



A Deserted Village in Union County?

THIS UNUSUAL HISTORIC TREASURE CAN BE FOUND ON THE WATCHUNG RESERVATION

By Daniel J. Bernier

“I have lived in Union County all of my life and did not even know this place existed.” That is the most common response from visitors who discover the Deserted Village of Feltville for the first time. A visit to this quiet collection of ten historic buildings transports the visitor back to a time that stands in stark contrast to the urban and suburban development that is more familiar to New Jersey residents.

This unique historic resource is located within the Berkeley Heights portion of the 2,065-acre Watchung Reservation, the largest of 33 parks in the Union County Park System. Eight homes, a combination general store and church building, and a carriage house are spread out along the half-mile long Cataract Hollow Road, a dead end park road off of Glenside Avenue. Over the course of three centuries, this area has been a farming community, a quasi-utopian mill town, a deserted village, and a summer resort. Today, three families still live in this ‘deserted’ village and thousands of people visit the site annually to learn about its history, participate in its school and general public programs, or just enjoy a walk through the settlement.

The first settler of this area was Peter Willcocks, an Englishman who moved to this area about 1736 from Long Island. At the time, the area was still a frontier, beyond the West Fields of Elizabethtown. Settling on the side of the Second Watchung Mountain, Peter built a dam across the Blue Brook in the valley below his home to harness the brook’s water to power a sawmill that he constructed.

Though their buildings were later dismantled, we see remnants of the Willcocks family today in the Village’s quaint Revolutionary War-period



ABOVE: Headstone of John Willcocks, one of the sons of Peter Willcocks, first settler of the area that is now the Deserted Village.

TOP LEFT: The building that David Felt constructed to house the officers for the Stationer’s Hall Press. Today this is the residence of the Village Caretaker.

Their second oldest, a son named John, was a soldier in the New Jersey militia during the Revolutionary War. John’s headstone, a brown sandstone slab that is the only original stone of the five in the cemetery.

David Felt started a stationery business in Boston in 1825. By 1844, his store was selling products faster than his factory could produce them. So Felt began looking at property in New Jersey on which to build a second factory and he began buying up land from Peter Willcocks’ descendants. Within two years, from 1845 to 1847, Felt had built a mill along the Blue Brook, two dams to supply water power for that mill, and an entire town on the bluff above the brook to house all of the people who would work there. That town became known as Feltville.

Archaeologists from Montclair State University’s Center for Archaeological Studies have spent eight summers excavating sites in

cemetery. Only five headstones are seen there today, but it is believed that about two dozen people were buried in the Willcocks family plot.

One headstone commemorates Phebe Badgley Willcocks. Phebe Badgley met and married Peter Willcocks while still living in Long Island. When she and Peter moved to the Second Watchung Mountain in New Jersey, her brothers and sisters came with them and settled in an area on the First Watchung Mountain that today is the Scout Camping Area behind the Trailside Nature & Science Center.

Phebe and Peter had five children.

and around the Deserted Village. In 1998, the Feltville Archaeology Project excavated a privy vault behind Felt’s office building. Few of the artifacts recovered in this excavation dated to Felt’s time, indicating that the privy was probably meticulously cleaned during its lifetime.

David Felt ruled Feltville with a beneficent but stern hand, and earned for himself the paternalistic nickname “King David.” Village residents were required to attend religious services each week in a church on the second floor of the general store building, but were allowed to worship and practice





David Felt's mill as it appeared in 1929. The mill was torn down one year later.

religion in accordance with their own beliefs. Felt provided a priest, minister, or rabbi each week to conduct the services, and eventually hired a non-denominational minister, Austin Craig, to remain in full-time residence. Craig later became president of Ohio's Antioch College.

Children were taught in a one-room schoolhouse that stood high on the hill above Feltville, just off of Buttonwood Road. The school served the children of the mill town, as well as surrounding farms. It is important to realize that the average 12 year old in a working class family during Felt's time was immediately recruited into domestic or factory labor. Felt's free school and provision of a liberal house of worship show that he was concerned with the social welfare of his employees' families to an unusual degree.

Further along Cataract Hollow Road, just past the Church/Store Building, MSU archaeologists uncovered the foundation of David Felt's residence in 2004. Formerly described as a 'mansion,' Felt's humble abode is, in fact, no larger than any of the workers' houses in the village.

All of the houses in Feltville, regardless of size, were partitioned down the center, much as a duplex house is

today. Each side had its own entrance and staircase. With about 175 residents living in Feltville by 1850, and only 11 total buildings in which to house them, there were probably four families living in each of the larger houses and two families in the smaller houses. Some of those "families" were likely unmarried men or women, quartered together in dormitory fashion.

In the Blue Brook Valley, at the base of the hill on which the houses stood, was the 3 1/2-story mill that was the center of life in Feltville. Water routed from a dam upstream flowed through a raceway and over a waterwheel on the side of the mill.

Feltville thrived for fifteen years under the patriarchy of David Felt. In 1860, he was sixty-seven years old. In August of that year, he sold Feltville to Amasa Foster and returned to New York City.

Over the next two decades, ownership of the property changed hands six times. Several business ventures were initiated on the property, including the manufacture of sarsaparilla, cigars, and silk. However, all were unsuccessful, and for a while the former mill town may have been abandoned. It was at this time that

Feltville first became known as the Deserted Village.

In 1882, Feltville was purchased at public auction by Warren Ackerman, a prominent landholder, for only \$11,450, a fraction of its former worth. Ackerman bought the property to raise fancy cattle. He used the vacant mill as a stable for his cattle and the former farm field became pastures for grazing.

Warren allowed several friend to stay in the former mill worker houses for short vacations. At the suggestion of those friends, Ackerman converted Feltville into a summer resort and renamed it Glenside Park.

Visitors came to the summer resort from places like New York, Orange, and Newark. A barn was built in 1882 to house horses and carriages that would be used to transport businessmen to the train station at Murray Hill. From there, they could travel by train to their jobs in Manhattan, while their families stayed behind to enjoy resort life.

Glenside Park flourished until 1916, when the hamlet began losing its appeal. The advent of the automobile permitted former patrons to travel further away from their homes, especially to the developing Jersey Shore area. For a while, the village became almost deserted again.

In the 1920s, the property was purchased by the newly formed Union County Park Commission, and incorporated into the Watchung Reservation. The Park Commission began to rent out the houses, and had full occupancy until the 1960s, when an Outdoor Education Center opened here and used several of the houses as classrooms until it closed in 1985. The abandoned mill was torn down in 1930 after it was deemed to have become a safety hazard.

This site was listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places in 1980. Stabilization work was performed on all of the buildings in 1992 using a grant from the New Jersey Historic Trust. Two additional grants from the Historic Trust funded the Village's first full-scale restoration project at the Church/Store Building. Soon, visitors will be able to enter a visitor center in this building to see displays of photographs and artifacts depicting Village history.

A fourth New Jersey Historic Trust



grant is funding the rehabilitation of the former carriage house for use as a public assembly building and school lecture hall. That building is home to Union County's own Operation Archeology, a program in which fifth-grade students learn the principles and practices of archeology, both in their classroom and during visits to this site. Students learn from a real archaeologist, take a site tour, conduct a site survey, and participate in an excavation. Teachers or school administrators can get further information from the Union County Division of Cultural and Heritage Affairs at 908-558-2550.

Two programs that are held annually at the Deserted Village each attract about a thousand participants. On the third weekend in October, Feltville is one of 23 historic sites across Union County that open to the general public as part of the Four Centuries in a Weekend program. County staff and volunteers provide hayrides, children's games, a demonstration of apple cider pressing, and a display of archaeological artifacts. "David Felt" himself returns to lead a guided tour of the Village. For more details, call 908-527-4900.

On the weekend before Halloween, David Felt comes back again, along with other people notable in the Village's history, to the delight of participants in the Haunted Hayrides. As they ride a haywagon through the darkened woods, visitors experience a mix of historical narrative, costumed characters and special effects. Tickets go on sale mid-September at the Trailside Nature & Science Center in Mountainside, 908-789-3670.

The Deserted Village of Feltville is open to the general public every day during daylight hours, free of charge. Visitors can park in the gravel lot at the top of Cataract Hollow Road, just off of Glenside Avenue. Brochures are available at the information kiosk to guide visitors on a one-mile tour of the village, providing pieces of the history at each stop.

As unusual as the survival of the buildings is the survival of their isolated context. Set within the high-pressure development atmosphere of the New York metropolitan region, the quiet wooded refuge of the Watchung Reservation preserves the mystical air of this Deserted Village.

Daniel J. Bernier is the director of the Division of Park Planning & Maintenance, within the Union County Department of Parks, Recreation and Facilities. He and his family have lived in the Deserted Village since 1992 and he is officially designated as caretaker of the site.