

SPRING & SUMMER 2010

# Jersey MAGAZINE CITY

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NEIGHBORHOODS JCM



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NEW JERSEY ROOM

## 350 years and counting

*Bergen celebrates its semiseptcentennial*

BY NANCY MÉNDEZ-BOOTH

**C**enturies before C-Town and Bank of America arrived, Bergen Square was a cornfield. The Dutch saw opportunity in that strategic spot west of the Hudson River and founded the village of Bergen, which eventually became incorporated with surrounding communities to form Jersey City. This year marks the 350th anniversary of Bergen's settlement, a diverse area that to this day attracts newcomers from around the country and the world.

**THE VILLAGE OF BERGEN OFFICIALLY ESTABLISHED A** local government in 1661, making it the oldest chartered municipality in New Jersey. A year earlier a group of intrepid Dutch folks started to settle a walled village atop the "bergen" (the Dutch word for hill). Peter Stuyvesant negotiated with the Lenni Lenape to acquire the farmland, which centuries later would become the concrete landscape of Tuers Avenue and Newkirk, Van Reypen, and Vroom streets. Today these streets are lined with Chinese take-out, Indian, and Pakistani restaurants, and international convenience stores.

While few original Dutch landmarks remain, the past and present connect daily as Van Winkle Avenue leads into Little India in the Journal Square area, Spanish and Chinese language lessons are advertised on the Van Vorst Park commu-

nity board, and Martin Luther King School/PS. 11 is built on what is reportedly the oldest continuous school site in the state. "That's the way it's always been here," says one Jersey City native of Irish descent. "Everyone comes looking for a chance." As evidence, the site of her childhood home is now a Middle Eastern convenience store.

**COMMEMORATIVE EVENTS ARE IN THE WORKS,** including a Bergen walking tour that will include a stop at Old Bergen Church, also celebrating its 350th anniversary and believed to be New Jersey's oldest established congregation. However, residents "may be disappointed to learn many older buildings have vanished from Jersey City, particularly from 1660 through 1860," says Patrick Shalhoub of the Guarini Library of New Jersey City University. Historians from the school, along with the Hudson County Genealogical Society, the Jersey City Free Public Library, and the Jersey City Board of Education are sponsoring an essay contest for Jersey City middle and high school students. Entrants will likely have to conduct "old school" research: visit the library, browse old photos and drawings, possibly even use microfilm. "Giving students the task of researching further back in history will broaden their appreciation of the challenges faced by those who came before us," says



Cynthia Harris, manager of the New Jersey Room of the Jersey City Free Public Library.

**IN 1910 A WEEK-LONG CELEBRATION COMMEMORATED** the city's 250th anniversary. At that time, train travel to New York City stopped on the Jersey side of the Hudson River and Jersey City's brisk rail, industrial, and commercial businesses drew immigrants looking for opportunities. Continuous train travel to New York City's Penn Station was made possible by under-river tunnels in 1911, allowing trains to bypass Jersey City. The accompanying decline of factories blighted neighborhoods but the city was sustained by the continued arrival of groups willing to make a start in areas that others were leaving. Eastern Europeans, Germans, Irish, and Italians were followed by immigrants from the Caribbean, India, Latin America, the Middle East, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, South America, Southeast Asia, and even Manhattan.

**THE WATERFRONT THAT TODAY BOASTS A LIGHT RAIL,** million-dollar homes, and the New Jersey School of Wine was largely swamps when the Dutch West India Company named Michael Paulusen agent for the settlement of Paulus Hoeck in the early 1600s. From its start, the area was recognized for its geographic advantage and provided ferry service to lower Manhattan. Paulus Hook also served as a fort to defend New York and was the site of a famous Revolutionary War battle in 1779. Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee, a 23-year-old major, led a bold pre-dawn surprise attack on the British. The battle was lost but Lee was awarded a gold medal and credited with boosting American morale.

Today, finance reigns along the waterfront, and former factories such as the American Can Company where Irish workers from St. Joseph's parish worked alongside Polish parishioners from St. Ann's, are now luxury condos that house metropolitan and international transplants.—/CM



PHOTOS BY KATE ROUNDS

## RESOURCES

For more information on anniversary events, visit:  
[www.hudsoncountynjgenealogy.org](http://www.hudsoncountynjgenealogy.org)  
[www.jcboe.org](http://www.jcboe.org)  
[www.jclibrary.org/service/njroom.php](http://www.jclibrary.org/service/njroom.php)  
[www.njcu.edu](http://www.njcu.edu)  
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