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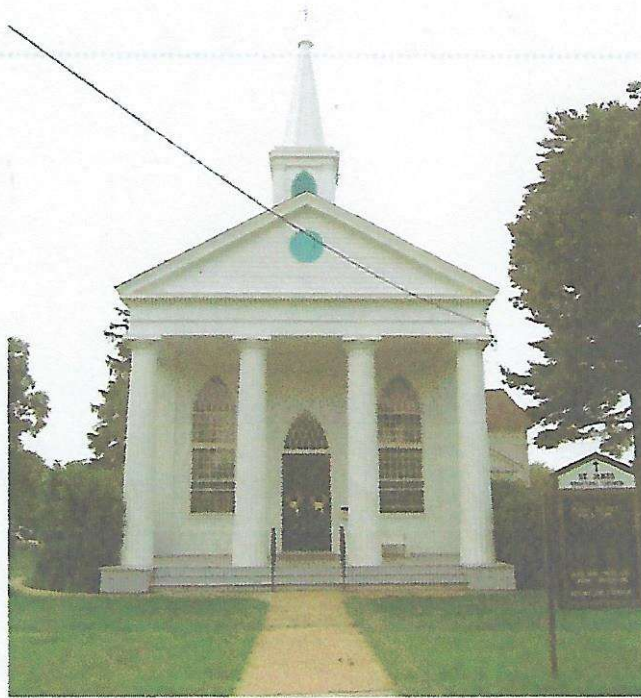
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The Piscataway Commons: A History of Town Land Use in Piscataway Village



Prepared by:
Michael J. Gall, RPA

Prepared for:
Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission
703 Jersey Avenue
New Brunswick, New Jersey 08901

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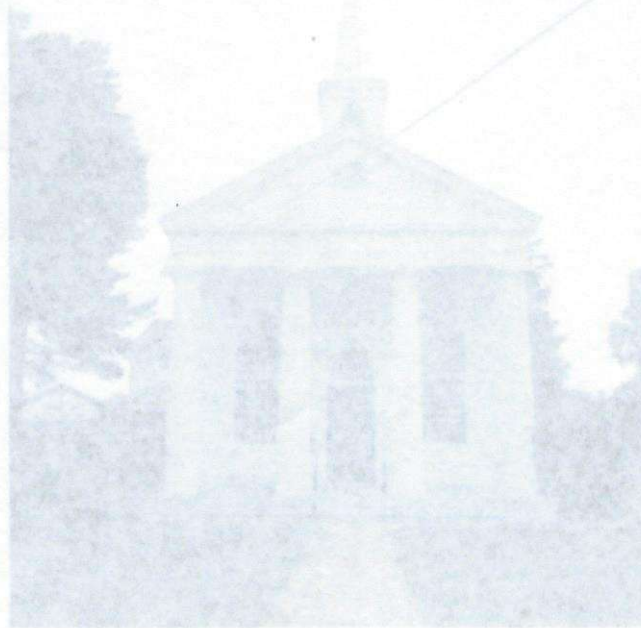
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Cover Image: St. James Episcopal Church (Photograph by the Author, August 29, 2009)

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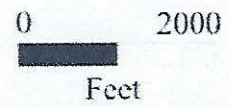
Introduction

The following history was prepared for the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission as part of a two stage approach that will include an in depth historical and archaeological examination of the town commons in Piscataway Village, Edison Township, Middlesex County; one of New Jersey's earliest town commons. This historical overview is the first stage in that process. The town commons currently consists of burial ground and recreational parkland, nestled within sprawling suburban residential and commercial development. Though the landscape around it has drastically transformed over the past 300 years, the commons itself offers a unique opportunity to historically and archaeologically examine aspects of town life in 17th-century Piscataway, New Jersey.

The Township of Piscataway was among the earliest colonial settlements in the State of New Jersey. Sited on the north bank of the Raritan River, the original boundaries of the town, dating to 1666, stretched from Woodbridge in the east, to Westfield Township in the north, and the Raritan River in the south and west. It once boasted some 42,944 acres (67.1 square miles) and contained several small hamlets, the first of which was the village of Piscataway, the town's governmental and judicial center. Since 1870, land within the township was annexed to form the smaller municipalities of Dunellen, South Plainfield, Middlesex, and Raritan (now Edison, Metuchen, and Highland Park), most of which rapidly developed as distant suburbs of New York City during the 20th century. The small community of Piscataway village remained within the Piscataway Township until 1870 when it was incorporated into Raritan Township, later renamed Edison Township in 1954, in honor of famed inventor Thomas Edison. Elements of the initial village settlement survive. Focus herein is on the town commons, or more specifically the land that bounds the south, east, and west sides of St. James Episcopal Church. Located between the Raritan River and Woodbridge Avenue (County Route 514), formerly known as the High Road, the small, 7.67-acre tract contained the town or meeting house, training ground, burial ground, and by 1724 the Saint James Church, the latter of which still survives, but is no longer included within the bounds of the commons land (Figures 1, 2, and 3). The history of this tract, as portrayed through a close examination of historic deeds, town minutes, proprietors' and church records, maps, and aerial photographs, provides insight into initial town settlement, early inhabitants, government, and both changing needs and land use of the village over the past three centuries.



Figure 1: 1955 7.5' Quadrangle: Plainfield, N.J. (Photorevised 1981);
 1954 7.5' Quadrangle: New Brunswick, N.J. (Photorevised 1981)



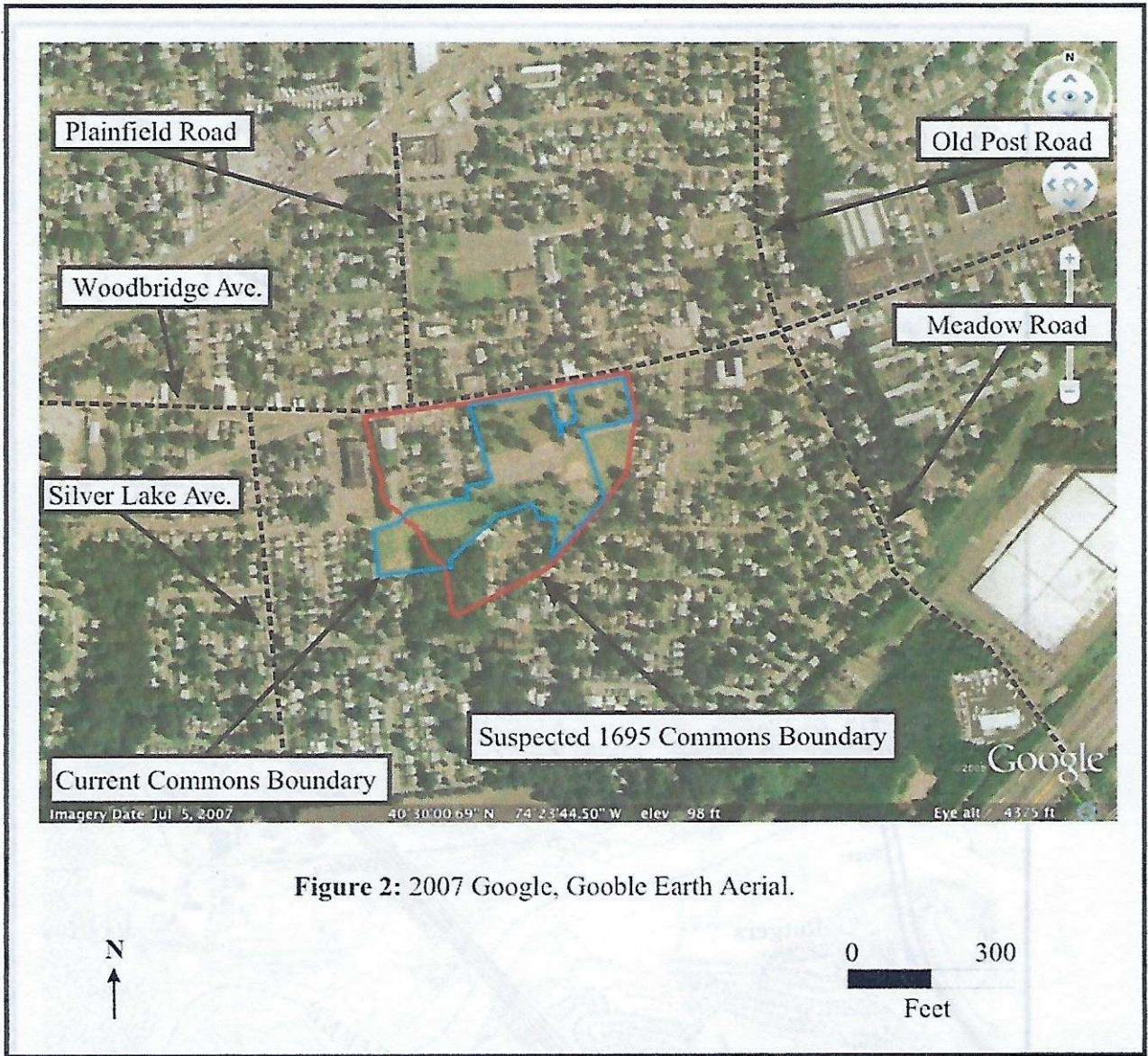


Figure 2: 2007 Google, Google Earth Aerial.

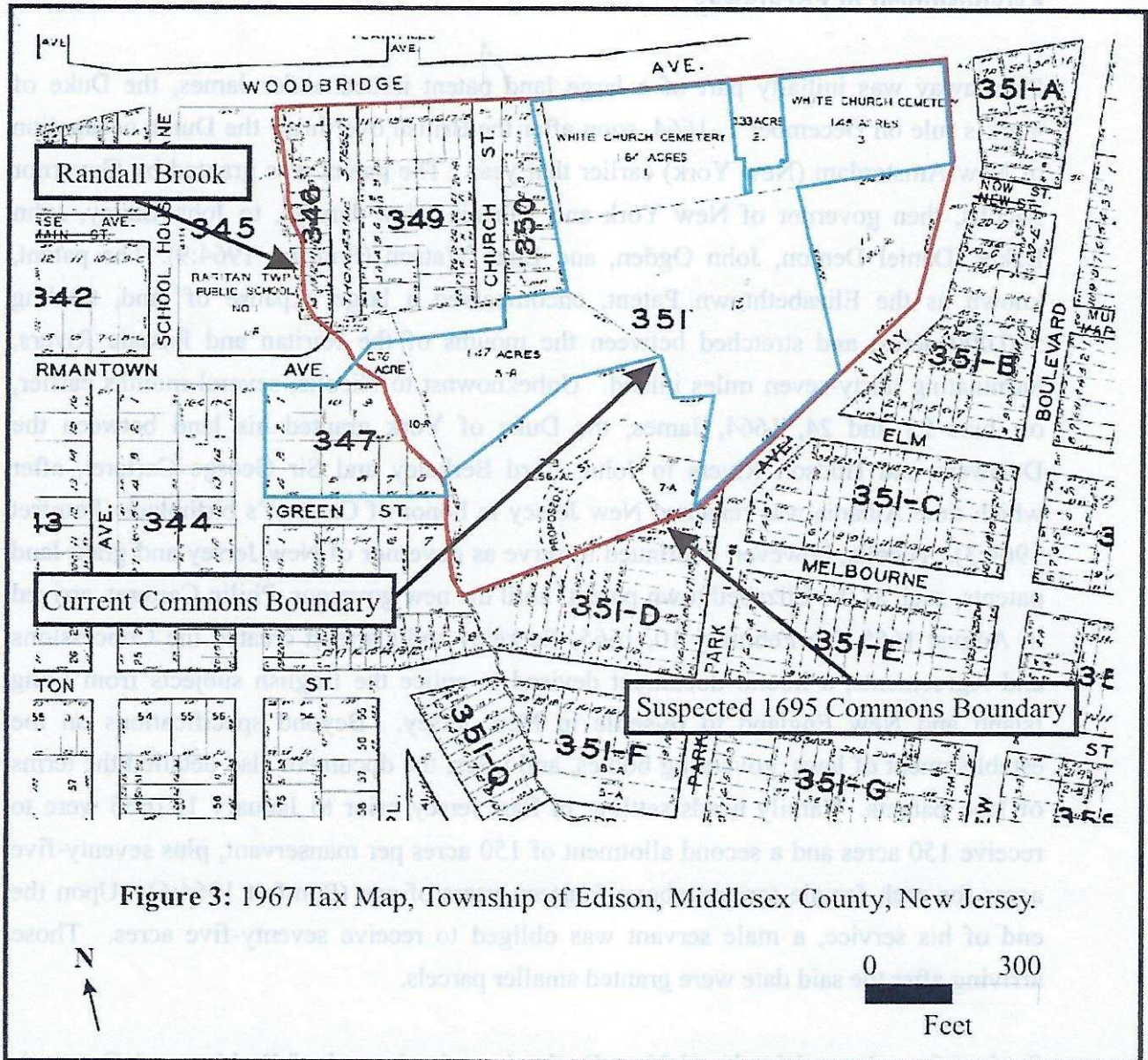


Figure 3: 1967 Tax Map, Township of Edison, Middlesex County, New Jersey.

Establishment of Piscataway

Piscataway was initially part of a large land patent issued under James, the Duke of York's rule on December 1, 1664, soon after the British overthrew the Dutch occupation of New Amsterdam (New York) earlier that year. The patent was granted by Governor Nicolls, then governor of New York and Albania (New Jersey), to John Bailey, John Baker, Daniel Denton, John Ogden, and Luke Watson (Pomfret 1964:9). The patent, known as the Elizabethtown Patent, encompassed a large expanse of land, totaling 500,000 acres, and stretched between the mouths of the Raritan and Passaic Rivers, terminating thirty-seven miles inland. Unbeknownst to Nicolls, several months earlier, on June 23 and 24, 1664, James, the Duke of York granted his land between the Delaware and Hudson Rivers to John, Lord Berkeley and Sir George Carteret, after which time Albania was renamed New Jersey in honor of Carteret's birthplace (Pomfret 1964:3). Nicolls, however, continued to serve as governor of New Jersey and grant land patents, such as the Elizabethtown patent, until the new governor, Philip Carteret, arrived in August 1665. On February 10, 1665, Berkeley and Carteret created the Concessions and Agreements, a liberal document devised to entice the English subjects from Long Island and New England to re-settle in New Jersey. Beyond specifications on the establishment of laws, governing bodies, and taxes, the document also detailed the terms of land patents. Family heads settling in East Jersey prior to January 1, 1666 were to receive 150 acres and a second allotment of 150 acres per manservant, plus seventy-five acres for each female servant above fourteen years of age (Pomfret 1964:6). Upon the end of his service, a male servant was obliged to receive seventy-five acres. Those arriving after the said date were granted smaller parcels.

Settlers from Long Island and New England received word of Berkeley and Carteret's concessions, and some quickly made the trek to the colony (Leonard 1898: 38). In 1666, Carteret purchased John Bailey's share in the Elizabethtown patent issued by Nicolls, and Ogden bought out Denton. By May 1666, the remaining owners sold the southern half of the patent to Daniel Pierce, Andrew Tappan, and John Pike, who formed Woodbridge to satisfy the arrival of settlers from Newbury, Massachusetts (Pomfret 1964:10).

Later, on the 21st day of May, Carteret engaged in an agreement with Pierce, Tappan, and Pike outlining the terms of settlement (Whitehead 1846:183-184). The agreement consisted of numerous articles. The first granted liberty to the associates to settle one or two towns of 40 to 100 families each before November 1666, and gave the town

inhabitants the right to lay out their own lots. The latter would prove problematic in the coming decades. It also specified that two 500-acre tracts were to be laid out for the proprietors. The second stated that a charter would be granted to the inhabitants of each town, enabling them to elect their own governing body and minister, hold their own courts, and nominate military officers and Justices of the Peace to be approved by the Governor. It also granted inhabitants liberty of religious consciousness, which enticed emigrants from religiously conservative areas in New England to resettle in New Jersey. Another article permitted the allowance of 200 acres for the ministry and land for the construction of a church, churchyard, and other town uses. The fourth prevented the imposition of a tax or custom without the agreement of the Governor, Council, and General Assembly. The fifth entitled the proprietors to charge a quit rent of a halfpenny per acre for surveyed land. The sixth required the inhabitants to unite with those of other towns to suppress invasions and insurrections. The inhabitants were also given a free voice to elect delegates to the General Assembly. All inhabitants were forced to swear oaths of loyalty to the Crown and accept the governing laws. No law was to be made in disagreement to those of the province, and those found in violation of established laws were to be punished. Finally, land possessed for seven years could not be resurveyed by the proprietors, and inhabitants could move freely and sell their lands.

With the agreement in place, Pierce capitalized on the first article mentioned and subdivided his share to form two towns or companies. On December 18, 1666, Pierce sold one-third of his land, roughly 40,000 acres, to New Englanders John Martin, Charles Gilman, Hugh Dunn, and Hopewell Hull, who formed Piscataway (Anonymous 1912:216; Colonial Conveyances 1666; Scot 1846: 277) (Figure 4). The town was originally known as Piscataqua or New Piscataway, in namesake of the Piscataqua River region near the border of Maine and New Hampshire, an area (now Dover, New Hampshire) from which the four men previously resided (Leonard 1898:39; Anonymous 1912:216). The settlers wished to escape from the religious intolerance and astringent nature of court justice that characterized the northern section of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (Anonymous 1912:216; Monnete 1930:69-77). Some of the settlers were Baptists and welcomed the opportunity to start anew (Barber and Howel 1847:323). Under the Concessions and Agreements, they found refuge in New Jersey. Subsequent arrivals were both immigrants and emigrants and practiced a variety of religions.

Two years later, on May 11, 1668, the four men who began the Piscataway corporation, namely John Martin, Hopewell Hull, Charles Gillman, and Hugh Dunn, accompanied by

