



The Metlar-Bodine House

Up from the Ashes by Junelynn N. Sadowski



Click to watch the video about the Ross Hall Wall project

Not only has this historic Piscataway house come back from a devastating 2003 fire, it is planning an expansion around the "Ross Wall," an artifact of national importance!

Since 1728, the Metlar-Bodine House has stood atop a hill overlooking two Native American transportation routes—the Minisink Trail and the Raritan River. The house looked out on Raritan Landing, a vital 18th century port. Eventually, the Delaware and Raritan Canal was built alongside the river and carried tons of farm products to market. Trains, trolleys, and automobiles began to crisscross Piscataway, one of the 50 oldest towns in the nation, making the area a major transportation hub. How these diverse modes of travel impacted the social and economic growth of the area shapes an exceptional story revealed through the museum's theme, from Indian Trail to Interstate.



The oldest surviving structure from Raritan Landing, the Metlar-Bodine House is a National and State Historic Site and, since 1979, has proudly served as Piscataway Township's official historical museum, showcasing a fascinating collection of Central New Jersey artifacts. The house, whose seminal 18th century section was built by Peter Bodine, a Raritan Landing merchant, experienced three major additions during the 19th century and is considered a fine example of architecture built in the New Jersey vernacular style. Early in the 1900s, John Metlar, heir to a real estate fortune, became the property's owner giving it the name, "Metlar House."



The N.J. Department of Transportation purchased the privately owned Metlar House in 1977 to make way for the N.J. Route 18 extension over the Raritan River.

However, the home's compelling historic value caused an outcry from local citizens on behalf of its preservation. By 1979, the Fellowship for Metlar House foundation was formed, the township had leased the building for 25 years from the state, and the local history museum—known as The Metlar-Bodine House—was established. Piscataway's and the Fellowship's responsibilities were assigned, and the long-standing historic preservation commitment between government and residents began. The museum opened to the public in 1980 and all was set for a bright future.



During the 1960s, a massive wall, with two beautifully executed cabinets and a fireplace surrounded of delft tile was salvaged from the 1740 Piscataway mansion, Ross Hall. The Ross Hall Wall is the jewel of the museum's collection. However, its large size (23 feet long, 11 feet high, 6 feet in depth) and condition, precluded its immediate installation at the Metlar-Bodine House, and an addition was planned. In December 2002, the Fellowship received a gift of \$225,000 earmarked for this project. Then disaster struck in the form of a fire on the evening of July 17, 2003, and volunteer fire companies from Piscataway and neighboring towns rushed to the scene. The following morning, state, county, and municipal

Views of the fire damage to the interior of the house.

Connolly & Hickey Historical Architects



A selection of artifacts from the Metlar-Bodine collections.

officials sun-eyed the damage, with some authorities concluding that the historic sire could not be saved. More than a third of the building was severely damaged, the roof was compromised, at least a quarter of the collection was lost, and the remainder of the historic site and artifacts sustained smoke and water damage. Thankfully, the Ross Hall Wall avoided fire damage since it was in off-premises storage.

Piscataway Mayor Brian Wahler, the Township Council, and N.J. Senator Bob Smith, 17th District, championed its restoration, and the Fellowship for Metlar House immediately initiated the "Rebuilding Our Past" campaign.

Township workers covered the building with a large blue tarp, the museum's long-time historic architectural consultants were asked to plan the recovery, and N.J. Department of Transportation insurance would provide funds for the building's repair. Piscataway Township had continued its longtime partnership by insuring the museum's contents and within hours, freezer trucks arrived, and workers boxed all ephemera while volunteers formed a triage team selecting artifacts that could possibly be saved from those that were no longer viable.

Among the artifacts saved and, where necessary, professionally conserved were: the only remaining copy of the 1742 Duychink deed, a Piscataway property impacted by the Route 18 extension; the 150-year-old Gulick clock, the heirloom of a founding Piscataway family; the c. 1868 velocipede that was ridden in every Piscataway parade until 1930; an ice chest that belonged to one of the township's immigrant families, who were part of the early 20th century migrations from Europe; and the notary public sign of Mr. M. J. Jackson, a 1920s resettled southerner and the first African-American to achieve this prominent position.

N.J. Department of Transportation site repairs began in 2005 (the lease was renewed for another 25 years), and a grant from the New Jersey Historic Trust, which was matched by the township, restored the building to its 1890s appearance. Through fundraising efforts, the Fellowship for Metlar House provided



Artist's rendering of the reconstructed Ross Hall Wall.

\$70,000 for central air conditioning.

The Fellowship continues to receive and purchase artifacts, which become township property when accessioned, and rebuild the collection to its pre-fire prominence. Among the museum's more recent acquisitions are a Federal-period linen press or kasten, a wardrobe in the Dutch tradition, built by renowned New Brunswick cabinetmaker Matthew Egerton, Jr.; and a valuable 16-by 18-inch needlework embroidered in 1800 by teenager Sarah Staats of South Bound Brook, depicting a soldier and a woman standing under a willow beside a tomb memorializing George Washington, who had died the previous year.

In 2010, temporary occupancy of the building was approved, and the following year the township matched another New Jersey Historic Trust grant for an ADA-compliant entrance and restroom addition. This work was completed in 2015, allowing the museum to re-open to the public in time for the township's 350th birthday in 2016. Visitors have been impressed with the historic building, the fascinating collection and the modern amenities, including an "app" that can be downloaded to tour exhibits, a feature usually not available in a local history museum.

After its donation, The Ross Hall Wall was moved to the New Jersey Historical Society in Newark for safekeeping. In 2000 the relic became the property of Piscataway and is stored by the



township in an acclimatized facility. The exquisiteness of the wall's design is outweighed by a historical event of great import. This American treasure was salvaged from Gen. George Washington's Piscataway headquarters, where he wrote the military order for the Continental Army to celebrate the first organized expression of Independence Day. The joyous military maneuver took place on July 4, 1778, along the Raritan River. This year the Fellowship for Metlar House launched a \$2-million capital campaign, Our Plan Is Revolutionary, which will complete the museum's full recovery by reestablishing exhibits, creating an endowment for the site's future needs, and, most importantly, building at long last a home for an American treasure, the Ross Hall Wall. (See the video about the Ross Hall Wall accompanying this issue of GSL for more information!) 

A selection of artifacts from the Metlar-Bodine collections.

Click on the image at right to be taken to the Ross Hall Wall webpage!



The Metlar-Bodine House Museum

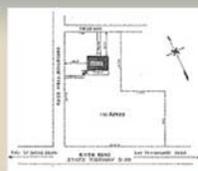
The Historical Museum of Piscataway Township Circa 1728

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Ross Hall



In 2000 the museum received a significant artifact, the Ross Hall Wall – a piece of America's past that had witnessed one of the nation's most memorable occasions. In July 1778, George Washington and 11,000 patriots were camped along the Raritan River in Piscataway. General Washington's headquarters was at Ross Hall and it was there that he wrote the first order for the United States Army to celebrate the 4th of July – a tradition that continues to this day. The troops were ordered to march across the river on Landing Lane Bridge, line the banks of the Raritan in New Brunswick, and shoot their rifles down and up the line in the first organized salute to the nation's independence. They were then given an extra ration of rum and that evening the General had a party for officers (including Alexander Hamilton, the Marquis de Lafayette and Baron Von Stuben) and their ladies at Ross Hall. The building was destroyed in the 1960s but, because of its significance, a parlor wall was saved and was exhibited at the New Jersey Historical Society until it was given to the Township and the Metlar-Bodine House. It is the intention to have the artifact recognized as an "American Treasure" and interpret it, and the incredible historical moment it represents, in a new wing of the museum.

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HISTORIC ROSS HALL WALL AWAITING MUSEUM'S NEW EDUCATIONAL WING

The Ross Hall Wall, a fully paneled parlor wall, and the only remaining piece of the Edward Anthon House, an important mid-eighteenth century house in mid-Jersey, is scheduled to be reinstalled in the museum's new educational wing.

