



Bergen County, Where America Begins

A Short History of River Edge, NJ by Kevin Wright

Cornelius Matthew, a Swedish land-clearer, made the first European settlement about 1683 at the narrows of the Hackensack River in the vicinity of the Steuben House. This area was known as *Tantaqua's Plain* or *Aschatking* (meaning "at the narrows, where the hill comes close to the river.") Tantaqua was a Hackensack sachem and a successor to Oratam. The earliest landowners were John Adams, Eptkey Jacobs (Banta), Richard Pope, Daniel River, Andrisse Tibout, John Durie, John Demarest, and Albert Zabriskie, who purchased tracts of land in 1685 and 1686.



The Steuben House with tidemill



Pie Plate with Gen. Lafayette's profile,
made by Henry Van Saun of River Edge

River crossings were built at the gristmill hamlets of Old Bridge (by the present River Edge train station) in 1724 and at New Bridge in 1745. Early deeds mention the “path to Kindockameck.” The roadside farms, lying along the Kinderkamack Path between Old and New Bridge, formed a neighborhood known as *Steenrapie*, a vanished place-name. Despite centuries of change, three pre-Revolutionary War homes still survive (2010), including two along Kinderkamack Road. The homestead of Christian Dederer, built around 1760, stands at the foot of Wayne Avenue. The Heritage House on Kinderkamack Road, overlooking the head of River Edge Avenue, was constructed, perhaps as early as 1760, on “that certain Farm, or Plantation lying and on the West side of the Hackensack River opposite the Place where the old Mill stood, being the farm or plantation whereon David Demarest lived and died and containing 270 acres.”

Considerable military activity occurred in River Edge throughout the Revolution. Surprised by British invasion on November 20, 1776, General Washington led the retreating garrison from Fort Lee across the New Bridge to safety, inspiring Thomas Paine’s memorable refrain, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” British troops built earthworks and troop emplacements upon Brower’s (later Cherry) Hill in September 1778. The Continental Army encamped at Steenrapia in September 1780. Washington’s correspondence lists his headquarters at New Bridge, undoubtedly in the Steuben House. At war’s end, the State legislature presented Jan Zabriskie’s stone mansion to Baron von Steuben, the Prussian Inspector-General of the Continental troops. The historic Zabriskie-Steuben House at New Bridge probably survived more of the American Revolution than any other spot in America, having served as a fort, military headquarters, encampment ground and battleground throughout the war.

Utilizing the thick bed of glacial clay that mantles the Hackensack Valley, Henry Van Saun opened a brickyard and pottery near what is now the River Edge Swim Club around 1811. Pot-baker George Wolfkiel took over operations in 1848, producing crockery and slip-decorated pie plates that are today highly collectible. Based upon the seasonal harvest of cattail rushes for seating, chairmaking was another important cottage industry.



Schooner on the Hackensack River

Captain Stephen Lozier had a general store at the Old Bridge, which was a thriving lumber port during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, sending great quantities of cordwood to New York and other coastal cities. In 1874, the Hackensack Water Company erected its first pumping station at New Bridge, feeding river water to its reservoir atop Cherry Hill (hence, Reservoir Avenue) to supply potable water to Hackensack by gravity feed. Because the brackish river water drawn from this location proved undrinkable, the company relocated to New Milford at the head of tides in 1881. The Hackensack & New York Railroad extended northward in 1870, initiating the first suburban development. Commuter residences rose on streets surrounding the depot near New Bridge, named Cherry Hill, and another at Old Bridge, renamed River Edge.

The King Iron Company installed an iron bridge at Old Bridge in 1887 and at New Bridge in 1889. The latter still survives and is listed on the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places as the oldest highway swing bridge in the state. Developer Gustav Peetz purchased the 25-acre David W. Christie farm in 1892, lying between Kinderkamack Road and the Hackensack River, adjacent to the River Edge Station, and surveyed the tract into streets and building lots. He remodeled the old Christie Homestead on Spring Valley Avenue for his own residence. Emil Baumgertel opened the River Edge Hotel at this location in May 1894.

On June 29, 1894, by vote of 37 to 3, citizens of River Edge and Cherry Hill approved incorporation of the new borough of Riverside. The first town officials were: Mayor John G. Webb; Councilmen, Albert Z. Bogert, Nathaniel Board Zabriskie, James D. Christie, Nicholas R. Voorhis, Frederick H. Crum, and D. Anderson Zabriskie; Assessor, John R. Voorhis; Collector, James D. Holdrum; and Commissioners of Appeals, Henry Spatz, Conrad Freidman, and Henry Lozier.



House on Main Street demolished by a tornado in 1895

James D. Holdrum built his store building at the corner of Park Avenue and River Edge Road in 1895. In July 1895, Albert Z. Bogert built a new store alongside the river at the west end of the Old Bridge. At about 3:30 p. m. on Saturday, July 13, 1895, the black funnel of a tornado appeared atop Cherry Hill. This “hellish wind,” soon known as the Cherry Hill Tornado, caused considerable damage along Main Street in its eight-minutes of fury, killing three persons and injuring eleven.

Albert Z. Bogert, Mayor Joseph Brohel, and Wm. Martin purchased about 14 acres of the Webb and Demarest farms in 1905, formed the River Edge Land Company and began selling building lots on the hill above the train depot. Many fine homes were subsequently built along Summit Avenue and its vicinity. The first Cherry Hill School House was built on Grand Avenue in 1901. The River Edge Volunteer Fire Department was incorporated in June 1903. The post office and depot at Cherry Hill were renamed North Hackensack in 1907. The North Hackensack Hose Company was incorporated in 1907, with 35 members and 500 feet of hose. A new River Edge railroad depot was erected in 1907. In 1911, contractor Carl Ufheil, of Peetzburg, built a small post office building of concrete blocks for River Edge, opposite the train station on the west bank of the river. It served as a post office until 1931 and the building still survives. Also in 1911, the Freeholders ordered the installation of a new bridge near the River Edge depot, using the Bascule patent, which employed a counterbalance apparatus on the principle of the seesaw, in which one end rises as the other falls.

The borough name changed to River Edge in 1930. The literature department of the Women’s Club established the River Edge Library in 1931. As late as 1938, 25% of River Edge remained farm acreage. The population, however, doubled in the decade between 1930 and 1940. Over the next several years, the Borough accepted 4.6 miles of new streets and Kinderkamack Road was widened. The present Borough Hall opened in 1941. Charles H. Reis developed the Clarendon Hills section of River Edge. In 1941, the Sunnyslope subdivision had sites available for 51 dwellings to supplement the 350 already constructed. A new Borough Hall opened in 1941 in the former residence of Mayor Elmer Howell, situated on the dividing line between the old north section of town and new subdivision housing developments.



D. Anderson Zabriskie, last private owner
of the Steuben House

The State of New Jersey acquired the historic Zabriskie-Steuben House through eminent domain in 1928, largely at the urging of the Bergen County Historical Society. The Historical Society opened their museum headquarters in there in 1939 and purchased the adjacent eight-acres in 1944 to provide a buffer and refuge for threatened historic sites. The Historic New Bridge Landing Park Commission was created by legislation in 1995 to coordinate governmental and private development within the historic park, preserving this rare fragment of our past. After a flood in April 2007, further legislation turned over administration of the state-owned lands and buildings to the commission, not only to better protect this Revolutionary War battleground from modern intrusions, but to promote it as a major heritage destination.

The pace of suburban subdivision and development accelerated rapidly after World War II. In the past decade, new and larger residences have already replaced houses built in the postwar boom. In 2009, the name of the NJ Transit stop in the south end of the borough was changed from *North Hackensack* to *New Bridge Landing*, restoring the historical identity of the neighborhood, where exciting new hopes and plans for redevelopment are now under consideration.