

Scotch Plains and Fanwood — A Tale of

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Specially Written for Our Towns

Before small towns appeared on maps, before land was owned, and before streets were paved, pioneers described the location of their settlements by the geographic details of the land.

"The valley at the foot of the notch between the first and second mountain," or "southeast of Ash-Swamp alongside the Green Brook" were the way in which locations were identified, according to "Under the Blue Hills," by Marion Nicholl Rawson, published in 1974.

In 1684, a small group of Scottish immigrants cleared the plains at the foot of the Blue Hills, today known as the Watchung Mountains, and built a community which they named "Scotsplains," in honor of George Scot, their leader, who died at sea before reaching what is now New Jersey.

The land that was to become Scotch Plains and Fanwood has a history rich in cultural diversity, having been populated by numerous peoples over a span of 300 years. The Lenni Lenape Indians were the first to live on the plains at the foot of the mountains, followed by Dutch and English settlers, in the early 1600s.

Trade expeditions were launched by various European monarchies to stake out and claim land in the New World. The English, the French, the Swedes and the Dutch all claimed to have a stake in Nova Caesarea, later known as East Jersey.

Dutch Quakers, who migrated south from New England, settled in East Jersey along the banks of the Green Brook. The Indians and the peace-loving Quakers lived in relative harmony, side-by-side, for many decades.

In 1684, the Quakers persuaded wealthy Scottish families and their servants to come over from Scotland, to take advantage of the abundant natural resources of East Jersey.

With a promise of 50 acres to the head of each family, 25 acres to each family member and to each servant after three years of service, many prominent Scots, skilled laborers and servants came to the Scotsplains to take advantage of the land offers.

Many of the Scots were religious dissenters against the English throne, and wanting to avoid further persecutions and imprisonment, were anxious to leave Scotland.

Early maps indicate that by 1685, 24 prominent Scottish and Quaker families settled on parcels of land ranging from 300 acres to 3,000 acres in the plains that extended southwest from Elizabethtown to the northern border of Piscataway — all of which was a part of the

Scotsplains of East Jersey.

Those 24 farms were staked out by families whose names belonged to the founding fathers of Scotch Plains and are still familiar today. Names such as Fullerton, Alexander, Frazee, Lambert, Johnstone, Gordon, Miller, Swan and De Camp were among them. Exactly when "Scotsplains," also known by the names "Scot's Plains," or "Scotsplain," became "Scotch Plains" is uncertain. All three spellings appear in old documents and maps spanning the Colonial era.



Courtesy of Scotch Plains-Fanwood Historical Society
A CENTURY AGO...An 1897 postcard depicts the Scotch Plains business district between Second and Grand Streets. Today, the downtown remains a diverse mix of business and professional services.

The early history of the plains beneath the Blue Hills was fraught with numerous land disputes and social strife, bordering on riots and insurrections between the Scots, the Quakers and the English as a result of duplicate land bequests.

Several European overlords claimed to own the land, resulting in endless litigation in succeeding years. After the Revolutionary War, the State of New Jersey ruled that whoever was in possession of the land at that time would be the official owners, which settled all disputes.

By 1700, a small village sprang up at the base of the notch in the first mountain at the head of what is today Park Avenue. It was also referred to as "The Village," and was considered to be an extension of Elizabethtown.

The Village flourished, partly as a result of the numerous mills along the banks of the Green Brook, which offered a plentiful supply of water power for fur, grist, cider, ore and paper mills. Numerous ponds, with man-made dams, were constructed in the Village below to create additional mills.

Six mills along the Green Brook employed various smiths and skilled laborers, some of whom resided at the mills in the mountains, while others lived in the tiny

village below.

One of the earliest and most famous of the mills was the paper mill owned by David Felt. A thriving mill community grew up around the Felt Mill on the Green Brook, and the town became known as Feltsville. The mill eventually went bankrupt and the mill town became known as the Deserted Village, which was eventually restored and has become a tourist attraction in recent years.

A pivotal development in establishing The Village of Scotch Plains as a distinct community was the construction of a sizable home belonging to John Sutton on the corner of what is now Park Avenue and Front Street. The large home was turned into an inn, originally called Sutton's Place, and was also used as the first post office for the villagers

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