

# The Bernardsville News

## Mapping a gilded age



Landscape architect John Charles Smith of Peapack-Gladstone displays a map he designed depicting the great estates of the Somerset Hills from 1898 to 1939. Residents can view the map from 2 to 5 p.m. on Sunday, May 3, at the historic Jacobus-Vanderveer House on Route 202-206 in Bedminster Township.

### *Grand mountain estates of the Somerset Hills detailed in map*

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**PEAPACK-GLADSTONE** – For all its links to the Revolutionary War and its recent growth, the Somerset Hills still owes its image to the grand old estates that flourished in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Lured in part by extended rail service, titans of finance and industry from the New York City area bought up large swaths of land north of Route 202 and built enormous mansions with cottages, stables and gardens.

The estates were so grandiose that they carried names that remain familiar today – “Blairsdén,” “Upton Pyne,” “Natirar,” “Stronghold,” and “Hamilton Farm.”

While much has been written about the estates and their owners, there has never been a comprehensive map showing all the estates and their exact location, size and boundaries.

Not, at least, until now. John Charles Smith, a borough resident and landscape architect, has just completed such a map after more than a decade of research.

Labeled, “Somerset Hills 1898-1939,” the map depicts about 210 estates from the Route 202 area north to Mendham, stretching as far east as Hardscrabble Road in Bernardsville and as far west as Route 206 in Peapack-Gladstone.

Many are well in excess of 100 acres. Among them are Bernardsville estates “Meadow Brook Farm,” “Claremont,” “Stronghold,” “Blythewood,” “Boulderwood,” “Peachcroft” and “Upton Pyne,” Far Hills estates “Pennbrook,” “Mayfields” and “Natirar,” and Peapack-Gladstone estates “Blairsdén,” “Vernon Manor,” “Teviot Farm” and “Hillandale.”

Each estate on the map is defined by shaded boundaries, with listings of its name, acreage, owners, and in some cases, the years in which it existed. Also depicted is the location of the master house and any cottages, stables, tennis courts or orchards, as well as the driveway routes.

In the lower right corner of the map is a picture of C. Ledyard Blair, the owner of “Blairsdén,” crossing one of his estate’s bridges in a four-horse coach.

Map On Exhibit

“It’s been a lot of fun,” Smith said at his office on Branch Road. “I learned a lot about all these people – where they earned their living, all the things they did on the side.”

Copies of the map will be displayed at an exhibit scheduled for 2 to 5 p.m. Sunday, May 3, at the historic Jacobus-Vanderveer House on Route 202-206 in Bedminster Township.

Requests for an R.S.V.P. can be made at (908) 234-1121. Information can be found online at [www.jvanderveerhouse.com](http://www.jvanderveerhouse.com).

Smith plans to offer copies of the maps for sale, with a price probably between \$100 and \$200 without a frame, he said.

Considering how monumental the task was, it wasn't something just anyone could take on.

Smith is a fan of local history and chairs the borough's Historic Preservation Commission. As a borough native who turns 71 this month, he also has childhood memories of estate owners like Peapack's Richard Gambrell, who owned the 227-acre "Vernon Manor" off Willow Avenue and often drove around in a horse-drawn coach.

Smith also comes from "a lineage of map people," noting that his father's uncle, Oscar Smith Jr. of Peapack, was the Somerset County engineer from 1926 to around 1950.

"I draw all day and I love it," he said. "As a landscape architect, it's in my blood."

Smith was inspired to begin the project around 1997 after his cousin, Barry Thomson, collaborated with Far Hills Realtor Jack Turpin on two books about Somerset Hills estates.

He started looking at old maps, aerial photos and engineering plans kept by firms like Apgar Associates of Far Hills, and then overlaid them against modern tax maps. He sought additional information from current estate owners.

"I had to put it together piece by piece," he said. "It was like a jigsaw puzzle – take one at a time and lay them out together."

Smith found that by 1920 or so, the estates occupied virtually 100 percent of the land on the Bernardsville Mountain.

"There was almost nothing there that wasn't in a major estate at the time," he said. "Almost every piece was covered."

#### City Migration

The era of the local estates coincided with the extension of the old New Jersey West Line Railroad to Bernardsville in 1872. Suddenly, Newark and New York, where most of the wealthy lived, weren't so far away.

George I. Seney, president of the Metropolitan Bank of New York, was the first mogul to venture west when he settled off Mendham Road in Bernardsville in 1871. Seney came here after his doctor, who lived in Mendham, advised him that the country would be good for his wife's health, Smith said.

Seney believed in the area, and in 1879 he even built a hotel – the Somerset Inn, located off Mendham Road before it was destroyed in a 1908 fire – to entice wealthy people to come here.

Also influential was George B. Post, a prominent architect who designed the New York Stock Exchange building. After settling in Bernardsville in 1871, he offered to design the new homes, Smith said.

Others joined in promoting the area. Grant B. Schley, a New York broker who settled in Far Hills in the 1880s, helped get the rail line extended to Gladstone in 1892. He also set up the Somerset Land Co. to buy and sell land, Smith said.

Most of the land at the time consisted of small farms, he noted. He said land typically sold for only \$2 an acre, so the wealthy newcomers had enough means to convince the farmers to sell.

Clarence B. Mitchell, for example, assembled "Pennbrook," a 389-acre estate in Far Hills, by buying up 14 farms, Smith said.

Most of the farmhouses were then demolished as a new master house went up.

#### Showcase Homes

"Houses were built as a demonstration of one's wealth and creativity," Smith observed. "Not out of need but as more of a showoff situation, to show they were successful."

"There were beautiful little carriage houses with all the estates," he added. The owners "could grow their own vegetables, they had cows and could produce cheese. So they had it all – they didn't rely on Kings for shopping."

The largest home was the 50,000-square-foot mansion that Blair built at "Blairsdon" between 1898 and 1901, Smith said. Still standing atop a wooded hill, it had spectacular views of a 550-acre estate that featured its own terraces, stairways, fountains, statues and a man-made lake.

Another estate, "Yadesmos," owned by pharmaceutical magnate Charles Pfizer Jr. and located at Mendham and Ballantine roads in Bernardsville, had a renowned Japanese garden. In 1915, it provided the background for actress Mary Pickford in the movie, "Madame Butterfly."

Other prominent estate owners included John F. Dryden, the founder of Prudential Insurance Company and a U.S. Senator from 1902-07; John A. Roebling II, whose grandfather planned the Brooklyn bridge; Robert Stevens, whose family founded the New Jersey Institute of Technology; Frederick P. Olcott, president of the Central Trust Company; and Francis G. Lloyd, president of Brooks Brothers.

Probably the most famous was bandleader Tommy Dorsey, although he didn't arrive until 1935, and his property on Old Army Road in Bernardsville was a relatively small 21 acres, Smith said.

The estate owners frequently engaged in land swaps, Smith said. "Most of them knew each other. They socialized, their children went to school together – there was a lot of commonality."

The estates had an impact on other parts of the Somerset Hills. Because they required large levels of staffing, the jobs generated more housing in the village sections of Bernardsville and Peapack, he said.

The staffing costs and taxes began to take their toll by the 1920s, with the Great Depression making things even tougher for the estate owners.

"A lot of them were broke, and they got older, too," Smith said. The estates "started breaking up, and they're still breaking up."

"Quite a few" of the master homes still exist, he noted. "They're sort of tucked away, and you hardly notice them."

Despite completing the map, Smith hopes to expand upon his work.

He said he would like to extend the data on estates east to the Passaic River and west to the Black River. He also hopes to go further back in time and compile the list of farms that were consolidated.

The map "gives great background on how the area grew and ended up," Smith said. "It's sort of sad to see the breakdown of the old estates, where they're reduced in size and scale and grandeur, and it makes one want to preserve and appreciate them.

"It's my role to preserve some of the history for upcoming generations, and I feel very dedicated to this," he added. "The more I do, the more I want to do."