

Chapter 1

BRIEF HISTORY

The geologic structure underlying Chatham Township's land area coupled with glacial activity determined how the town developed.

Physical Character

Chatham Township is part of the Upper Passaic River watershed, with 90% of the Township in the Great Swamp watershed and 10% draining to the Passaic River. Its 9.2 square miles extend from the Passaic River, which forms the southern border, up over Long Hill and across the eastern end of the Great Swamp. The Great Swamp is the dominant physical feature, occupying approximately 25% of the land area in Chatham Township.

Development Pattern

Chatham Township developed primarily on the high, well drained ground around and above the flood zones of the Passaic River and the Great Swamp. In the 1700's, extensive drainage ditches were excavated to make the Great Swamp accessible for farming and wood harvesting activities. An early 1800 map drawn by Littell shows the whole swamp surveyed into wood lots with the first lot plotted from a "bull's head" stone located behind the Green Village post office. William Penn supposedly was responsible for the survey.

Green Village, a crossroads settlement, developed in the westerly section of town on the edge of the Great Swamp. Scattered farms characterized the rest of the town. In the 1800's, greenhouses dominated the agricultural efforts in the town and immediate region. Morristown, Madison and Chatham Borough were the commercial centers.

As time went on, development took place primarily near roads on easily worked land that had few physical constraints. Housing, dependent on septic systems and wells, was located for the most part on the well-drained soils. Since the early 1960's and the availability of sewers, housing has moved down into areas that once could not have supported septic systems. One hundred apartment units were constructed on slopes above the Passaic River on River Road and two hundred twenty apartment units were built adjacent to the Great Swamp in the Hickory Tree area. Two shopping centers were built at Hickory Tree (at the Shunpike / Green Village / Southern Boulevard crossroads). In the 1980's, nine hundred condominiums were constructed along the Passaic River and are serviced by a small wastewater treatment plant. Areas outside the sewage service area have remained settled much as they were long ago.

Jetport Fight

No account of Chatham Township is complete without a brief description of the fight the town and the region fought to keep the Great Swamp from becoming a metropolitan jet port. In the early 1960's, the New York / New Jersey Port Authority made what many call "stealth" plans to locate a third major airport in the region's backyard. The plans were leaked to the New York Times and caused an uproar. A cross section of people launched a campaign and successfully worked together to defeat the plan.

The citizen's efforts resulted in neighboring towns working together to save a regional resource not only for its flood control value, but also for its aesthetics, its wildlife, and its ecological value. The newly found appreciation of the Great Swamp's treasures led the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to agree to establish a Wildlife Refuge here and the first National Wilderness Area east of the Mississippi River.

Saved But Not Safe

Efforts continue to "save" the Great Swamp, this time from the impacts of development. With up-to-date engineering technology, public sewage systems allow construction in areas previously unsuitable for housing and roads.

The Future

Concern about the impact from development led the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) to conditional approval of a sewage plant expansion. The conditional approval required Chatham Township to enact very strict stormwater controls. The Township is also being required by the DEP to institute a stormwater management plan that will include land use considerations, such as stream buffers, development location, and density.

Chatham Township is currently working formally with the nine other towns of the Great Swamp watershed to develop land use ordinances that all towns in the region can agree to enact. This regional effort should continue to foster cooperative efforts to protect the Great Swamp.