

# **History of Linwood**

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**1987**

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# History of Linwood

## Indian Settlements

To the early settlers of New Jersey, the sandy, sub marginal soils of the Outer Coastal Plain were much less desirable than the lands bordering on the Delaware River. It was not, therefore, until the final decade of the seventeenth century that any kind of substantial settlement was begun along the "shore" (the mainland) between the Bays of Little Egg and Great Egg Harbor. But lured by the spring and summer bounties of marsh and bay for hundreds of years before, Indians of the Late Woodland Period took temporary leave of their permanent villages in the northwestern part of the state and followed well established trails south along the Great Egg Harbor River. They were the Unilachtigo, a subtribe of the Lenni Lenape of the Delaware Nation, and between 500 and 1600 AD. They came annually to "Pattecoin Point" (Job's Point) on the north bank of the river.<sup>1</sup> The red men fished and hunted; they gathered clams, oysters and mussels and left behind indisputable evidence of their presence. Shell mounds, scrapers, celts, points, and other artifacts appeared with regularity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on the meadow bottom between Seaview and Essex Avenues and along the uplands of Patcong Creek. Their presence is implicit, too, in words that have become integral parts of our language - words whose origins are unmistakable - persimmon, moose, Patcong, pipsissewa, and Absecon.

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## Thomas Budd Land Sales

On November 29th and 30th in the year 1695, in the City of Burlington, Gloucester County, a West Jersey Proprietor, "Thomas Budd, Merchant of Philadelphia", sold large tracts of land along "Patconk Creek" in "Great Egg Harbour in ye Province of West New Jersey to seven men. They were John Somers, John Skull, John Gilbert, Jonas Valentine, Peter Cowanover, James Steelman, and Jonathan Adams."<sup>2</sup> Some portions of the Somers "Plantation" and all of the Skull property (Mainland Regional High School is located on part of that site) lie within the boundaries of the present City of Linwood. There is evidence that actual settlement had begun, however, some time earlier. In fact, the Court of Portsmouth in Cape May County (which apparently exercised jurisdiction over Great Egg Harbor for a short time) felt the need in 1693 to appoint John Somers "first Supervisor of Roads and first Constable for Great Egg Harbour."<sup>3</sup> In 1694, the New Jersey Legislature passed an act placing Great Egg Harbour under the "jurisdiction of Gloucester County to all intents and purposes, till such time as they shall be capable by a competent number of inhabitants to be erected into a county."<sup>4</sup> By October of 1695, there were enough people in the area to move the Grand Jury for the County of Gloucester to appoint "John Somers to keep a Ferry over Great Egg Harbour for man,

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hors & Kattle; to pass to Cape May ... and other ports as passengers may have occasion."<sup>5</sup> It ran for many years from Job's Point on the Great Egg Harbor side of the river to Beesley's Point in Cape May County.

## Early Quaker Settlements

The arrival of Somers, Skull, and the others marked the beginning of the rise to prominence of the Quakers in the eastern part of Gloucester County. Their plantations along Patcong Creek and Scull Bay reflected a tendency common to Quaker settlements. They were relatively small and insular and, in fact, became somewhat complex extensions of several families. A strong, independent people who had known persecution, the Friends were still regarded by many with suspicion for their religious beliefs, with respect for their economic shrewdness, and with wonder for their fierce humanity.

During most of the eighteenth century, the influence of the Quakers was great among all of the settlements along the old Sea Shore Road from Nacote Creek to Somers Point. As early as 1702, the Egg Harbor-Cape May Friends Monthly Meeting was held in private dwellings of the members. Thomas Chalkley's Journal specifically mentions the house of John Scull as a meeting place.<sup>6</sup> The first Meeting House in the area was built circa 1730, in Leedsville (Linwood) on land donated by James Somers, son of the early settler,

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John. Known in old deeds as "the Miller," James operated the first gristmill on Patcong Creek on the south side of Central Avenue by Bargaintown Pond

## Other Religions

The Quakers were not alone in the area, however; the mid-1700's witnessed the rise in numbers of Presbyterians who under the leadership of John Brainerd, erected Blackman's Meeting House near Cedar Bridge in 1761.<sup>7</sup> The nineteenth century marked the gradual but steady decline of Quaker influence in Great Egg Harbor. Contributing factors were undoubtedly the liberal-separatist Hicksite movement in 1827, and the rapid growth of other sects bringing a new spiritual awakening to the area. By the 1840's the Methodists were holding services at both Blackman's Meeting House and Bethel Church. Central Church was constructed in 1860 in response to the need expressed by Captain John Walker Tilton for "a church on the Shore Road, centrally located, that will welcome seamen from yards and docks of Bakersville, Leedsville, and the Point. A church that will give these men something more to hope for than a tavern and a gutter in the dawn."<sup>8</sup> By 1881, a Baptist Church was located in Leedsville, and during the next few decades the community saw the appearance of Lutherans, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and others.

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## American Revolution

Although Leedsville and the other shore communities were somewhat isolated geographically from the mainstream of the Revolutionary War, local citizens organized two battalions of militia to protect the shore area against potential attacks from the sea. The musters contain familiar names: Somers, Steelman, Leeds, Ireland, Doughty, Risley, etc. Between 1774 and 1776 Colonel Richard Somers's Daybook records sales from his store in Somers Point of "Ridgmentell suites and cotes... Powder for Congress..." as well as flints, shot, and lead.<sup>9</sup> On various occasions between 1779 and 1782, Privateer Captains brought captured prizes into Great Egg Harbor where they were "condemned to the claimants" and both vessel and cargo sold at vendue.<sup>10</sup> During the War of 1812, too, a Volunteer Regiment was again under arms (1812 to 1815), and the rolls include the same surnames with few exceptions.

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## Old Leedsville

Sometime during the late eighteenth century, the community became known as Leedsville. It is probable that it was named for a store (located about where Monroe Avenue strikes Shore Road) which was operated by members of the Leeds family; an old photograph exists which is marked on the back "Leeds- Scull Store."<sup>11</sup>

Until its establishment as a Borough in the late nineteenth century, the history of Leedsville, like all of the settlements from Pleasantville to Somers Point, is bound inextricably to Great Egg Harbor Township. It is often impossible, therefore, to connect specific family names that appear in the Township records with exact locations in the village. The Customs House for the Port of Entry of Somers Point, for example, was located in Leedsville, and several of its early officials (like Thomas E. Morris) were Leedsville residents. The Somers Point Post Office, which served the area from Somers Point to Central Avenue, was established in 1806. It was located at various times in Leedsville and Somers Point; the Postmasters, too, were residents of both communities.

From the earliest times, most of the inhabitants of Leedsville were engaged in farming or farm-related endeavors. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the marshlands like those along Patcong Creek and Scull Bay were, "highly esteemed by farmers whose lands border on them, as they constitute an unfailling

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source of hay for winter use, but also good natural pastures for cattle and sheep all the year round."<sup>12</sup> Crops and pasturage were at first necessities in terms of individual family survival, but as more land was cleared, modest commercialization began. Marketable surpluses provided the enterprising farmer with small luxuries, and in an age when hard specie was scarce, they gave him book credit at the village store. Old ledgers from the Edmond Somers Store in Leedsville (1821-1863) clearly illustrate the systems of "barter- bookkeeping" and book credit so common in the pre-industrial economy of the United States.<sup>13</sup>



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## Baymen and Shipbuilders

Supplementing the products of the land, Scull Bay and the water adjacent to it have long provided both sustenance and livelihood to the residents of the community. Fish, clams, and oysters were highly marketable commodities for the New York and Philadelphia markets. "Vessels from New York were always ready to by spot cash from the bayman. An empty basket run to the topmost peak was a signal to the bayman to come alongside with what they had to sell."<sup>14</sup> Shellfish beds in the bay were important personal possessions, often more valuable than some of the land. They figure significantly in the old deeds involving property transfer and they are mentioned as important legacies in wills. The bay provided the raw materials to establish a salt works some time during the mid 1800's just east of the foot of East Drive. In the same general area in 1885, Richard Somers had a ditch cut from "Salt Works Creek" to the upland for the purpose of constructing "a sunken platform to be covered with a house for...fattening or freshing oysters and clams." The ditch was also to be used "for the purpose of landing manure and hay or other freight."<sup>15</sup>

Kirkbride's New Jersey Directory published in 1850, indicates that in the county "ship building seems to be the leading mechanical business, and is principally conducted in the following places: Absecombe, Bakersville (Northfield), Leedsville, Mays Landing, Tuckahoe, and

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Port Republic." Samuel R. Risley, John VanZant, and Job VanZant of Leedsville are listed as "Builders, (Ship)." <sup>16</sup> Shipbuilding emerged as an important industry very early; access to timber and navigable waters made it both practical and profitable. In 1796, Christopher VanSant built a brig on the banks of Patcong Creek that was "55 ft. by the keil and twenty feet Beam and Nine feet and half hold."<sup>17</sup> The Somers and VanSant families built ships on the east and west banks of Patcong Creek near the Mill Pond and along Scull Bay north of Winner's (Patcong) Landing. The building of Patcong Bridge in 1819 eventually forced the yards on the creek to move to Somers Point. Flatboats or scows used principally for hauling salt hay continued to be built near the old yards on Patcong Creek until much later in the century.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the sea was an important aspect in the lives of Leedsville residents. Coasting vessels commanded and manned by local men carried on brisk and lucrative trade with major ports along the eastern coast. The 1872 Beers and Comstock Map of Atlantic County clearly indicates the large number of sea captains who made Leedsville their home. <sup>19</sup>

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## Schools Keep Pace

Formal education in old Leedsville seems to have begun about 1800, with classes in Friends Meeting House adjacent to the existing cemetery. By the 1820's, the Cedar Grove Schoolhouse, located on the corner of Shore Road and Garfield Avenue, served the southern half of the village. Near VanSant and Maple Avenue, a school referred to as "Leeds Ville Academy" was holding classes in 1843; it operated until 1873 when a one room schoolhouse (the present Library) was built on Poplar Avenue for students who lived between Belhaven and Central Avenues. Those who resided south of Belhaven to Ocean Heights Avenue attended the Sea View School located on Ocean Heights Avenue (it existed as a private residence on the west side of the Bicycle Path). The Belhaven Avenue "High School" was built in 1908. Two years later the Sea View School was sold "to use for current expenses" and the Poplar Avenue School was deeded to the "Borough of Linwood, for one Dollar, to be used for Borough purposes."<sup>20</sup>

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## **Leedsville Becomes Linwood**

In 1880, because another Leedsville existed in New Jersey, the US Post Office Department requested the residents to change the name of the town. Meeting in the old schoolhouse on Poplar Avenue, the name "Linwood" was chosen, and a Post Office was established with Joseph R. Risley as the Postmaster.

Linwood removed itself from Egg Harbor Township and became incorporated as Linwood Borough in 1889; it had a population of over five hundred. In 1902, ordinances were passed by Borough Council, which would ultimately bring gas, electric, telephone, water, and transportation services to the community. All of the utilities were in place by 1910, and Linwood was prepared to move into the twentieth century.

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## **Trains and Trolleys Bring Changes**

Although never a transportation center, the introduction of rail service had a profound effect on Linwood and its inhabitants. It sounded the death knell for the blacksmith, the wheelwright, and the horse trader; but it provided improved marketing for the farmer and storekeeper, permitted mobility heretofore unknown to the citizens, and introduced cultural changes that were significant. The Pleasantville and Ocean City Railroad had established a line along Shore Road in 1881, which was absorbed by the West Jersey Railroad in 1884. The West Jersey ran freight and passenger train four times daily between Pleasantville and Somers Point where connections were made with a steamboat service to Ocean City. Using the same trackage, the Atlantic Suburban Traction Company completed an electric railway line in 1904. It ran for a relatively short time because it was unable to compete successfully against the interurban line which was built by the Atlantic City and Shore Railroad Company on a right-of-way west of Shore Road in 1907. This trolley line, the Shore Fast Line, was the major means of transportation between Atlantic City and Ocean City for the next forty-seven years.<sup>21</sup>

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## Technology Alters the Landscape

In the years between 1880 and 1940, the four square miles that encompassed the City of Linwood were characterized by a large number of substantial and productive farms, which served many of the major hotels and quest housed in Atlantic City. Shortly after World War I, growing prosperity on both the mainland and the island communities led to the first of a series of housing booms that erupted intermittently for the next seventy years. Suburban development companies began their relentless push which absorbed the farmland and radically altered the landscape. In addition, the changes wrought by increasing technological development, the impact of further population growth, and the aftermath of several world conflicts helped to complete an evolutionary process that began with the primitive candle mold and ended with electric light. Along the way, the blacksmith and the wheelwright shops--the grist mill and shipyards returned to earth. The steam dummies and trolleys went the way of the horse-troughs and general stores along the old Seashore Road, and the farms that furnished thousands of people with summer produce were literally swallowed up by real estate development.

Except for a few stretches along Patcong Creek and Scull Bay, most of Linwood's natural landscape is gone, replaced by a cultural landscape that is an accretion of the needs of

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the people who lived on this land for three hundred years. The only vestige of the old town's long relationship with the soil stands on Central Avenue--the winery; the barn and the vineyards have known four generations of the Krumm family. But in spite of all the changes, good and bad, there remains in the landscape a strong trace of cultural integrity. Carefully guarded and nurtured, it is quiet testimony to the community's respect for the legacies left so long ago by generations of Quakers and farmers--of sea captains and baymen.

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