

CROSSROADS

Newsletter - Winter 2023

ASSOCIATION NEWS

Warm winter greetings! Hope the cold weather and holiday busyness didn't prevent you from attending our recent meetings...but if you were unable to join us, here are some highlights.

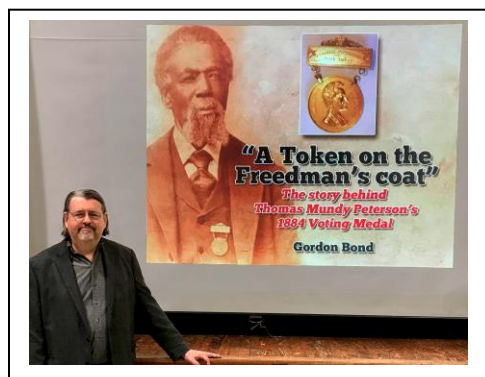
Magician Mac McParland joined us to discuss "Victorian Medicine" at our November 2022 meeting. Mac shared a fascinating presentation on various powders and elixirs that were marketed to the public during the second half of the 1800s. Some were merely ineffective; others were actually dangerous. And a few were forerunners of products we use today. We enjoyed watching Mac demonstrate some of the deceptions used by traveling medicine shows.



Association members were treated to festive holiday fare in December. A large buffet featuring hot main dishes, salads, and sandwiches was thoroughly enjoyed by all in attendance. The dessert table was filled with an assortment of sweet treats. And a delightful presentation of seasonal songs and carols was performed by the Village Carolers who were attired in their Victorian best. (Audience participation was also encouraged!) Thanks to all who contributed their time and talents to our evening of holiday cheer.



Our January 2023 program was presented by historian and author Gordon Bond. "A Token on the Freedman's Coat: The Story Behind Thomas Mundy Peterson's 1884 Voting Medal" was based on his latest book about Peterson, who became the first African American to vote in the nation under the Fifteenth Amendment when he cast his ballot for the Perth Amboy city charter referendum in 1870. Gordon not only provided the background of this extraordinary event but also placed it in the context that underscored its significance and put Peterson's vote in a more complex light.



To Cast a Freedman's Vote: Thomas Mundy Peterson at the Intersection of Suffrage, Citizenship and Civil Rights by Gordon Bond is available for purchase, along with several of his other books. Be sure to visit his website at www.GardenStateLegacy.com.

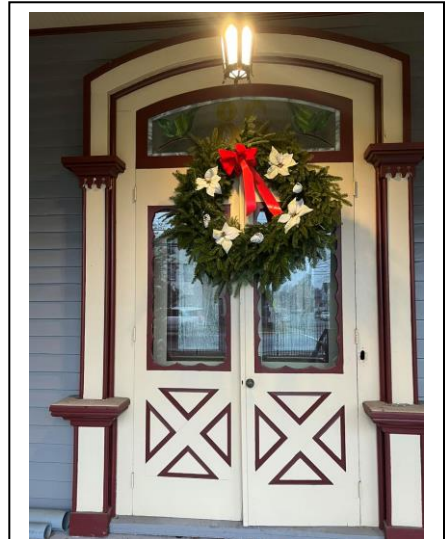
Our 2022 Year-End Appeal raised over \$3000!

A note of thanks to these members who made a special year-end donation to support our organization's ongoing work: Arthur Anderson and Anne-Marie Lesny, Ted Boehm, Laura and Geoffrey Bradshaw, Daniel and Marcia D'Arcy, Tara Dubai, Frank and Anne Louise Grippo, Angelika Heuer, Todd Howell, Lois Muller Jones, Susan Keating, John and Karen Keithler, Audrey LaPenta, Jay Mascolo, Karen Moffat, Andrew and Shirley Nagy, Patricia Osborne, Charles and Mary Ann Paul, Donald Peck, Elaine Tweedus, Brenda and Miguel Velasco, Howard and Mary Anne Weber, Joan Zeller, Loretta Zimmer.

We also greatly appreciate the contributions made by these local businesses: Almasi Companies LLC, CME Associates, Craig's Plumbing and Heating, Dillon Music, Hutt and Shimanowitz, James P. Nolan and Associates LLC, Neves Jewelers, Owen S. Dunigan & Co, Inc., Reliance Insurance Group, Seaquest Woodbridge LLC, and Stone Mountain Printing.

~~~~~

Check out our website at [www.woodbridgetownshiphistory.org](http://www.woodbridgetownshiphistory.org)!



Front door at 86 Green Street – home of the future museum – adorned with a beautiful holiday wreath donated by Aquila Landscaping.

## Beyond Local Lore:

### Where New Jersey's First Print Shop Was and What Became of It

by Gordon Bond (Part 1 of 2)

In 1976, the late local artist Francis McGinley unveiled his painting, "Burning of the Parker Press." It depicted British soldiers during the American Revolution having torched the wood structure during a frustrated retreat in 1777. It hung for a time at Town Hall, reflecting a dramatic moment in the colonial history of Woodbridge, relating to a favorite son. There is just one problem. The event it shows never happened.

#### **Where was Parker's print shop?**

The name of James Parker (1714—1770) is one most Woodbridge Township residents will likely recognize—if for no other reason than from "Parker Press Park." In brief, he was a colonial era printer who apprenticed under William Bradford in New York, and later replaced him as the city's printer of record, with the help of his business partner and friend, Benjamin Franklin. There he became caught up in important conflicts surrounding the scope of the emerging ideal of the "freedom of the press." Around 1752, he opened a second print shop at his native Woodbridge, which was the first permanent press established in New Jersey. While there is, of course, much more to his story, I want to focus on this shop and its printing press, given its obvious significance to local colonial history. The question that immediately comes to mind is *where* this important structure stood. Some would say the answer is simple—certainly it stood where Parker Press Park is, right? After all, there is even a replica built there!

In fact, the only thing "historic" about the building in the park is how some of the timbers used to build it were salvaged from an old barn in New Brunswick, believed to date to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The park and replica were created for the Bicentennial in 1976, and, while not on the site of its namesake, does reflect Parker's place in the township's cultural self-identity. So if the original shop was not located in today's park, where exactly was it?

Perhaps surprisingly, we don't really know, though there have been two theories. One was related in 1924 by Perth Amboy judge, printer, and amateur historian Harold E. Pickersgill (1873—1942) in an installment of his *Perth Amboy Evening News* local history column about the Parker-Franklin association (Franklin visited the Parkers in Woodbridge in 1763):

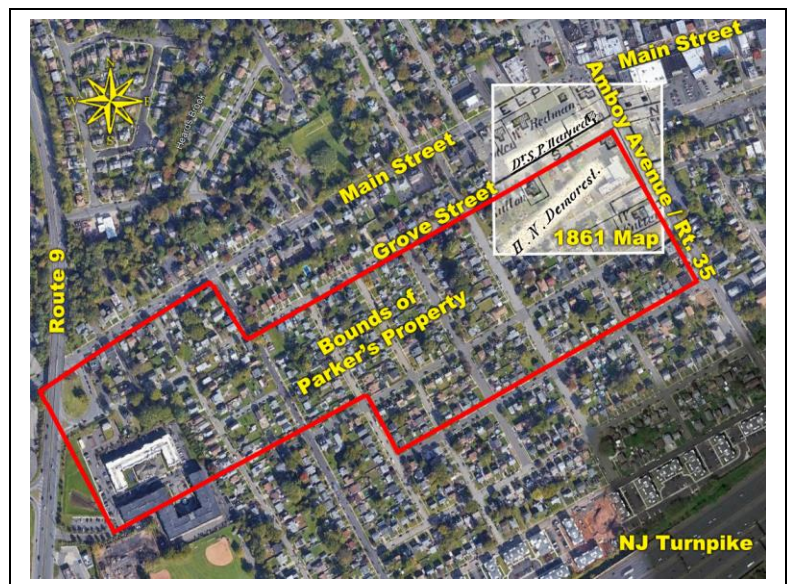
*'With all that has been written of Parker's printing in Woodbridge, the contemporary records have as yet been produced to show where this first printing office was located. Old residents three decades ago [1890s] said that there was in colonial days a printing office on the southerly side of Green Street, west of School Street, and when a printer who flourished here at about that time occupied for a time a small frame building there he was told that according to tradition he was not the first disciple of Franklin to so use it.'*

According to this version, not only had Parker's shop *not* been destroyed by the British, but it even *survived* into the 1800s to be used by another printer. There was indeed a music printer, Frank J. Lawson, who lived on the south side of Green Street around the suggested period, and there is a surviving wood structure today behind the house, perhaps large enough for a workshop. However, this stands much further west, past the intersection with Amboy Avenue (Route 35) and there is little else to recommend this as the site.

A second, earlier theory, however, has firmer evidence than "tradition." Rev. Joseph W. Dally's seminal 1873 history, "Woodbridge and Vicinity," stated:

*'It is supposed, with very good reason, that this [printing] office was located on the lot adjoining and north of the present residence of Mr. David Demarest, about where Dr. Samuel P. Harned lives. Not only is this supposition supported by tradition, but also by the fact that individuals employed in cultivating land near this spot have plowed up metal types at different times. Mr. Robert Coddington says that when he was a boy, he, in company with others, was accustomed to go to this locust grove and search for these types; and many were found.'*

An 1861 map of Woodbridge shows that there were indeed properties of Demarest and Harned, as Dally described, at the corner of what is today Amboy Avenue and Grove Street. Perhaps the most important piece of supporting evidence, however, comes from land records held at the Middlesex County Clerk's Office in New Brunswick, NJ. While there are no records from Parker's time, there is a record dating to his grandson, James Eugene Parker. On March 13, 1799, he is found selling a property to Cornelius Shermerhorn, the description of which traces out the area shown on the accompanying map and includes the Demarest property. James Parker inherited land from his father, Samuel, and parcels may have been subsequently added or sold and roads realigned, but Dally's tale at least coincides with



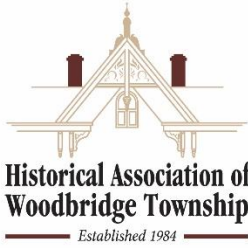
property known to have been in the Parker family. It seems logical that a print shop would be located near the eastern side of the property, along the busy road leading to Perth Amboy and near the intersection with what used to be known as the road to Philadelphia, now Main Street.

There is one more local story that lends credence to this being roughly the location of the print shop. Today, the corner of Amboy Avenue and Grove Street is home to St. James Catholic School. Before that, however, it was the site of the St. James Catholic Church itself. In 1924, that structure had been pulled off its foundation on upper Main Street, put onto rollers, and pulled by tractors to this corner. When they were digging the new foundations, so the story goes, a "quantity of type" was found in the ground. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be any real record of this find—what qualified as a "quantity" of type? Was it all in one place or scattered? The archeological context is long lost and no one at the church today knows what happened to whatever might have been found.

There were, of course, other print shops in Woodbridge since Parker's day, and metal detectorists still pull the occasional types from the soil at different spots around town. But if we allow that those found by young Robert Coddington and the diggers of the new church foundation came from the press of James Parker, they represent a challenge to the story of the burning of the shop by the British.

***(Part 2 – The Fate of Parker's Press – in our next issue!)***





Historical Association of  
Woodbridge Township  
*Established 1984*

PO Box 83  
Woodbridge NJ 07095

Historical Association of Woodbridge Township  
**Board of Directors**

Daniel D’Arcy, *President*  
Audrey LaPenta, *Vice President*  
Howard Weber, *Treasurer*  
Tracy Billings, *Interim Recording Secretary*  
Brenda Velasco, Donald J. Peck,  
Tara Dubai, Irv Hyatt,  
Laura Bradshaw, Michelle O’Rourke

Email: [hawt1669@gmail.com](mailto:hawt1669@gmail.com)

Phone: 732-634-1669

Website:

[www.woodbridgetownshiphistory.org](http://www.woodbridgetownshiphistory.org)



Future home of the museum at  
86 Green Street, Woodbridge

## MEETING ANNOUNCEMENTS

### *“Paterson: The First Planned Industrial City in the USA”*

The guest speaker for our February meeting will be Giacomo DeStefano, Museum Director at The Paterson Museum. Paterson was at the center of Victorian-era industry. Join us as we learn about the many innovations developed in America’s first planned industrial city.

**February 27, 2023 at 7pm**

Fellowship Hall at First Presbyterian Church  
600 Rahway Avenue, Woodbridge

### *Upcoming Events:*

**March 27, 2023** – Monthly Meeting

“Frederick Law Olmsted and the Restoration of the Olmsted-Beil House”  
– presented by Patricia M. Salmon, historian of the Friends of Olmsted-Beil House in Staten Island at First Presbyterian Church, 600 Rahway Avenue, Woodbridge

**April 24, 2023** – Annual Dinner and Awards Meeting

at Colonia Country Club, 300 Colonia Blvd, Colonia  
*(Save the date...more information to follow!)*

*Historical Association of Woodbridge Township is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit tax-exempt charitable organization.*