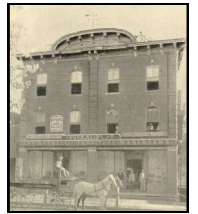




Around and About the 'Ville

The newsletter of the Somerville History Roundtable



Vol. 4, No. 6

November 2025

Who we are: The Somerville History Roundtable will educate Somerville residents and other interested people about the borough's history and act to conserve, protect, enhance, and perpetuate its historic character. We meet on the 2nd Monday of the month at various places in Somerville or in a nearby town. To contact the Roundtable, call or write to Linda Barth, 908-240-0488; barthlinda123@aol.com.

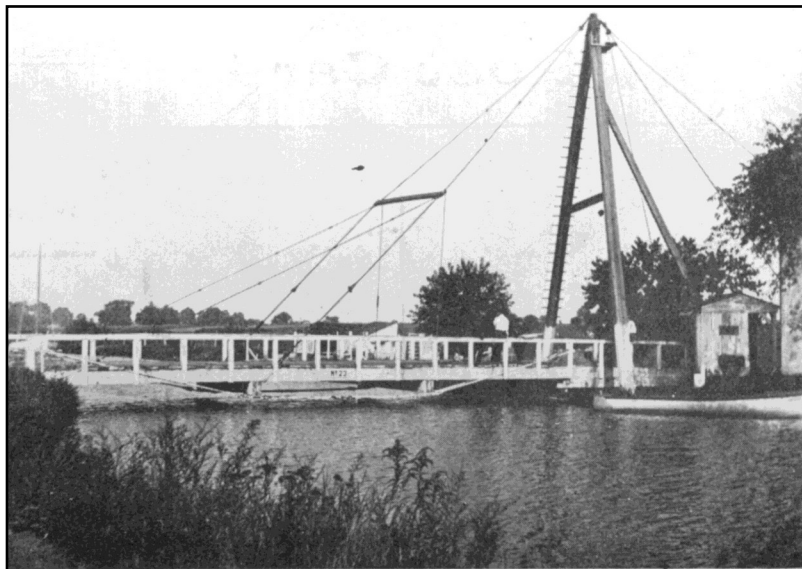
**Upcoming Roundtable Meetings at 7:00 p.m. at the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church,
300 Union Avenue, between N. Clark and N. Richards
Park and enter at the back of the church**

The Somerville History Roundtable began in 2017 when Marge Sullivan, Bob and Linda Barth, and Jim Sommerville decided that we needed a local history group.

Eight years is a good run, and we've covered a lot of topics, but now it's time to end. The December program will be the last, unless someone else wants to take over the leadership.

December 8 — The final meeting of the Somerville History Roundtable will be a presentation by Linda Barth on the historic Delaware and Raritan Canal.

Did you know that for more than 190 years, the Delaware and Raritan Canal has meandered across the narrow waist of New Jersey? Did you know that the D&R was one of our nation's most



successful towpath canals, carrying more tonnage in 1866 than the more famous Erie Canal? Did you know that Johnson & Johnson, Roebling, and Fleischmann's Distillery all had their start along the D&R? And did you know that the canal provides the people of central New Jersey with both a water supply and a premier recreational facility?

Canal author and historian Linda J. Barth will introduce you to the people, the bridges, the locks, and the aqueducts that made the canal work. This waterway, now the centerpiece of a popular state park, transported men and supplies between New York and Philadelphia during three wars. Inventor

John Holland used the canal to deliver his *Holland VI* submarine to Washington for its Navy trials, and luxury yachts, like J.P. Morgan's *Tarantula*, cruised the waterway. Come and learn more about this historic gem of central New Jersey.

Here are two of the “Hindsight” columns written by Jessie Havens.

Gaston Family Makes Its Mark – May 26, 1988 – Part I

In Somerville, the name Gaston once commanded attention. For more than a century, it was associated with the town’s forward-looking enterprises.

First on the scene was William B. Gaston (1791-1859) of Basking Ridge, a descendant of Huguenot refugees, who moved his family here to set himself up as a merchant. At first he operated a general store, but later specialized in shoes. His store was on Main Street near the courthouse, about where Lord Memorial Fountain is now, and his home was also on Main Street. But later, after Grove Street was laid out, he moved around the corner a short distance north.

William Gaston was known for his piety. In 1817, he was a founding member of the Somerset County Bible Society, whose purpose was to ensure that every family owned a Bible. To this end, members canvassed the county and gave a copy of the scriptures free to any home where there was none.

In 1827 William Gaston was sworn as a judge, and in 1837 and 1842 his name appears in county records as a justice. He was proud of the honor such office conferred and always after it pleased him to be known as “Judge” Gaston.

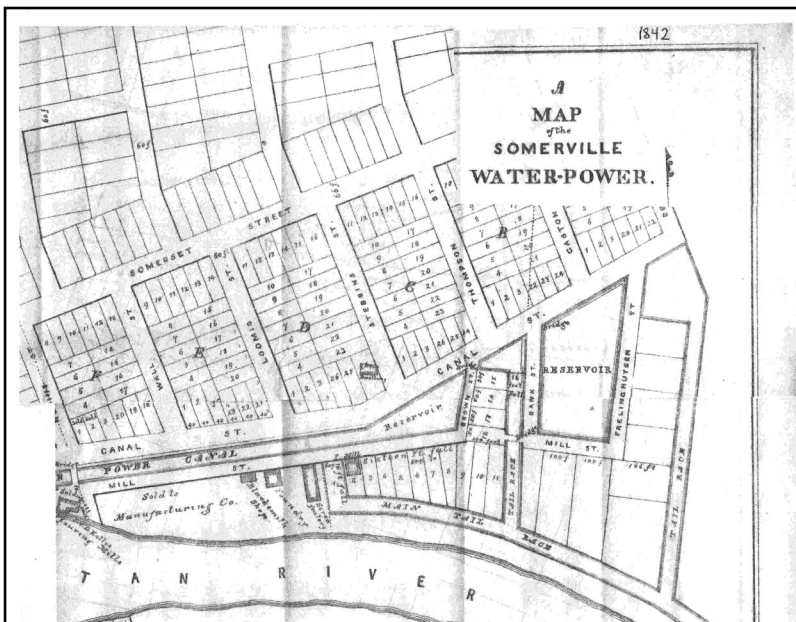
Along with his piety and integrity, William Gaston was known for his thrift. Some regarded him as a pinch-penny. Perhaps his way with money was a matter of necessity rather than choice, for he had a large family of children to raise. Of his six sons, two became doctors, one a lawyer, one a minister, one a farmer, and one died as a young man.

It was the lawyer son, Hugh McEowen Gaston, who cemented the family name in Somerville history. Born in 1818 in Basking Ridge, he spent his childhood in Somerville and attended the Somerville Academy. After that grounding in the classics, he was set reading law with his cousin, George H. Brown, a local attorney who later went on to become an associate justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court.

After he became a counselor in 1843, Hugh M. Gaston immediately opened his own office and quickly established himself as a man of sterling ability and unyielding integrity. His long career served to confirm continually this early assessment of his worth.

Hugh Gaston was involved in all manner of civic endeavors. In 1863 he helped to form a corporation to reorganize the defunct Somerville Water Power Company as the Raritan Water Power Company (see map on left). Under the new management, the headgates dam and the raceways were rebuilt and attracted industries to settle here, which led to the development of the town of Raritan.

While Gaston was supplying the legal know-how for that enterprise, he was also collaborating in winning Somerville its



first measure of independence from Bridgewater. The charter under which the town elected its first board of commissioners was drawn by him; thereafter, he contributed to town improvement as first president of the Somerville Cemetery Association (1879) and as one of the founders of the People's Reading Room (1871), which later became the public library.

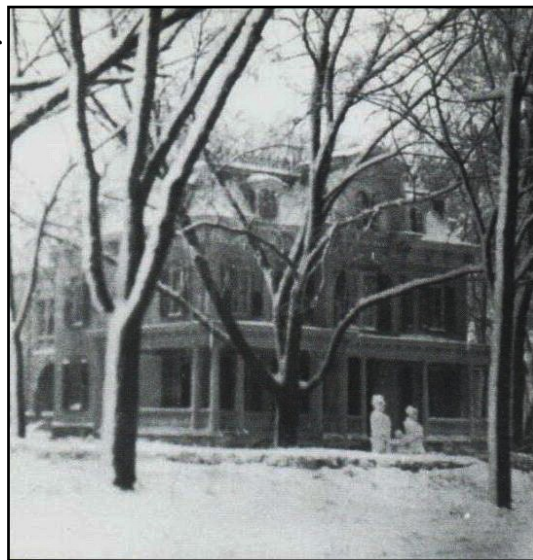
Well-known and well-respected as he was, Hugh Gaston made a likely candidate for public office, but the only one he ever accepted was prosecutor of the pleas for Somerset County for a number of years. At one time he was nominated for state senator, but refused to run. On another occasion he was tendered a judgeship, but declined it in favor of his law partner, James J. Bergen.

In 1853 Hugh Gaston married Frances Mallet-Prevost, granddaughter of an aristocrat who had fled the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. He immediately set about building for his bride a fine, big, frame house at 18 West High Street (pictured at right), which was to be home to their family of seven children.

It was a good marriage despite Gaston's somewhat irascible disposition, for he was also possessed of a sense of humor even when the joke was on him. But his wife did lament the judgeship he could have had because the income of a country lawyer was not large. The Gaston family's reputation for affluence came later, thanks to judicious investments and the successful careers of two of the children, Hugh Kirkpatrick Gaston, who followed his father into law, and Louis Prevost Gaston, a civil engineer. A daughter, Mary, became a doctor, one of the first women physicians in New Jersey; but in her day, it was not an occupation that paid well.

Gaston's interest in civic affairs was shared by his keen-witted wife, and she also fully shared his bent for hospitality. She frequently gave euchre parties for the benefit of the struggling library and opened her home to other good causes. Relatives and friends were always encouraged to come often and to stay long, even though she had only one hired servant to assist her and her girls in all the work of a large household.

When Hugh M. Gaston died in 1892, his obituaries lauded his kindness and liberality as well as the high esteem in which he was held for wise advice and counsel. He was, moreover, remembered as a man who never intentionally wronged anyone and was always quick to repair a wrong if one was done. Living up to the reputation of such a father was no easy assignment, but the luster of the Gaston name continued to glow on the Somerville scene for another generation.



THE "CORNER HOUSE."
The fine Victorian house that stood on the corner of Bridge and West High Street was the home of the Gaston family. It was constructed in 1859 by Hugh M. Gaston, the prominent local attorney who drafted Somerville's 1862 charter. Dr. Mary Gaston, his daughter, later lived and held office hours there. The house, one of four grand homes on the block, was badly damaged by fire in 1973 and subsequently demolished.

(continued on page four)

Contributions Still Evident – June 2, 1988 – Part II

Seven children were born to Hugh McEowen Gaston and his wife, Frances Mallet-Prevost, in a big, white, frame house which once stood at 18 West High Street. Three of them had remarkable impact on their home town, one as a lawyer, one as a doctor, and another as an engineer.

Hugh Kirkpatrick Gaston (1858-1938), the fourth child and first son, read law in his father's office after completing his secondary education at the Davidson School in Salem, New Jersey. The elder Gaston took a dim view of his youngster's abilities and gave him a rough time of it. The training was not in vain, though; H.K. Gaston came to be one of the leading lawyers of the Somerset bar. His practice was always a general one; to the extent that he did specialize, it was in estates and corporations. Of these, several he served were significant in the life of the community: Somerville Water Company, which he helped form in 1881 and of which he was president at his death; Raritan Savings Bank, on whose board he served for thirty-five years; and Cott-a-Lapp Company, parent of Calco Chemical Company. He was also president of Raritan Water Power Company.

Louis Prevost Gaston (1864-1939), the second son and youngest child, was, as youngest often are, the darling of his family. He was beloved by them all as a boy, and as a man was beloved by the whole community. He had always a cheery smile, a lively wit, and a sense of fun. When he died, it was said of him, "The town has lost its kindest man."

Lou Gaston did not appear to be cut out for success as a child. He was no student. But, thanks to persistent tutoring by older sister Mary, he made it through high school Latin and was accepted at Lehigh, where he at last found his forte, graduated with the highest science honor, and became a civil engineer.



He established himself in offices in Philadelphia for a time, but returned to Somerville to work for James B. Duke, transforming Hillsborough farmland into an impressive estate of valleys, lakes, and woodlands laced with beautifully landscaped drives (see image at left). In the course of this project, Gaston associated himself with Elmer and Thomas Richards of Somerville, and continued thereafter with them as Richards and Gaston, contractors for major construction projects.

Successful as both sons were, it was neither of them, but rather the third daughter, Mary Exton Gaston (1855-1956) who was the born achiever. As a child, she was an apt student and wanted to become a teacher. In a day when higher education for girls was a rarity, she was able to persuade her parents to send her to Vassar, but was obliged to drop out after two years because family finances were tight and brother Louis' college education had priority. Undeterred, she continued to educate herself through study-at-home courses. After brother Hugh had been admitted to the bar, Mary won her parents' reluctant permission to go off to school again, only now she wanted to train to be a doctor. It was a profession just opening up to women. Her mother was sure it would be far too demanding, but nothing else would satisfy her.

Graduation from Women's Medical College of Philadelphia was followed by an internship at New England Hospital, Boston. In 1889, a wing of the family home (see p. 3) was converted into offices, and Dr. Mary Gaston hung out her shingle on High Street.

Medical practice proved every bit as demanding as her mother had anticipated. Not only were there calls for her to come at all hours of the day and night, but she trudged to the homes of her patients on foot. Only when the call was to someone out of town did she trouble the stable boy to hitch up the horse for her.

Dr. Mary Gaston guided and encouraged the women of Somerville in establishing an emergency hospital in 1894 and after that had become too burdensome for volunteers to continue, she was instrumental in founding Somerset Hospital (photo below) in 1899 and served on its staff. Her two brothers



Chelsea House at 350 E Main St, Somerville, was the location of the first Somerset Hospital.

became its constant benefactors. Louis

Gaston was a trustee of the hospital for years, and both donated so much so often that the full extent of their contributions was never tallied.

It was not only Somerville's hospital that benefited from the extraordinary generosity of the Gaston brothers. Their philanthropy embraced the Somerville library, which their father had helped to found; the Somerville park system, which they were instrumental in creating; and many, many individuals whom they aided

personally. A revolving scholarship fund was established to assist youngsters whose parents could not afford to send them to college. Mortgages were paid off. Friends and relatives were taken along on wonderful vacations they could never themselves have afforded. The full extent of the benefices of these two men was never known, even to their families, and, when they died, both left generous bequests to the good causes they had supported in their lifetimes. H.K. Gaston's will even included a substantial sum for improvements to the Borough Hall, then at High and Bridge streets; much of it was used to give police a new, improved headquarters.

Dr. Mary Gaston was not financially able to be similarly liberal. Medicine did not pay well in those days, and she was, moreover, forced to retire at fifty because of ill health. She, nevertheless, had as great or greater an impact on the community as an energizing force for good works. She is credited with founding the Somerville Civic League. She also helped to establish an Anti-Tuberculosis League in Somerset County to fight the dread scourge of that disease, and the Somerville-Raritan Chapter of the American Red Cross.



Mary Gaston as a student at Vassar in 1878.

She, too, left bequests to Somerville's parks, library, and hospital.

Despite so much community involvement and so many worthwhile and lasting contributions, the name Gaston has all but vanished from local ken. Even the handsome family homestead is gone, destroyed by fire after it was converted to a discount clothing boutique, The Corner Store.



This 1939 Civic League portrait hangs in the Somerville Library.

Many thanks to Jim Sommerville and Marge Sullivan for the photos in this story.

Don't forget the fourth and final Middlebrook Symposium that will be held on Saturday, March 21, 2026 at the Raritan Valley Community College.

★ Middlebrook Symposium ★ Middlebrook Symposium ★ Middlebrook Symposium ★ Middlebrook Symposium ★

SAVE THE DATE!

The Legacy of Middlebrook

Saturday, March 21, 2026
9:00 am - 3:30 pm

Raritan Valley
Community College
Conference Center, RVCC Drive
North Branch, NJ

The 4th of
a four-part
series!

CALLING ALL HISTORIANS AND HISTORY BUFFS!

★ Middlebrook Symposium ★ Middlebrook Symposium ★ Middlebrook Symposium ★ Middlebrook Symposium ★

**SAVE
THE DATE!**



Speakers & presenters
to be announced.

Registration
coming soon!

Learn more at <http://www.htanj.org>

Questions? (908) 240-0488

E-mail: barthlinda123@aol.com

Made possible by funds from the Somerset County Cultural & Heritage Commission,
a partner of the New Jersey Historical Commission.

Supported by the New Jersey Society, Sons of the American Revolution; Friends of
Bridgewater History; and Washington Camp Ground Association.





Wallace House & Old Dutch Parsonage

STATE HISTORIC SITES, N.J.

A Scots Musical Celebration of the Wallace House's 250TH BIRTHDAY



Sunday, November 16, 2025, 4 p.m.

St. John's Episcopal Church

158 W. High Street, Somerville, NJ 08876



@NJWallaceDutch

Made possible by



Wallace House & Old Dutch Parsonage Association

with the sponsorship of

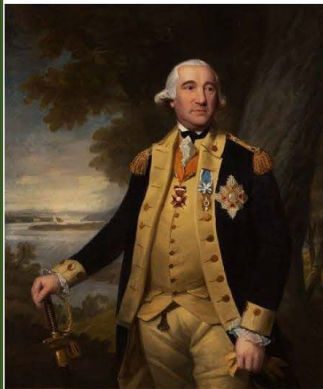
NEW JERSEY COUNCIL
FOR THE
HUMANITIES

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***Celebrate an American Revolution
and the Birth of a New Nation ...***

“Drill Master of the American Revolution”
Saturday, November 15, 2025 3PM – 5PM
Featuring Ed Koenig as General von Steuben
at the Abraham Staats House
17 von Steuben Lane, South Bound Brook, NJ 08880



Friedrich Wilhelm August Heinrich
Ferdinand Steuben / General von
Steuben (Artist: Ralph Earl, c. 1786)

General von Steuben is in the House!

*Learn about the life and times of this key figure
of the American Revolution and his stay at the
home of Abraham Staats in 1779!*

*After his remarks, the General will be available
for questions, light refreshments, and tours of
the House.*

House Opens at 3PM for Seating; Program at 3:30PM

Reserve your tickets now! Admission: \$10 per person

at [EventBrite](#) or at www.staatshouse.org By Phone: 732-369-3583

Please allow a two-week notice for accessibility and assistive services requests



Friends of Abraham Staats House, Inc.

E-mail: info@staatshouse.org Web: www.staatshouse.org

732-369-3583 Mail: PO Box 115, South Bound Brook, NJ 08880



The Friends of Abraham Staats House, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization which has received grant support made possible by funds from the Somerset County Cultural & Heritage Commission, a partner of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and New Jersey Historical Commission and the Borough of South Bound Brook.



Festival of Trees

Opens with Winter Village
Continues weekends December 12th
through 21st 10am-6pm

A display of beautiful Christmas trees decorated by individuals, organizations & businesses adorn the historic museum grounds. Experience historic trades & get a photo with Santa!

Go to theredmill.org
or scan the QR code:



Outdoor Holiday Market



Winter Village
AT THE RED MILL MUSEUM

56 Main St
Clinton, NJ 08809

Thanksgiving Weekend Nov 28-30
Saturday & Sunday Dec 6-7
10-6 Daily

