seized by privateers found its way to Philadelphia via sand roads through the Pine Barrens.

The privateering situation greatly displeased the British, and on October 6, 1776 they sent the largest military and naval movement amassed along the South Jersey shore. The fleet landed and set fire to nearby Chestnut Neck. On Osborne's Island (near the present Mystic islands) British raiders under "Scotch" Ferguson attacked Count Casimir Pulaski's cavalry killing between 40 to 50 men and capturing 5. The British success was largely due to deserters from Pulaski's ranks reporting to the British the location of the military encampment of the cavalry. As a result a fierce battle ensued with the British losing a portion of their fleet — sunk in the Mullica and Bass River estuary, and the Americans suffered heavy casualties.

Inland military operations during the war were carried out by the British loyalists known as Tories. Several bands of "Pine Robbers", under the guise of Loyalism, relentlessly attacked homes, taverns, and stage coaches. Notable among these outlaws were John and Joe Mulliner.

## **FORGOTTEN VILLAGES IN BASS RIVER TOWNSHIP**

Many formerly sizable and flourishing settlements once existed within the present boundaries of Bass River Township. Most of these relied heavily on a particular resource in the Pine Barrens for their existence and died out due to depletion of that resource, changes in technology, or were severely damaged by wildfire. Since these settlements were owned by the company that ran the business, when an industry failed, the people moved elsewhere and the town became abandoned.

### **MARTHA'S FURNACE**

Martha is located on the Oswego River on a sand road off Route 563 near Harrisville.

Proprietary surveys in the neck between the Oswego and Wading Rivers began in 1737 when Gervis Pharo acquired 95 acres. In 1741 he took up 50 acres additional in Swago Swamp. Swago Saw Mill was built on the site that would eventually become the location of Martha's Furnace.

By 1765, and all through the American Revolution, the sawmill was owned by Springfield Township Quakers, Hough and Newbold. The site was controlled by Quaker owners for the next century.

In the spring of 1793, Isaac Potts, a Pennsylvania Quaker, purchased the Swago Saw Mill tract from Hough and Newbold. Several of Isaac's brothers were in the iron business in Pennsylvania. Isaac had operated a grist mill at Valley Forge prior to 1776. Potts immediately erected a small blast furnace at the Swago Saw Mill site. According to the Little Egg Harbor tax duplicate, 1795 through 1797, Isaac Potts was assessed for one furnace, 30 acres of improved land and 2000 acres of unimproved land.

Ports, a member of a Philadelphia firm of iron merchants, purchased the site an October 1, 1793 from Samuel Hough, who had operated the sawmill there. The furnace was built in September, 1793 and made its first bog iron that year. It was named for Potts' wife, a custom of the times. Workers lived at a nearby settlement called Calico. The old Tuckerton Stage Route passed near the furnace.

During the height of operation the village had about 400 people, 50 houses, a store, school, sawmill and gristmill.



Martha Furnance was excavated by the State of New Jersey in 1968, under the direction of Archeologist Budd Wilson. After it was photographed and fully documented, it was covered with a mound of dirt to guard against theft and to preserve the integrity of the remains. Today, you can see the dirt mound surround by a chain link fence. (Photo courtesy of Budd Wilson.)

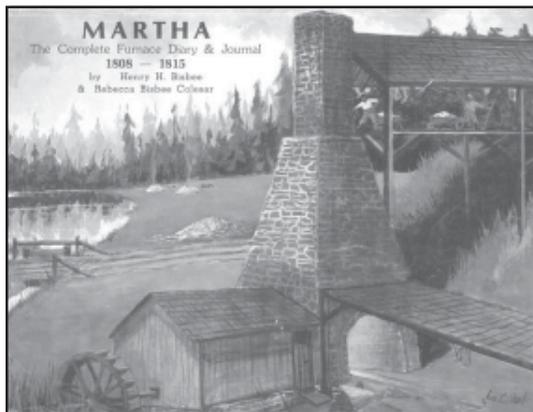
Martha was a charcoal burning, cold-air blast furnace. Surrounding it were half dozen structures associated with the making of iron. Nearby stood the ironmaster's house. The village, housing the workers, was strung along the roads leading to the furnace. The furnace was in operation from 1793 until about 1844. Budd Wilson, state archeologist, made an archeological dig at the site in 1968, and the ruins were fenced in to preserve remaining artifacts.

The volume of water and relatively high banks of the Oswego River made the location of Martha's Furnace an ideal site for a water wheel. The stream was first named Swago Branch. By the end of the Eighteenth Century the name had been corrupted to Oswego.

In 1800 Potts sold the furnace to a group which included Samuel Richards and Joseph Ball, two names closely connected with iron in the South Jersey Pin elands.

Martha's Furnace prospered until the 1840's when it felt the Pennsylvania boom caused chiefly by the use of coal instead of charcoal. Richards sold it in 1841. In 1850 the Furnace at Martha closed down, after which the place was used for the production of charcoal until 1858.

When Joseph Wharton started assembling his vast holding's in Southern New Jersey he purchased the Martha Tract, which by that time had returned to a wilderness. It is now in Wharton State Forest.



The [Martha Furnance Diary](#), transcribed and edited by Henry Bisbee, documents life in the town of Martha from 1808 to 1815. It is available for loan at the Bass River Township Community Library.

## **HARRISVILLE**

Two years after Martha Furnace was established, the Wading River Forge and Slitting Mill was built on Harrisville Pond. This mill processed the pig iron bars into sheets and strips of metal of commercial size. A canal was built to enable the barges from Martha to bypass the dam.

In the 1830's a paper mill was begun at Harrisville. A heavy grade of paper was made from salt hay from the marshes. In the 1850's Harrisville was the largest paper mill in New Jersey. Harrisville was a thriving community. The main street, lit by gas lamps on ornamental posts, was part of the road that led to Bodine's



Harrisville Paper Mill ruins, circa 1920's.  
(Photo courtesy of Howard Ware.)

Tavern and "The Landing" at Wading River or Bridgeport. It was the center of an industrial area with five bog iron furnaces not far away. The store was a shopping center for workmen and farmers from miles around.

A railroad from Camden to Tuckerton was chartered in 1836. The line was to pass through Harrisville (then known as McCartyville, after the founder of the paper mill, William McCarty.) The line was never started and instead a railroad was constructed to Atlantic City.

After financial difficulties Harrisville was sold at Sheriff's sale on July 16, 1896 to Joseph Wharton, a Philadelphia industrialist and financier. It remained a ghost town until destroyed by fire, the ever present threat in the Pine Barrens, in 1910. It, along with Martha and much of the surrounding land, became part of the Wharton tract which eventually became the Wharton State Forrest.

An excellent account of Harrisville is found in a book by Michael Fowler and William Herbert entitled [Paper Town of the Pine Barrens](#). This text includes old photographs, maps and a survey by A. Hexamer dated August, 1877.

## **BODINE'S TAVERN**

A major stopping place along the Tuckerton Stage Route at the Oswego River was Bodine's Tavern. This inn, established by John Bodine shortly after the Revolution, was a meeting place for the local militia as well as one of the few public drinking houses in close proximity to the company towns of Harrisville, Martha and Calico. It was the final stop for a traveler going from Philadelphia to the shore at Tuckerton or New Gretna.



Today, the field around the original Bodine's Tavern is a rustic camping area in Warton State Forest. (Photo by Pete Stemmer)

Social life for these isolated militia workers and travelers centered around locations such as Bodine's Tavern where activities such as meetings, military training and voting took place. At that time, fist fights and public drunkenness were commonplace.

## **CALICO RIDGE**

An old map of 1889 still depicts the location of Calico, a village along the Oswego River. It was located about one mile up stream from Martha's Furnace where most of the workers were employed. Most of the iron workers were Irish with a small group of Blacks residing there also. Living in the village were charcoal burners, lumbermen, ore-raisers, and teamsters to haul the wood, charcoal and pig iron.

After the demise of Martha's Furnace in 1840, many of the workmen continued, at least for a time, to reside in Calico and worked chiefly in charcoal making. There is almost no trace of the village although the ridge is now used as a favorite picnic and canoe stop along the Oswego River.

## **SIM PLACE**

Sim Place is located adjacent to the Ocean County line, in the northeast corner of Bass River Township. The place was named after an old Indian who came here first about 100 years ago. He lived in a cabin which was near the present location of a large red homestead. His name was Sim, sometimes spelled Simm or Simms.

Today, some of the cranberry harvesting buildings remain; however, most of the approximately 20 houses with picket fences, lilacs and apple trees, and some 60 residents are gone. Residents of Sim Place were employed in the cranberry industry. Although some residents had garden plots, they did most of their grocery shopping from a truck that came weekly from West Creek Market.

In 1850 cranberry harvesting began at Sim Place. Up Until 1899 the Satterwaite family ran the operation. Then it was sold to Penn Producing Company. At one time, this firm had more than 5000 acres in cranberries including tracts at Howardsville and Cedar Bridge.

Dozens of local residents were employed by the cranberry business. Abandoned barracks were moved from Fort Dix to the town for migrant workers but were never used.

Electricity came to Sim Place some time in the mid 30's. Then eventually came the telephone service as well.

The property is now owned by George Kudra, a Trenton furrier. The property comprises 3000 acres.

Several groups have indicated a recurring interest in buying the tract in recent years because the area near the head of the Oswego River forms an important part of the Wading River watershed. This is an integral link in the Pine Barrens surface drainage system.

## **PAST LAND USE**

The Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan contains research concerning the prehistory evidence of Native American activities within the Pinelands. Evidence has been discovered of three encampments located along the Wading, Oswego and Mullica Rivers, apparently used as bases for fishing, hunting, foraging and land/water travel.

Since the Pine Barrens provided little in terms of agricultural production, the early settlers were resourceful in utilizing many products from the bay and forest for their livelihood.

## IRON

The iron industry required tremendous capital resources, expert management and technical skills. In addition to the mines themselves, forests were needed to supply the charcoal used in smelting the ore. Limestone, usually in the form of oyster shells, was required as a flux in the forges. Water power was essential to operate the bellows and other machinery. Also, because the operation had to be carried on in remote areas, the ironmaster had to provide a self-sufficient community for his numerous workers.

Bog ore is a variety of limonite formed when water percolates through iron bearing strata and decayed acidic vegetation. When this solution is exposed to air it gradually decomposes and a dark red muddy sludge continually accumulates at the water's edge or in coves. It eventually thickens to form bog ore. Since this is a continuous process, these beds can replenish themselves in a relatively short period of time (approximately 20 years) unless the area is adversely impacted. Today there are very few remaining "beds" as much of these areas have been converted to cranberry bogs.

Furnaces, such as the one located at Martha, operated around the clock "in blast" for up to 10 months a year until winter freeze-up of the streams.

Forges differed from furnaces in that the pig iron produced in the furnaces was brittle and was refined in a forge and hammered to remove excess carbon and to fashion products such as cannonballs, nails, stoves, pots, kettles and the like.

## PAPER

Paper at Harrisville was made from an unlikely combination of raw materials: old rags, rope, scrap paper, bagging and, as a principal ingredient, salt hay. The process involved shredding the fibrous raw materials into pulp, cooking, washing and bleaching the pulp, spreading this out into a thin mat, removing the excess water, then drying, rolling and sizing the paper with a coating.

The process began by gathering salt hay from the nearby marshes, stacking it on barges, sailboats or mule drawn wagons and transporting it to the paper factory. Due to the type of raw materials and the dark color of the water (due chiefly to iron and tannins from oak and cedar leaves) the finished product was not of superior quality, due to its dark brown color even after bleaching. This fact, coupled with the lack of railroad transportation in close proximity, caused the obsolescence of this industry even before the devastating fire that destroyed the village and factory in 1914.

## CHARCOAL



Raking a charcoal pit at Bass River State Forest in 1937. (Photo courtesy of Bass River State Forest Photo Archives.)

The charcoal making industry in its heyday from 1830-1850 utilized over 60 schooners, many from Tuckerton and New Gretna, and employed thousands of wood choppers and many colliers and charcoal tenders.

Each charcoal kiln was arranged with between 14 and 45 cords of wood -mostly pitch pine, then oak, gum and maple. This required up to forty acres or more to be clear-cut, as all parts of the tree were used. Even the shrubs were dug up in 2' x 2' squares to make a turf covering to which sand was added to make the kiln airtight during the two week burning period.

## LUMBERING

Lumbering offered a livelihood to many men. Woodchoppers and charcoal burners were employed in large numbers to serve the bog iron industry. Sawmills turned out lumber in great quantities, much of it for export. Barrel staves, to be used in making hogsheads in the West Indies, were an important commodity. Ancient white cedars, three feet and more in diameter, were dug up or "mined" from the waters of the swamps and converted into shingles of superior wearing quality.

Cedar mining became important after the cedar swamps had been completely denuded because of the great demand for such products as garveys, fences, houses, barns, canoes, shingles, pilings, rustic furniture and cabin logs. The "mined" cedars were floated to the surface and then milled into extremely durable wood products, especially cedar shakes. There is, even today, a man engaged in mining cedar at Merrygold, a small tributary of the Wading River within the township.

Pitch pine was used for flooring and joists as well as for tar to grease wagon axles and to caulk the seams of vessels. Other pitch pine products were turpentine and, most importantly, charcoal.

### **SALT HAY**

The high salt marshes along the coast are dominated by salt hay, *Spartina patens*, which has fine bending stems that form swirling mats of grass in the meadows.

Uses of salt hay in the 1800's includes stable bedding for horses and cattle, for making manure, for thatching the roofs of barns, for feeding cattle and sometimes horses, for layering bananas, mulching strawberry plants, as a packing material for glassware and pottery, for icehouse insulation, for use on sandy roads for traction for teams, for making wrapping and butcher's papers, for building roads over marshy lands, for putting on top of newly laid pavements and concrete roads during freezing weather. It was used in bedding and automobile upholstery.



Charlie Weber harvesting salt hay from the meadows in the Bass River Township - Greenbank area, circa 1940's. (Photo courtesy of the William Augustine Collection, Rutgers University.)

Harvesting was often done by a group of workers who sometimes stayed on the marsh for a week. After the salt hay was cut, raked and bunched, ox teams or horses were used to pull harvesting equipment, with their feet enlarged with leather, wood or iron "mud boots" to keep their feet from getting mired. 'Mud boots' served in the manner of snowshoes. Also, all kinds of barges were used — some had sails, some were rowed and some were towed. The heads of horses were covered by sacking with eye and ear holes, and they wore burlap aprons. These devices protected them from mosquito and greenhead-fly attacks.

With the invention of man-made materials the salt hay industry decreased dramatically. Salt hay is still being harvested from the salt marshes along the shore and is used as a mulch by Burlington County strawberry and early market vegetable growers. Current salt hay retail prices are approximately \$60.00 to \$75.00 per ton as compared to \$16.00 to \$25.00 per ton around 1955.

### **BOAT BUILDING**



The 42 ton, two masted schooner Lizzie Bell was built in a Bass River shipyard in 1884. Her original papers are on file in the Bass River Community Library History Committee Archives.

When Tuckerton, on September 17, 1787, became the third port of entry in the United States, it influenced industry in the township. Shipbuilding was carried on in two locations on Bass River. The first vessel built was the brig "Argo" in 1800. Many cargo vessels were registered to owners and operators in Bass River. Exports were sent to New York, Philadelphia and Rhode Island, from which places they might be shipped to the southern colonies, to the West Indies or overseas. Some engaged in direct trade with the West Indies.

Boat building gave employment to a variety of tradesmen such as lumbermen (sometimes known as woodjins), haulers, carpenters, iron workers, blacksmiths, caulkers and sailmakers. Then came the captain, apprentices, pilots and ordinary seamen. The old sea captains had large beautiful homes built, naturally, near the Bass River, located at a distance from the Barrier Islands.

## **CRANBERRIES AND BLUEBERRIES**

Many of the cedar swamps, after the timber was depleted around 1830-1840, were converted into cranberry bogs and many large cranberry plantations, notably Sim Place, sprang up along nearly every flowing stream.

Cranberries were in great demand chiefly for their high nutrient content (vitamin C) and their resistance to spoilage. This fruit was used extensively on sailing ships to prevent scurvy.

Because the cranberry vine has an extremely shallow root system and is subject to severe frost damage, bogs were constructed with a lock built on the stream so that the vines could be flooded during the winter to prevent frost heaving.



In the early 1900's, Miss Elizabeth White and Dr. Frederick Coville developed the cultivated blueberry at Whitesbog in Pemberton Township. Soon thereafter many acres were converted to blueberry fields throughout the Pine Barrens, including Bass River Township.

Previous to this development, many residents in the Pinelands earned a meager living collecting wild blueberries and huckleberries during the summer. These people also supplemented this income by gathering pine cones, laurel and holly, and as trappers, hunting and fishing guides.

## **FISHING**



Captains Max Quade, Chester Allen, Levi Downs, and Les Allen, just back from catching 84 fish, on Allen's Dock, south of the Bass River Bridge in September, 1930. (Photo fourtest of Levi Horner via Tom Williams)

Scallops and oysters, prior to 1920, were quite plentiful and the waters off Bass River Township were also noted for clams and crabs, and still are. Some of the best bay and estuary fishing is found in Great Bay and the Mullica River Estuary, and many of the residents of Bass River Township were employed in the fishing trade.

## **MOSSING**

Sphagnum moss growing in profusion in the White Cedar Swamp was gathered with a long toothed tool known as a moss dray, stacked up around the base of large cedars, then toted in baskets to a clearing known as a moss landing for drying. In a few days the top of the moss dried and it was turned over. When mostly dry, the moss is packed in a moss press and baled with wire and covered with burlap.

Sphagnum moss is antiseptic and, because of its water retentive qualities, was used extensively as a wound dressing, chiefly during World War 1. Its most recent market has been for florists to pack flowers, asparagus and tree seedlings.

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The preceding was taken from Chapter 2, pages 3-10 of the Bass River Township Master Plan, January 1982, prepared by the Conservation & Environmental Studies Center, Inc., Browns Mills, N.J. Photos and captions were added.