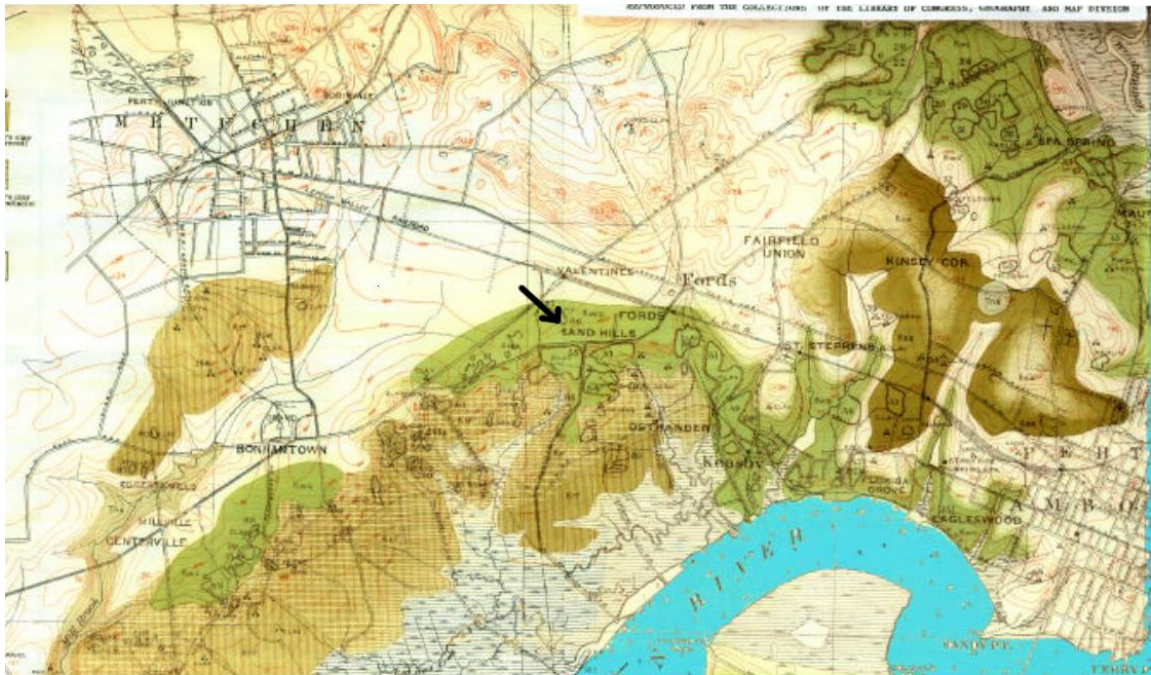


The Sand Hills of Bonhamtown

by George M Muha

Many years back as we approached the Metuchen/Edison exit from the NJ Turnpike, my father, who was seated beside me in the passenger seat, pointed towards the toll booth and said “*George Washington stood right there and directed a battle here in the Sand Hills.*” I quietly chuckled for I knew that, as he had done many times in the past, my father was seeking to excite the imagination of youngsters, in this instance his two young grandsons seated on the car's rear seat.

Of course my father had no knowledge of George Washington's whereabouts at the time. But as I discovered years later, he was indeed correct that a major Revolutionary War battle had taken place in the vicinity of Exit 10 of the Turnpike in the *Sand Hills*. The *Sand Hills* was my father's descriptor of the section a mile or so northeast of Bonhamtown Center in which he, at age 2, initially settled with his family upon their immigration from Austria-Hungary in 1905. The family would spend their next twelve years resident in the Sand Hills before moving to Metuchen in 1917 where my father would reside most of his remaining 69 years.



Pic 1. 1904 Map of the Metuchen/Bonhamtown area . The shaded sections denote areas of clay deposits. Map: Kümmel, Henry B. “Geological Survey of New Jersey – Map of the Clay Formations, 1904”, courtesy of the U.S. Library of Congress - Geography and Map Division

An 1882 History of Middlesex County describes the Sand Hills (also then known as Ford's Corner) as a small “... settlement just on the line of Woodbridge Township. The Amboy Railroad branches pass through. The hamlet contains a store and a schoolhouse.”

A decade or so back while compiling my family's history and being uncertain as to the extent of the Sand Hills, I sought information from the *US Library of Congress*. The *Library* kindly replied with a 1904 map of the area (see above) along with a somewhat cryptic note that a major Revolutionary War battle had taken place there in 1777. Seemingly my father's tale had basis in fact.

I became curious concerning the 1777 reference and discovered in the NJ State Archives that of the two-hundred-eighty-seven documented Revolutionary War battles that had occurred in New Jersey, eight of the

conflicts were listed as having occurred in Bonhamtown. But what was so important about this relatively small area to cause it to serve as the site of so many battles?



Pic 2. View to the east across the Sand Hills (Raritan Arsenal) towards Perth Amboy. Time-exposure picture taken by author with a pin-hole camera while perched on limb 20 ft up in a pine tree. (Author's Collection – March 1946)

The answer was quickly forthcoming. After the Colonial Army's 1777 Christmas Eve victory over British mercenaries in the Battle of Trenton was coupled with another victory a week later over British Regulars in the Battle of Princeton, it became clear to the British that they did not have sufficient forces to control all of New Jersey. In default they chose to setup a series of enclaves or strong points to hold open the New York-Trenton-Philadelphia corridor. Perth Amboy and New Brunswick were among the key strong point along this corridor. King Georges Road (modern day Woodbridge Avenue), which ran through the Sand Hills, connected this pair of strong points thus establishing the area's important role in the Revolutionary War.

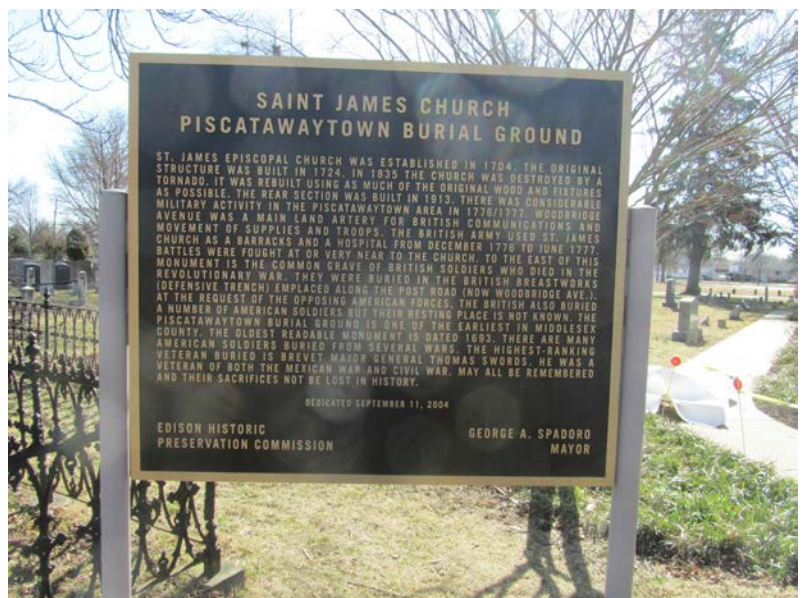
It is likely that the major battle referenced by my father and by the *Library of Congress* arose because this road link had been

severed. Throughout the month of February 1777 scouting parties of Colonial Militia ranged throughout the current-day Piscataway/ Metuchen/ Bonhamtown area and by the end of the month had cut essentially all land communication between Perth Amboy and New Brunswick. In early March 1777, to reopen communications, a battle referenced in contemporary newspaper accounts as the *Battle of Punkhill*, was precipitated. The battle began in Perth Amboy and concluded in the Sand Hills.

On 8 Mar 1777, a force of 3000 British with wagon train set out from Perth Amboy, ostensibly to forage. This was a feint for the real purpose was to attract Colonial forces away from New Brunswick where the British commander, General Howe was in isolated residence. As related in the 10 March 1777 edition of *The Pennsylvania Journal* newspaper, the safe extraction of General Howe from his isolation was the concealed purpose of this British expedition.

The Colonial commander, General William Maxwell, engaged the enemy outside of Perth Amboy but in addition sent some of his forces reinforced by "a battalion of *Pennsylvania militia from Matuching*" (Metuchen) to the "heights overlooking *Bonhamtown*" (i.e. the Sand Hills) to attack the enemy flank. The British responded with reinforcements along King Georges Road and a major battle ensued. Which side was victorious is difficult to judge. Since the British left the field of battle first, the Colonials claimed victory. However General Howe was safely extricated from his isolation in New Brunswick which was the (unannounced publicly) purpose of the British expedition.

Incidentally the article in the 1777 edition of *The Pennsylvania Journal* wryly comments: "... General Howe was at *Bonhamtown* during the engagement till he saw his



Pic 3. Saint James Episcopal Church - Woodbridge Ave., Bonhamtown, NJ

troops make the best of their way home, and then he thought it was time for him to go (also) ...". Along King Georges Road undoubtedly.

There were other battles along King Georges Road in the Sand Hills area but seemingly only one, which began as a skirmish on May 10, 1777, is currently marked with a historical plaque (see above). On this day the 42nd Royal Highland Regiment fought with a large body of Colonials. Fighting occurred along a long line with many casualties on both sides. As recorded on the plaque, both British and Colonial dead were buried in the church yard where they remain interred today.

Ballad of the Sand Hills

"I came to the Sand Hills to get me a job;
I met Billy Barr, and he sent me to Bob,
Saying if Bob doesn't give it, I'm sure Howe will
Give you a job digging clay in the dreary Sand Hills.

"There is Jimmy O'Brien who keeps a saloon
He lives in a house I think he'll leave soon.
He'll sell you a quart, or a pint or a gill,
And trust you till pay day on the dreary Sand Hills.

(... Many more verses concluding with ...)

"There is a butcher from Metuchen who sells meat by
the pound,
Porterhouse, sirloin, the chuck or the round.
They say the meat is cheap but we're eating pork still,
And we're out digging clay on the dreary Sand Hills."

Ballad from the Woodbridge Public Library file:
"The History of Woodbridge, NJ"
Archives Ref R974.941W

Battles, skirmishes, and raids continued in New Jersey until the end of the war but after the Battle of Monmouth on 26 June 1778, the principal phase of the conflict moved to the southern colonies and its successful conclusion at Yorktown, VA in 1783. Whence soon thereafter, Central New Jersey returned to its peaceful agrarian existence.

But as concerned the Sand Hills, the agrarian character was soon to change for, in the 1820-30's, the extent of rich clay deposits in the area became generally known and its commercial exploitation began. Indeed, by 1878 there were eight brickyards along this section of the Raritan River producing 54 million bricks per year.

Production at this level required the services of many additional laborers, a need met by a large number of European immigrants. The first arrivals were from Ireland but, beginning ca. 1886, arrivals from Poland, Austria-Hungary, and the Ukraine arrived to join the labor force.

The ready availability of employment for these immigrants in the Sand Hills and the stark reality of

their everyday life are celebrated in a 'ballad' of the era, a few verses of which are given in the sidebar at left.

As related by my father, life for these early immigrants was difficult ... long hours at hard labor, loneliness, a language few (at least initially) could speak or understand, and immersed in a culture very different from that they had known. Understandably these immigrants settled in groups defined by ethnicity, the Magyars (Hungarians) principally in Carteret, Fords, and the Sand Hills region of Bonhamtown. My father's recollection is that, through the mid-1910's, seven Hungarian families were the sole residents of the Sand Hills.

I still clearly remember my paternal grandmother's answer when, as a young boy, I asked if she was not afraid of making her first trip to the USA alone. Her answer ... "no (for she had) *cousins in Carteret*". My father later explained that "cousins" was not to be taken literally. Rather it meant that everyone helped everyone else as if they were family. He added that although life was indeed



Pic 4. Early mining of clay in the Sand Hills was a very labor-intensive industry. As related by my father, it involved only "... a Hungarian with a shovel and a wheelbarrow ...". Pic from - "The Clay and Clay Industry of NJ", Trenton, 1904.

hard, one always had something to eat and a place to sleep, such was the help available within the immigrant community.



Pic 6. Edgar Clay Building, Station Place, Metuchen NJ

office/research laboratory on Station Place in Metuchen, NJ. The building still exists today but the company is now registered as *Edgar Minerals, Inc.* with its principal office moved to Edgar (Hawthorne), Florida.

Through his enterprise and executive ability, C S Edgar accumulated a considerable fortune. In his later years and much to Metuchen's benefit, he turned to philanthropy. The Metuchen Edgar School (1917), the Metuchen YMCA building (1927), and the Sunday School Addition to the Dutch Reform Church (to the original 1857 church building), came into existence due to his beneficence. He also donated the land on New Brunswick Avenue for the Metuchen Edgar Park now the site of the Edgar School gymnasium.

Other Sand Hill residents also benefited from the clay mining activity. In my family's instance the 1910 US Census lists my paternal grandparents and their children resident at 229 St Georges Road in the Sand Hills. There, my grandfather and namesake, George



Pic 8. Dedication Plaque (1927) - Front Entrance Steps YMCA Building, High St, Metuchen, NJ

l) which was then currently raging. In 1924 the plant was destroyed by a horrendous explosion that, as my father

[My paternal grandmother had made two trips to the US, the first in 1899 when she was still single. After an 11 month stay in the US she returned to Hungary, married (1901) and returned to the US a second time (1905) with family to spend her remaining sixty years.]

In addition to employment, entrepreneurial opportunities were to be found in the 'Hills'. In the early 1870's the young Charles S Edgar (1848-1917), while farming his family's plot in the Sand Hills, discovered a type of clay of particularly high quality - kaolin.

After extensive prospecting along the east-coast seaboard, he eventually acquired control of a large kaolin deposits in Florida whence, in 1892, he founded a company – the *Edgar Plastic Kaolin Company*. The company prospered greatly and, in 1925, the company established its principal



Pic 7. Edgar School – New Brunswick Ave,

Muha, was the proprietor of a tavern and a semi-enclosed pavilion.

My father later recounted that the tavern was a popular meeting place where, after a day of hard work in the nearby clay mines, many workers would stop by for a “short one” before heading home. He also recalled that the weekly dances held at the pavilion, which provided nigh the only source of relaxation for most of the workers, had a distinctive Magyar (Hungarian) flavor – Czárdás orchestras were particularly popular and “if you did not speak Magyar, you stood little chance of being understood”.

Other industries, unrelated to clay products, also set up plants in the Sand Hills. In 1915, the Nixon Nitration Works began production of military explosives for sale to countries engaged in the European war (World War

related, "destroyed most buildings in the Sand Hills" and "broke windows" 2 miles away in his family's home on East Walnut Street in South Metuchen. The plant, later rebuilt, continued operations until 1960. [Incidentally this is the same company celebrated in the popular 2001 TV miniseries and feature movie "Band of Brothers" detailing some of the World War II exploits of the US Army's 101 Airborne division.]

Italian War Prisoners Build New Altar For Jersey Internment Camp Chapel

Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES.
12 Mar 1944

NEW BRUNSWICK, N. J., March 11—Italian prisoners of war at Raritan Arsenal near here will worship tomorrow before a new altar built with their own hands from salvaged wood and painted to simulate Carrara marble. The altar has been constructed in the chapel of the internment camp at the arsenal, Col. Max A. Elser, commanding officer, announced today.

Three cabinet makers and two painters with wide experience in their trades in Italy, devoted two weeks to creating the buff and green altar at the suggestion of Major Newton B. Mistell, commander of the internment camp, to replace the bare box formerly used for Sunday services. Parts of old boxes and remnants of old planks were nailed together to form a structure seven and a half feet long and four feet high. The prisoners then painstakingly paint-

ed a buff grained marble effect with fluted columns of green simulated marble at each side. Even the paint used for the delicate grain effect of marble was salvaged from paint cans at the arsenal.

Before the paint was dry in informal dedicatory service was conducted by Lieut. Dominic P. Dohanyos, chaplain at the arsenal. Colonel Elser, accompanied by Mrs. Elser and members of his staff, accepted the altar for the encampment, declaring "an object of such beauty could not alone come from drawings but must have first been in their hearts."

Speaking for the prisoners, an Italian marciallo, highest ranking prisoner of war in the camp, wearing insignia equivalent to an American warrant officer, told Colonel Elser through an interpreter that the altar was an expression of "true Italian art, worked in love and devotion."

In 1917 with the entry of the US into World War I, the Sand Hills changed somewhat in character when the Federal Government appropriated 3200 acres to establish what would eventually become the Raritan Arsenal. Initially the acreage served as a storage site for ordnance and ammunition awaiting shipment to combatants in Europe. Later, because of its strategic location, it was established (1920) as a permanent Army Ordnance depot and remained as such until being decommissioned in the early-1960's.

The Arsenal became a major employer in the area during World War II. By 1943, the nation-wide shortage of workers caused the import of several hundred Italian prisoners of war who had volunteered to serve at the facility. They were granted "trustee status" to work within the Arsenal's confines. Housed in barracks enclosed by in a barbed wire stockade, the prisoners had been carefully selected based on their political views. A boyhood friend's father who worked at the Arsenal at that time once commented that the prisoners were "no trouble ... they were a

New York Times, 12 March 1944

hard working lot ... loading, unloading and driving trucks and cutting firebreaks. Their barracks were located in the northwest corner of the Arsenal, presently the location of the Middlesex County College Campus.

On hot summer afternoons in 1944-5, several boyhood friends and I would often bicycle pass the prisoner stockade on the way to swimming holes in the Sand Hills. There were no guardhouses nor armed guards in view. One of our number, whose immigrant parents spoke only Italian to their children, could readily understand Italian but spoke it only haltingly. Occasionally we would stop to 'converse' with the prisoners, a few who were always milling about inside the stockade. Questions about the Italian dictator Mussolini always brought forth uncomplimentary replies accompanied by equally uncomplimentary gesticulations.

The swimming holes alluded to in the preceding paragraph were in water-filled abandoned clay pits on the property of the Raritan River Sand Company. This company had established operations in the Sand Hills in the mid-1920's to mine another commodity available in great abundance in the Sand Hills ... sand.



**Pic 10 - Raritan Sand Company Dredge in Action
(Author's Collection - March 1946)**

Their mining operation was conducted via a sand dredge floating in a large, water-filled, clay pit. A screw-like shaft burrowed into the hillside to mine the sand which was then mixed with water and the slurry pumped via a floating pipeline to holding tanks located about three-quarters of a mile distant at the southern end of the

present-day Mill Road. There the added water was allowed to drain, the tanks emptied and the sand, after being allowed to at least partially dry, was ready for transportation to construction sites.



Pic 11. Pipeline carrying slurry of sand and water from the dredge to collection hopper located on Mill Road. (Author's Collection – March 1946)

For the present author and also likely for others who grew up in South Metuchen during the early-1940's, recollection of the Raritan Sand Company's Bonhamtown operations brings back many pleasant memories of swimming holes and camp sites.

The Sand Company's site was easily reached via a series of foot paths and trails leading from the then Edgar Park Playground in South Metuchen through wooded areas past the old Mill Pond (later the site of the Ford Plant), whence on to the southern-most end of Mill Street where the Sand Company's property was located. On hot summer afternoons, often as many as 6-8 teenagers on bicycles negotiated this ~3 mile trip to "Sandys", our name for the large lake upon which the company's sand dredge was floating and which served as our swimming hole.

The Sand Company ceased operation in the mid-1950's and, a few years later, our 'Sandys' swimming hole was converted to a commercial swimming club, the *Mirror Lake Swim Club*, which itself was then closed when in the late 1970's the water was pumped out and the 'clay pit' filled to make additional land area available for development.

Yet another favorite activity at the Sand Company's site was the use of the wooded area between the Company's dredger and the Raritan River to locate a Boy Scout 'base camp'. In the mid-1940's members of Metuchen Boy Scout Troops 14 and 16 (as the troops were then numbered) constructed lean-to shelters, cooking fireplaces, and the like for use while accumulating credits for Boy Scout merit badges, e.g. Camping, Bird Watching, etc.



Pic 12 - Raritan Sand Company Dredge (Author's collection - March 1946)



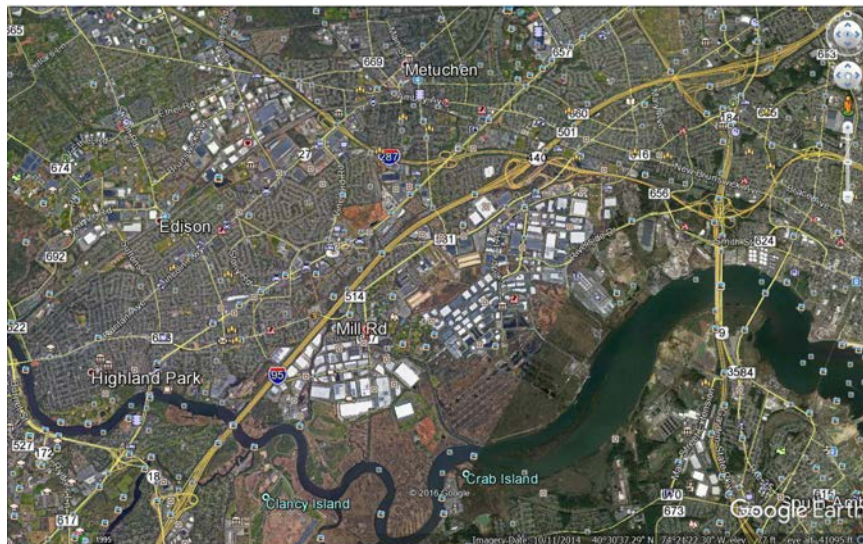
Pic 13. Mirror Lake Swim Club - Mill Road, Bonhamtown, NJ. Photo by J.Koye

The picture at right is of the author 'cooking-out' at the Sandy's Troop 14 'base camp' site to meet one of the requirements for the Boy Scout Cooking Merit Badge. (Incidentally all of the photos included in this manuscript that are listed as being from the author's collection were taken to partially fulfill a merit badge requirement for Photography.)



**Pic 14. Author 'cooking out', Metuchen Fugle-Hummer
Boy Scout Troop #14 base camp site, Sand
Hills. (Author's Collection – March 1946)**

The northwest corner of the property was immediately claimed by Middlesex County Board of Freeholders for educational use. Certain of the Arsenal's building located therein served during the start up phase of the present-day Middlesex County Community College.



**Pic 15. Goggle Earth - Current Map of Bonhamtown
"Mill Road" as seen on this map is greatly
foreshortened from its length in the 1950's.**

Over the following decade an extensive cleanup of the site by the US Army Corp of Engineers followed. It involved removal of ordnance, chemical agents, and explosive waste which had been routinely disposed of by burial or by burning in pits.

Eventually the present day business park, the *Raritan Center*, took form. The Center's growth was accompanied by nearby construction of apartment complexes and the development of a major highway interconnection hub

Today, 7+ decades after my initial acquaintance with the 'Hills', my infrequent visits there leave me at a complete lost to find past 'landmarks' ... sadly my father's (and my) *Sand Hills* exist no longer.