

# Places In Time

## LAWRENCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SUMMER 2014

### A Brearley House Mystery

Brooke Hunter

Visitors to the Brearley house admire its Georgian architecture and original interiors. But they also learn that some woodwork is missing. Donald Tyler's *Old Lawrenceville* states that "In 1914, Dr. James Russell, Dean of Teacher's College, Columbia University, bought the house and removed some interior paneling, corner cupboards and fireplace facings to another house he owned nearby." Is this accurate? Did Russell own the 1761 Brearley house and remove the now missing original woodwork to another house in Lawrence Township?

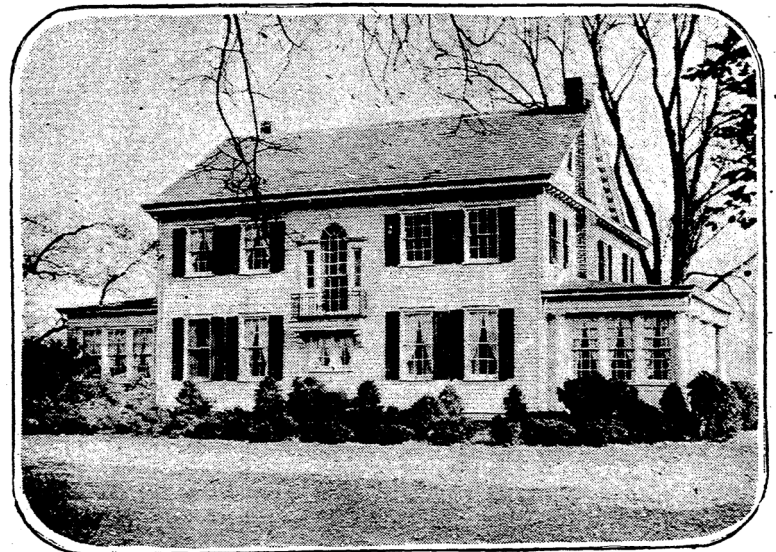
It turns out James Russell never owned the Brearley house. Russell was the first Dean of Teacher's College at Columbia and an internationally known educator. In 1916-1917, he purchased about 350 acres of land near the 1761 house tract on both sides of the Princeton Pike, extending from Franklin Corner Road beyond Lewisville Road. A *Trenton Evening Times* article announced Russell's first purchase of the "Old Hildebrecht Place" on May 28, 1916. The Hildebrechts ran a popular restaurant in Trenton and used the farm to supply dairy goods. Russell had no personal connection to the area. He and his wife came from upstate New York. The newspaper reported that Lawrence's rich soil attracted Russell as an ideal environment for the pursuit of his fancy cattle-breeding hobby, which he took up for exercise over golf.

In the summer of 1918 Russell sold these lands to create a rehab facility for WWI soldiers where they would be taught scientific farming methods. Russell had been appointed by the Secretary of

War to organize educational programs for wounded veterans. The soldiers' agricultural school was a short-lived operation. It opened in early 1919 with accommodations for 150 soldiers plus personnel. The government shut it down that August for budgetary reasons. At its peak 125 soldiers were in residence.

Meanwhile, Russell bought a new property on the fashionable Lawrence Road (opposite Rider University today), which he named Glenburnie Farm after his prize-winning herd of Guernseys. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century wealthy Trentonians and others built or renovated lavish homes along Lawrence Road. Russell's neighbors included John Brock, Trenton's top car dealer, who built "The Columns" (corner of Darrah Ln. and 206) in 1914. The newspaper printed a photo of Russell's "handsome house" describing it as "one of the show places of Lawrenceville."

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The photo accompanied an article on James Russell titled "Colleges Easier To Run Than Farms," *Trenton Sunday Times-Advertiser*, November 25, 1928.

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It turns out that Russell purchased the paneling, corner cupboards & fireplace facings from Walter Fawcett as remembered by his daughter Virginia and probably removed these items to Glenburnie in the 1920s. The original woodwork from the Brearley house certainly suited its colonial style. Ownership of a country estate and gentleman farming reflected Russell's elite social status. As did his interest in vintage woodwork. The 1876 centennial sparked a fascination with America's past that spawned a colonial revival in architecture and design. A combination of factors including economic growth, consumer culture and the automobile expanded the colonial revival in the 1920s. During this decade Henry F. du Pont scoured the east coast buying up antiques and entire interiors for his Winterthur estate. While John D. Rockefeller Jr. and his wife Abby Aldrich Rockefeller were busy helping to create Colonial Williamsburg, America's first living history museum. Russell's acquisition of Brearley items was less grand but still fits this larger cultural pattern.

So what became of the original Brearley woodwork? That may depend upon the fate of Russell's house. James Russell married Alice Wyckoff in 1929, his neighbor from across the street following the death of his first wife Agnes who was hit by a car crossing the road near their house in 1926. Agnes fractured her skull in the accident and died about a year later from her injuries. Alice Wyckoff inherited the large farm and unique 19th-century Italianate style house (Van Cleve House) bought as a summer retreat from her father shortly before her marriage. Wyckoff was a good match for the widower. Well-educated and an educator, Alice attended Vassar, earned a teaching degree from the state normal school in 1907 and taught math in Trenton until 1915. She then served as director and on the board of Trenton's YWCA through the 1920s. The Russells lived a glamorous life, hosting parties at their home and wintering in Miami as the Great Depression gripped the nation. The Russells sold both farms and James' prize-winning herd of Guernseys to Harry Pate in 1943 for a view of the Delaware River.

Pate ran a livestock business under the name Glenburnie Farm until he sold the land to Rider College in 1956. After years of deterioration, Rider demolished the house in the late 1960s to build a new residence for the college president.

Did the Russells take the woodwork with them to Trenton's Glen Afton neighborhood or leave it in the Lawrence Road house? If the woodwork remained, did someone salvage it before the demolition when other materials were taken? The missing Brearley woodwork is still lost, but we have a better sense of what happened to it than before and may find it yet.

*Please send comments to [bhunter@rider.edu](mailto:bhunter@rider.edu).*

## College Interns at LHS

The Society is lucky to have two interns this summer. History majors Jacqueline Cunningham (Rider University) of Hamilton and Michael Elbertson (Ursinus College) of Lawrence are working on several projects for the Brearley House including compiling a docent handbook to make it easier to train future volunteers and updating the house tour.

The interns are also conducting research for a new permanent exhibit focusing on important places and people in the immediate area to be installed next year in the large room on the second floor. The exhibit will feature panels on the Lenni Lenape, the Great Meadow and D&R canal, the Brearley family, Princessville Inn, Princessville Cemetery, Slavery and Abolition, and Lewisville Road.

Cunningham, a double major in Education, is preparing some new educational materials for classroom use as well as by families visiting the house. She also assisted with the fourth and second grade field trips to the Brearley House last month.

*☞ The Brearley House is open for tours the first Saturday of the month from 10:00 am-noon and the third Sunday of the month from 2:00-4:00 pm. Note new time on Sunday.*

## Winona Nash History Award

Lawrence Historical Society Trustee John Halvorsen presents the Winona Nash History Award to Aury Cifuentes at the Lawrence High School Senior Awards Night. (pictured right) The Nash Award — consisting of a book on history, a check, and a certificate — is presented to the graduating senior who demonstrates excellence in history, as selected by the faculty. Aury ranks in the top ten percent of her graduating class in our highly competitive school system and will begin her studies this Fall at the College of New Jersey, majoring in business. Aury has contributed to her community by being involved with her church, helping to run the soup kitchen, and organizing rummage sales to raise funds. A co-founder of the geological society, Aury also finds time to serve as co-editor-in-chief the school newspaper. Aury aspires to a career in business administration, management or finance with a minor in international business, environmental science, or international affairs.



## New Jersey Celebrates its 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

New Jersey turns 350 in 2014. On June 24, 1664 the Dutch handed over their territory in northeastern America to the English and the rest as they say is history. Learn more and find events at <http://officialnj350.com/>.

The Lawrence Historical Society is marking the anniversary with a series of essays on township history funded by a grant from the Mercer County Cultural & Heritage Commission. The NJ 350 History Series will include print versions of Township Historian Dennis Waters' popular lectures on the AT&T Pole Farm, trolleys and suburbanization, plus new research on slavery & abolition and Prohibition. The history of two local roadways — Federal City Road and Lewisville Road — are explored and the question “where did that street name come from?” will finally be answered. The series will be completed this summer and fall. The essays will be posted on the website and print copies made available at society events and public buildings in the township.

This project continues the tradition started by the Lawrence Tercentenary Committee who published brief works back in 1964 for the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary on Maidenhead's early history, the Revolutionary war, the Smith homesteads, the Lawrenceville School, the township minute books, and Town Hall.

The Tercentenary Series is now available in pdf on the Society's website at <http://www.thelhs.org/>.

Compare the state logos and mottos for the 300th and 350th anniversaries. From “People, Purpose, Progress” in 1964 to “Innovation, Diversity, Liberty” in 2014.



*For Three Centuries—People, Purpose, Progress*

**new jersey 350**

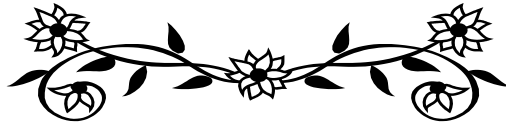
innovation • diversity • liberty

The Lawrence Historical Society  
P.O. Box 6025  
Lawrenceville, N.J. 08648

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## Comings and Goings

The Lawrence Historical Society welcomes to our Board of Trustees Dr. Brooke Hunter, Associate Professor of History at Rider University. LHS members will remember Dr. Hunter and her colleague, Dr. Roderick McDonald, who jointly presented the 2011 Mary Tanner Lecture on the subject of slavery in Lawrence Township. She has volunteered to become the newsletter editor.

The LHS Board bids a grateful farewell to Beverly Rubman, a great supporter of local history who served recently as Membership Chair.