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Woodbridge Essay Contest
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What do you think of when you hear the words “Merrill Park?” Do you think of young children running around the playground, climbing bluish-green rock walls and sliding down bright red slides? Do you think of people in sweatpants and sweatshirts walking their dogs and racing bikes early in the morning as the sun rises behind them? Do you think of families feeding squawking, royal blue peacocks and neighing horses in the petting zoo? I think of all this and more. I think of Merrill Park’s history.

Let’s back up for a second. By this point, you’ve probably heard of this year being Woodbridge Township’s 350th anniversary. But 350th anniversary of **what**? Well, on June 1, 1669, King Charles of England gave a charter to Woodbridge, allowing people to settle here for the first time. This day is now considered the township’s birthday, its 350th of which we’ll be commemorating this year. Already, multiple schools have started teaching their students about the many historical events that have taken place in Woodbridge, including the Woodbridge Trainwreck and George Washington’s visit to Cross Keys Tavern, to celebrate the occasion. There have also been a few essay, poetry, and art competitions centering on our district. Even a Sesquicentennial (or 350th) Anniversary Gala banquet will take place on June 1st, according to Woodbridge E-news!

A celebration this big hasn’t taken place in our township since 1969 when the district was commemorating its 300th birthday. Back then, schools celebrated the tercentenary anniversary by teaching their students about the history of Woodbridge, giving them lessons on the topic and assigning projects to them about specific events, just like today. The students of St. Anthony’s School even made a play about Woodbridge, called “The Mayor’s Surprise Birthday Party” to learn more about the district’s history. St. James’ Parish also helped communicate knowledge of our township’s past by making a “300th Anniversary Revue” about it. Many contests focusing on Woodbridge, in such varied subjects as music, poetry, photography, art, and writing, helped spread awareness, too (*Leader Press*, 2-26-1969 and *Leader Press*, 3-26-1969).

Woodbridge also celebrated its 300th anniversary with multiple reenactments of historical events and dedications of structures to important figures. For example, on April 20th that year, monuments of James Parker, the man who printed the first newspaper in the whole state of New Jersey, and Jonathan Dunham, the man who made the first grist mill in the state, were dedicated to the two respectively. A month before, on March 24, a reenactment of Lafayette’s visit to Woodbridge was shown in Woodbridge Senior High School and two months later, during the

Memorial Day parade, a reenactment of George Washington stopping in Woodbridge on the way to his inauguration and one of Janet Gage, the wife of a tory but a fierce patriot herself, waving the first 13-star American flag in Woodbridge took place. (*Leader Press*, 3-26-1969).

By this point you are probably wondering about the history of Merrill Park I mentioned in the introduction. Well, if you've gone there in the summer, you probably have noticed a big sign mentioning something about the annual Woodbridge Fair. To commemorate the anniversary, the fair of 1969 put a tercentenary spin on its usual events. All the classics were there: it had a Ferris wheel, a merry-go-round, an art exhibit, a kissing booth, a fortune teller, and a children's theater, as well as multiple food-judging contests, testing homemade cakes, cookies, pies, loaves of bread, and preserves. Bands from all over the state also performed at the fair. The Jerseyaires, a Barber Shop group of about 40 people, participated in the event, as did the Colonel's Garter Banjo Band. Many famous celebrities of the time came as well, including Bob Dunn, author of the famous cartoon "They Do It Every Time"; Bob Weber, creator of "Moose"; Craig Fessel, writer of "David Crane"; Tony Di Praela, author of "Joe Palooka"; and Joe Bolton, the TV cop. In addition to all of this, there were over one hundred red, white, and blue booths from various businesses in the township you could go to, one of which sold commemorative 300th anniversary coins for \$2.50. Sounds like a pretty cool event to go to, right? (*Leader Press*, 5-28-1969).

Speaking of going to an event, if I could go to only one of these events, I think I personally would go to the reenactment of Janet Gage raising the 13-star American flag, because I love history and I find her story fascinating. At the time, women had very few rights, and their husbands controlled every facet of their lives, so the fact that Janet rebelled against her tory husband, even to do such a simple act of waving the American flag, was amazing, and she must have had a lot of bravery. She knew that her husband could pretty much do anything to her for that act of rebellion, yet she did it anyway. If the American militia had allowed women like her to participate in war, the American revolution would surely have been way shorter. I think of her story as one of not only American independence but independence for women all around the world. So which one's your favorite?