



# Places in Time

**FALL 2020**

## **Women Voting In New Jersey** by Brooke Hunter

### **Did you know that women in New Jersey could vote before the 19th Amendment?**

2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment ensuring women the right to vote in the United States. New Jersey was the twenty-ninth of the required thirty-six states needed to ratify the amendment. But there was a time when New Jersey was #1 in women's voting rights. New Jersey was the first place in the United States where women voted, a right they held from 1776-1807.

Adopted on July 2, 1776, just two days before the Declaration of Independence, the framers of New Jersey's first state constitution granted the right to vote to "all inhabitants" who met the property requirement of "fifty pounds proclamation money." For a long time, historians interpreted this as a mistake by sloppy legislators pressed for time. But New Jersey election laws from the 1790s referring to voters as "he or she" prove that legislators gave women equal voting rights with men.

Not all propertied women could vote. Married women were disqualified by coverture, a legal principle inherited from Europe whereby women surrendered any property or income to their husbands upon marriage. Only single propertied women qualified as voters.

There was little proof of women actually voting until recently. In preparation for an exhibit scheduled to open this fall at the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia, researchers found nine New Jersey poll lists from 1797-1807 with the names of 163 women.

While it is unknown if women voted in Maidenhead Township, surviving tax records show some women qualified. Many were widows from prosperous local families, such as Ruth Phillips. According to her obituary, Phillips died in 1811 at the age of 90 and was the mother of three revolutionary war soldiers—Jonathan, Elias and John—and had been a widow for more than a quarter-century.

### **Eligible Women Voters in Maidenhead Township, New Jersey**

The first state constitution also extended the right to vote to black men and women. Though New Jersey's voting requirements were among the lowest in the new nation, most of the state's black population still would have been disenfranchised. Maidenhead's 1799 tax list recorded one free black man named William Smith who owned one cow, not enough to be entitled to vote.

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## President's Message

Dear Friends,

In 1761 when John Brearley built his Georgian house for his grandson, James, the townspeople of Maidenhead herded their cattle down Meadow Road to graze in the Great Meadow. Families rose at dawn and milked cows, gathered eggs, chopped kindling for the fireplace, chores that made life possible in this new and raw land. Today a FIOS cable lies beneath the road. The first European settlers endured diseases that could only be helped by medicinal herbs.

Today many of the values of the earliest Brearley family members are back in fashion—locally grown vegetables, milk and dairy products from antibiotic free cows and eggs gathered from a local farm. We value open space and clean water.

Although we are now in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic and can't meet you in person, we invite you to visit our website, [www.thelhs.org](http://www.thelhs.org), where we are planning virtual programming. Let's imagine a new way of bringing together our enthusiastic history lovers. We are working with local historians and artisans to provide lectures and demonstrations. Let's be as imaginative as our ancestors.

Tours of the Brearley House will resume as soon as it is safe to do so. In the meantime, let's stay in touch. Join us at the Lawrence Historical Society, share your time and talents, and let's get to know each other.

I hope to see you soon.

Kathie Meeker-Cohen  
President

## About Places In Time

The mission of *Places in Time* is to serve members of the Lawrence Historical Society (LHS) by:

- educating them about the history of Lawrence Township; and
- informing them of the activities of the Society.

Comments, questions, or submissions should be directed to sent to [webmaster@thelhs.org](mailto:webmaster@thelhs.org).

Deadlines for submissions are as follows:

December 15th (Winter issue)

March 15th (Spring issue)

June 15th (Summer issue)

August 15th (Fall issue)

Preferred length of submissions is 800-1000 words for feature articles and 400-500 words for reviews. LHS does not provide a commission for submitted works.

*Places in Time* accepts advertisements from businesses which provide services that would be of interest to LHS membership. Rates and other related information can be obtained by contacting the Society at [webmaster@thelhs.org](mailto:webmaster@thelhs.org)

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## Mary Tanner Lecture Scheduled for October 11th

Brian Armstrong, former President of South River Historical Society and author of numerous local NJ history books, will deliver a lecture entitled “The History of US Presidential Elections and New Jersey” for the 18th annual Mary Tanner Lecture series.

Armstrong will speak with an emphasis on all elections from 1912 to the present, discussing the candidates, the issues, the campaigns, and the results. Armstrong, a Political Science major from American University in Washington, DC, is a collector of US presidential election memorabilia and will bring some of his favorite campaign buttons and other items to the presentation.

The event will take place on October 11, 2020 at 2:00pm through Mercer County Library System's GoToMeeting Virtual Conference Branch. The library is co-sponsoring the program.

To register, please use this link:

<https://www.eventkeeper.com/code/ekform.cfm?curOrg=MCL&curID=449573>

Established in 2003 the Mary Tanner Lecture Series honors one of Lawrence Township's most active community organizers. As a member of the Society's Board of Trustees, Mrs. Tanner was instrumental in the effort to raise money and public support for the restoration of the 1761 Brearley House. Mary Tanner taught history at Mercer County Community College and was the first woman elected to Lawrence Township Council, serving from 1976-1981.



*Photo courtesy of L. Allen Brewer, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/navycrackerjack74/>*



## Fred Vereen, A Life of Advocacy

By Joe Ciccone

When people drive down Eggerts Crossing Road, few notice a small, seemingly abandoned church where Landover Road intersects with Eggerts Crossing Road. Fewer still would realize that this facility once housed Lawrence Township's Community Center. Fred Vereen remembers. He helped create it.

Vereen recently sat down and reflected on a life well-lived in support of Lawrence Township in general, and Eggerts Crossing in particular.

Vereen was raised in Lawrence and educated in the Lawrence and Trenton school districts. By the time he was in his twenties he had already begun a lifetime of advocating for improvements for Eggerts Crossing. Vereen remembered asking the Town Council in the 1950s to make improvements to Johnson Avenue at a time when none of the roads in Eggerts Crossing had sewers, sidewalks or paving. (The only paving, he later recalled, was compact ash from the Lawrenceville School's furnace that the town applied during the winter.) The Council told Vereen the town would be happy to make the improvements; he just needed to get all of the residents on Johnson to sign a petition supporting the work and acknowledging that they, the residents, would be taxed for the improvements. The Council didn't think he'd be able to get it done. Neither did we, Vereen later noted with a chuckle. But he did and Johnson Avenue became the first road in Eggerts Crossing with improvements.

Later in the early 1960s, after a tour of duty in the Army, Vereen was elected president of the Eggerts Crossing Civic League. Although the organization had been around since the late 1940s it was "mostly just a social thing for folks. It wasn't an organization to go to town hall, to be aggressive and talk about what was needed." Under Vereen's leadership, however, the group became a force in community advocacy.

Their first challenge came in 1966, when the township proposed a new master plan, which would have zoned part of Eggerts Crossing for light industry. Realizing what having light industry would do to Eggerts Crossing, Vereen galvanized local residents into action and in the next election they let their voices be heard: all of the Council members who supported the master plan were voted out of office.

At about the same time, the town's mayor, Charles Connell, formed a new Community Action Council, which Vereen, in his capacity as president of the ECCL, was asked to join. An outgrowth of President Johnson's "War on Poverty", the CAC was composed of representatives of numerous local organizations and sought to tackle some of the most pressing health, education and housing issues facing Lawrence Township's poorest residents.

That's where the Community Center comes in. The CAC concluded pretty quickly that a key problem was that residents did not know where to go for assistance. A new community center could help rectify that problem, serving as a centralized location that provided services and information. Vereen was chosen as the Center's first director. But there was a problem. Although the government provided funding to staff the Center, no funding was available to build the Center itself. Vereen quickly identified the unused church on Landover as a potential site, but the building was in dire need of repair. "Weeds had grown up around it. Half of the building was covered with weeds and trees," he recalled. "There was no water for a toilet – there was no toilet – there was no heat, no air conditioning, no nothing."

In a terrific show of support, however, community organizations offered assistance: AC Brown helped with excavating; Lawrenceville Fuel added a heater and installed plumbing; a local hardware store offered construction material free of charge. By 1967, the Center was fully operational, providing day care, youth programming,





and even a federally guaranteed credit union. Eventually, the Center outgrew its modest home and the impressive facility onlookers see today on Eggerts Crossing Road was built and dedicated in 1971.

In the meantime, however, the CAC continued to press forward with what would become one of the most contentious issues they faced: the need for adequate housing for Lawrence's poorest. The CAC formed a housing committee to tackle the issue, with Vereen as its chair. Another committee member, Peggy Huchet, marveled at Vereen's perseverance:

"He's probably the most consistent person I've ever met. He'll try something. If it doesn't work he'll go back and gather up his ideas and his people and try again. If it doesn't work then he'll wait and try again. And he usually gets what he wants.... He never stops. That's one of the things I learned from him. You keep on going and after awhile people pay attention to you if you don't go away."

Huchet's pithy statement does not fully describe the challenges and opposition that Vereen and the rest of the committee faced over the next several years in their attempt to build Eggerts Crossing Village. Dedicated in 1975 – almost a decade before such subsidized housing was mandated in the State of New Jersey – the Village provided a unique combination of housing and educational programming for its residents. Vereen became the Village's first manager and years later would be the driving force behind the Village's successful Every Child Valued afterschool program.

At age 87, one would think that Vereen would be relaxing, but he is not the retiring sort. Just this past summer he helped organize voter registration drives and continues to advocate for reforms in the township school system. That set of golf clubs he was given when he retired? They're still sitting in the closet, and he has no plans to start taking lessons anytime soon.

Why does he do it? "His passion was to do something about [Eggerts Crossing]," noted Huchet, "He wanted to see it improved. He just needed people there to have the same advantages that anybody else in the town had. He wanted to right the wrongs. He's still at that. I don't think he'll ever change. That's what has driven him all his life."

It still does.

*Joe Ciccone serves on the board of the Lawrence Historical Society. He is a member of the Society's newsletter committee.*

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1786	1789	1799
Hannah Green Ruth Phillips Isabela Smith	Elinor Cook Ruth Phillips Elizabeth Slack Mary Phillips	Mary Barnes Elizabeth Burroughs Mary Baker Sarah Hunt Sarah Johnston

Source: Maidenhead Tax Lists, New Jersey State Archives. Maidenhead Township was renamed Lawrence in 1816.

This revolutionary experiment came to an end in 1807 when New Jersey restricted voting to white men. This move foreshadowed what happened nationally before the Civil War. It took two constitutional amendments—the 15th and the 19th—to restore rights once held by New Jerseyans and to ensure that the right to vote in the United States shall not be denied on the basis of race or sex.

*Brooke Hunter is Lawrence's Township Historian. She presented a lecture on the 19th Amendment and women voters/politicians at the Historical Society's Annual Meeting this past February.*

### **Lawrence Township Historical Collection**

By Laura Nawrocik

The following is part one of a series of articles highlighting the items in the Township of Lawrence's archival collection, which is curated by the Office of The Township Historian.

Former township clerk Della Nash was a big history buff and served as a de facto town historian during her tenure from 1938-1957 collecting ephemeral and storing it in the municipal building. Those items stayed there for years under the watchful eye of former tax assessor Robert Immordino, who was also a local history aficionado. It is no surprise then, that when New Jersey passed the Local Historian Act in 1979, Lawrence was one of the first municipalities to name a Township Historian, which was Robert Immordino. Barbara Gladstone served briefly after Immordino resigned and then was replaced by Winona Nash, Della's daughter-in-law.

One of the mandates of the act is to establish and curate a local historical program to preserve items and documents related to the town's history. Winona Nash was responsible for finally organizing and cataloging all of the items that had accumulated in the basement of town hall over the previous decades, creating what is now known as the Lawrence Township Historical Collection. Nash worked with the township public works department, clerk's office, and the director of the Mercer County Library System to have the items brought over to the Lawrence Branch of the county library system when the branch moved from its old location in Lawrence Shopping Center to the former Riis Trucking Terminal on Darrah Lane in the 1980s. At first, the collection was stored in every manner of box it could be stuffed in and placed in a small closet at the end of the building. This is where Nash began the careful process of transferring items into archival folders and boxes and then arranging them in a meaningful way for easier access by researchers. When the library underwent renovations in 1996, a special room, the Lawrence Room (now known as the Nash Room) was established to house the material. As part of the renovation, the county provided shelving and the help of the reference staff to Nash for the purpose of cataloging the material.

Since Nash passed away in 2002, the Office of the Township Historian has continued to collect new items and

### Lawrence High Senior Jenna Cahill Wins 2020 Nash Scholarship



Each year, the Lawrence Historical Society presents an award to an outstanding student who has demonstrated excellence in history, as determined by the faculty. Due to a New Jersey state of emergency in force at the time of the presentation, in a first for both the Lawrence Historical Society and the Lawrence High School, the 2020 Nash award was presented virtually to Jenna Cahill.

Jenna is an intelligent and creative young woman who displays a passion for both academic and extracurricular activities. She is a student with excellent verbal and written skills and ranked in the top ten percent of her class. She is a liberal arts student with a multitude of interests in fashion, design, and business, and has excelled in both her scholastic and extracurricular activities.

Jenna is a four-year veteran of the field hockey team and was recognized as the “unsung hero” for Lawrence. She was a dancer from age 3, serving on several competitive dance teams and will have danced for 15 years by the end of her senior year.

Throughout High School, Jenna was involved in Operation Smile, serving as Director of Public Relations and then Vice President of the club. As a member of the Student Leadership Team, Jenna works with freshmen as they transition to high school. As a proud member of the National Honor Society, Jenna also works with students with special needs in the school’s Social Club. Her most significant accomplishment was placing in the Top Ten in the world in Hospitality Services Team Decision Making for DECA, receiving the highest score in role plays. DECA (Distributive Education Clubs of America) is an association of marketing students that encourages the development of business and leadership skills through academic conferences and competitions.

The Society is proud to recognize this outstanding student. Jenna’s award includes a mounted certificate, a book on history and a check for \$300.00.

Jenna will begin her collegiate studies at the University of Georgia this Fall.

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has worked on digitizing the collection. The two most recent Historians, Dennis Waters and current Historian Brooke Hunter, have served on the Board of Trustees for The Lawrence Historical Society and worked with the group to bring more research about town history to programming and publications. The Society has offered storage space for some of the digitized items on its website, notably the photography and slide collection. In addition to the photos, there are numerous newspaper articles, old township records books, documents, and physical items such as business advertising items in the collection. We will begin to highlight these items in upcoming newsletters.

*Laura Nawrocik is the part-time archivist for Lawrence Township and a librarian with the Mercer County Library System. She is also a former president of the Lawrence Historical Society.*

The Lawrence Historical Society  
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