

THE MOUNT AMWELL NEWS

John Reading and the Creation of Hunterdon County

By Marfy Goodspeed

Note on dates: In the 18th century England and America were still using the old Julian calendar, in which the new year began in March rather than January. England did not switch to the modern calendar until 1752. Today we recognize that problem by giving any event between January and March a double date. Hence the creation of Hunterdon is shown as March 11, 1713/1714.

In 1694, a law was passed stating “that all Persons inhabiting in this province above [the Assunpink at Trenton] being the Northern Boundary of the County of Burlington shall belong and be Subject to the Jurisdiction of the Court of Burlington, until further Order of the General Assembly.”

Why was this necessary? Because the lands from Trenton north were being settled without benefit of local government.

When the English arrived in West New Jersey, they began to survey and acquire large properties along the Delaware River. But they soon discovered that the inland area was impossible for the kind of agriculture they were used to. Today we call that area the Pine Barrens or Pinelands.

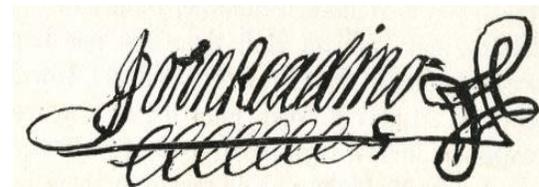
As a consequence, settlers looked north and made huge purchases of land from the Indians. The first of these was 15,000 acres bought by Thomas Budd in 1685, then 30,000 acres by Adlord Boude in 1688, followed by the Lotting Purchase of 150,000 acres in 1703 and finally, the most northern purchase by Lewis Morris in 1709 of an additional 100,000 acres. Townships followed settlers. Maidenhead (now Lawrence) Township was created in 1697, and Hopewell Township in January 1699/1700. Trenton was a township at least as early as 1720.

¹ Reading’s signature was reproduced in Wm. A. Whitehead, ed. *Documents relating to the Colonial History of the State of New Jersey (hereafter NJCD), first series, Vol. 4, Administration of Gov. Robert Hunter and President Lewis Morris, 1709-1720*, Newark, NJ: Daily Advertiser Printing House, 1882, vol. 4 p. 62, footnote.

² N. J. State Archives, West Jersey Proprietors, Basse Survey Book, p. 86, and Survey Book A p. 143. West Jersey Proprietors (hereafter WJP). State Archives are hereafter NJSA.

³ Oscar M. Voorhees. *The Exterior and Interior Bounds of Hunterdon County, New Jersey*, Flemington, NJ: Hiram E. Deats, 1949: 6.

John Reading¹



In 1704, a large tract of 1440 acres in the Boude purchase (but north of the Hopewell line) was surveyed for John Reading of Gloucester County.² This tract was located along the Delaware River just north of today’s Stockton. It was an excellent location with its access to the river and its superior agricultural soil. Being a veteran surveyor himself, Reading knew a fine piece of land when he saw one. He named it Mount Amwell, after his family’s home in England.³

John Reading was not your ordinary settler. He was chosen to be Gloucester County’s first Clerk in 1686, only about a year after arriving in West New Jersey, and held the position until 1702.⁴ He had been a member of the Council of West Jersey Proprietors since it was formed in 1688, and served as clerk and deputy surveyor.⁵ In 1697 he was elected a member of the West Jersey Assembly from Gloucester.⁶

Amwell Township, 1708

⁴ Josiah Granville Leach, LLB. *Genealogical and Biographical Memorials of the Reading, Howell, Yerkes, Watts, Latham and Elkins Families*, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1898, p. 12.

⁵ John E. Pomfret. *The Province of West New Jersey, 1609-1702*, NY: Octagon Books, 1956, p. 187.

⁶ Francis Bazley Lee ed., *Genealogical and Personal Memorial of Mercer County, New Jersey*, vol. 1 p. 12-13, citing *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State, 1677-1776.*] p. 371.

Very soon after John Reading was settled on Mount Amwell, the Township of Amwell was created by royal patent, on June 8, 1708.⁷ The choice of name was in recognition of the fact that John Reading was the most important person living there.

The town was not created by statute, as was normally done, because the Governor was unavailable. In March 1708, Queen Anne ordered that her cousin Gov. Cornbury be replaced, due to the terrible reports she had received about him.⁸ Without a governor in place, getting a royal patent was the only way to create a new township.

Amwell contained all of today's Delaware, Raritan, East and West Amwell Townships, and parts of Readington and Lebanon. Soon afterwards, on September 28, 1708, the Grand Jury in Burlington levied a tax on all the municipalities in the county. Because of its very low population, Amwell paid the lowest tax,⁹ but it would not be long before Amwell was paying the highest tax, due to its rapid growth. The first officers, appointed in 1709 by the Burlington County Court, were John Reading Sr. and John Wilkinson, Assessors, and Samuel Green, Collector.¹⁰

Burlington County now needed to revise its northern border. This was done on January 21, 1709/1710, when the County established that "the northernmost and uttermost bounds" of Amwell Township would be the northern bounds of Burlington County.¹¹

Governor Robert Hunter and His Council

Gov. Cornbury was replaced by Robert Hunter in 1709, although he did not arrive in New Jersey until July 1710, when he discovered he had serious opposition on his Council.

In the colonial period in New Jersey, the Governor's Council was equivalent to today's State Senate, although its functions were slightly different. Its members were appointed by the crown and served as the upper house of the legislature as well as the highest court of appeal in the province. It should not be confused with the

Council of Proprietors, on which John Reading served. The Governor's Council was a branch of government, while the Council of Proprietors only controlled the real estate.

Gov. Hunter first met his Council in Burlington on December 6, 1710. He found nearly half of them were still loyal to disgraced Gov. Cornbury, and were determined to obstruct him however they could. Hunter petitioned the Lords of Trade to remove four of them in February 1711.¹² One of the names on the list was Daniel Coxe.¹³

On the list of replacement members was John Reading, who was identified as "Proprietor and Clerk to the Proprietors."¹⁴ Coxe and his supporters protested vehemently, thereby postponing action. Meanwhile, Gov. Hunter nominated John Reading to the Supreme Court of New Jersey in a letter dated October 22, 1711.¹⁵ When he didn't get a response, he sent another letter to the Lords of Trade dated January 1, 1711/1712 in which he wrote that he was forced to "displace all the gentlemen of the Council" and to replace them with "others of known Integrity and Reputation." Otherwise, everything would be "in danger of being determined more by Spirit of party than Rules of Justice."¹⁶

Gov. Hunter's request was eventually granted by Queen Anne on July 20, 1712. John Reading took his oath at Burlington on December 7, 1713.¹⁷

After being sworn in, Reading met with the Council during the month of December. When the Council met again in early January, Reading was absent, probably to spend time with his wife who was ill. He appeared again on January 8, 1713/1714, and remained in Burlington meeting with Council until January 18th. The bills that were passed regulated the killing of wolves, raised money for jails and courthouses, regulated the recording of deeds in each county and the practice of law, allowed Quakers to make affirmation rather than swear oaths, and prohibited the concealment of stray cattle or horses.¹⁸

⁷ Voorhees (*ibid.* p. 5) transcribed the royal patent, dated 8 Jun 1708, which he found "at Trenton."

⁸ Daniel J. Weeks. *Not for Filthy Lucre's Sake: Richard Saltar and the Antiproprietary Movement in East New Jersey, 1665-1707*. Philadelphia: Lehigh University Press, 2001, p. 233.

Paul A. Stelhorn and Michael Birkner, ed. *The Governors of New Jersey, 1664-1974*. Trenton, NJ, 1982, p. 39.

⁹ Henry C. Reed and George J. Miller. *The Burlington Court Book*. Washington, DC: The American Historical Asso., 1994, p. 340.

¹⁰ Reed and Miller, p.340. For Hopewell, the Assessors were William Green and Jonathan Davis, and Collector was Daniel Howell

¹¹ John P. Snyder. *The Story of New Jersey's Civil Boundaries, 1606-1986*. Trenton, NJ, 1973, p.30. Oddly enough, when the West Jersey Society, owners of the Morris purchase, presented their survey to be recorded, they stated that it was

part of Burlington County, even though the land was far north of Amwell Township (from *First 275 Years of Hunterdon County*, Norman Wittwer, "The Dawn of Hunterdon," p.11).

¹² Stelhorn, p. 45.

¹³ Eugene R. Sheriden, ed. *The Papers of Lewis Morris, vol. 1: 1698-1730*. Newark, NJ: New Jersey Historical Society, 1991, pp. 130-31, fnt 1.

¹⁴ NJCD, first ser., vol. 4, p. 62.

¹⁵ NDCD, first ser., vol. 4, pp. 139-40.

¹⁶ NJCD, first ser., vol. 4, p. 150. The letter was not received until April 10, 1712.

¹⁷ NJCD, first ser., vol. 13, Journal of Governor and Council, vol. 1, p. 483; NJCD, first ser., vol. 11, Newspaper Extracts, 1704-1739, vol. 1, p. 35.

¹⁸ NJCD, first ser., vol. 13, Journal of Governor and Council, vol. 1, pp. 492, 497-500.

Creation of a New County

The residents of the northern townships in Burlington County were becoming frustrated by the need to travel 20 to 35 miles to the county seat at Burlington City to record their deeds, probate wills and attend court. In 1712, Maidenhead Township petitioned for creation of a new county “in the upper part of the Province.”¹⁹ But in 1712, legislation of this sort could not be passed. It took a change in the Council to make it happen.

John Reading was back at Mount Amwell soon after leaving the Council on January 18, 1713/14. He was only just in time to be by his wife’s side when she died on January 20th. It must have been a terrible blow, yet Reading was back in Burlington on January 22nd to deal with an act to regulate slaves, and on the 26th for the first reading of “The bill Entitled An Act for Erecting the Upper parts of the Western division of New Jersey into a County.”

Two days later, that bill received its second reading and was referred to a committee for amendments. On February 11th, John Reading presented the committee’s amendments to the Council and the bill was approved. He was then instructed to carry it to the Assembly where it was passed. On March 13, 1713/1714, the bill to create the county of Hunterdon was enacted into law.²⁰

The language of the Act justified the need for a new county, and established its border with Burlington County along the Assunpink at Trenton. The County covered everything north of that line, including Trenton, Maidenhead, Hopewell, Amwell and all points north within the former Province of West New Jersey. It was named after the ancestral home of Gov. Hunter, just as Amwell Township was named for John Reading’s.²¹ (Robert Hunter’s family came from Hunterston on the western coast of Scotland.) The county seat was set at Trenton, the most populous, well-established town. It remained the county seat until 1780 when the location was moved to Flemington.

Four days later, on March 15, 1714, as part of an act for the financial support of Her Majesty’s Government, John Reading Esq. and William Green were named assessors for Hunterdon and Ralph Hunt was named tax collector.²² Even so, the county was unable to send representatives to the Assembly until after 1727, when the two representatives from the small town of Salem were allotted to Hunterdon.²³

Death of John Reading

¹⁹ “Dawn of Hunterdon,” p. 12 of *The First 275 Years of Hunterdon Co.* NJHS Proceedings 3rd ser., vol. 6 (1909-10), no. 3 (1908) pg. 152.

²⁰ NJCD, first ser., vol. 13, Journal of Governor and Council, vol. 1, pp. 505, 507, 512-13. New Jersey Archives, 3d series, vol. 2, Laws of the Royal Colony of New Jersey, 1703-1745, p. 166. The text of the legislation is also reprinted in Wittwer, pp. 12-13.

On March 18, 1713/1714, John Reading was named by Governor Hunter to be “Captain for the militia company of Amwell & the upper part of Hopewell, Hunterdon County,” and on December 23, 1715 he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel.²⁴ This is how he came to be known as Col. John Reading, to distinguish him from his son John Reading Jr., who is often called Gov. John Reading.

John Reading Sr. continued to attend Council meetings, even when they were held in far-off Perth Amboy. Reading attended the Council meetings there in April 1716, and again on June 1st when Council members asked the Governor to let them recess until after the corn and hay had been harvested and seed time had passed. The request was granted and the next meeting held on November 27, 1716; but not at Burlington, where small pox was prevalent. The Council had to meet at Chesterfield while the Assembly met at Crosswicks.²⁵

The Council met through December and January, but when next they met at Perth Amboy, in May 1717, Reading was absent. He missed some excitement, for at that meeting, Gov. Hunter’s opponents presented a petition demanding that he be removed from office. The Council dealt with this insubordination by adjourning until April 9, 1718. At that time, Gov. Hunter nominated four new members to the Council, two for the eastern and two for the western divisions, because of the absence or death “of several of the Gentlemen of Council.” One of these gentlemen was John Reading Esq., who had died at Mount Amwell on October 30, 1717 at the age of 61.

He had led a full and active life, and was instrumental in the creation not only of a township, but an entire new county. Truly, he was Hunterdon County’s founding father.

Marfy Goodspeed presented a lecture on November 16th, 2014 on Col. John Reading as part of the Hunterdon 300th lecture series. She is a life member of the Mount Amwell Project and graciously gave permission to reprint her paper. A more detailed version of the Creation of Hunterdon County can be found on her web site: Goodspeedhistories.com.

²¹ Wittwer, p.12.

²² New Jersey Archives, 3d series, vol. 2, Laws of the Royal Colony of New Jersey, 1703-1745, p. 119.

^{23,23} Voorhees, p. 8. New Jersey Archives, 3d series, vol. 2, Laws of the Royal Colony of New Jersey, 1703-1745, p. 387.

²⁴ NJSA, MSS Commissions, Book AAA pp. 158, 169.

²⁵ Samuel Smith. *The History of the Colony of Nova-Caesaria or New Jersey*, Burlington, 1765, p. 408.

Cemetery News

- **Reading Burial Ground** - The site was cleared in mid-September by Blair-Kelly Property Management LLC, 3088 Wentling Schoolhouse Road, East Greenville, PA 18041. They will mow 3 times a year.
- **Swackhammer** - The Swackhammer Churchyard preservation Association has agreed to become a Chapter of the MTAP and has sent a request for IRS group exemption. The Board will take this up at the next meeting in January.
- **Slacktown** - The MTAP received a positive response from American Baptist Churches of New Jersey to our request that they grant a quit-claim deed to the Township for the cemetery property. We presented the letter to the Kingwood Twp. Committee on November 6, 2014 and the committee agreed to initiate contact with the ABC-NJ to begin the process of acquiring the deed.
- **Haypress** - The cemetery is located in Whitehouse Station and has many significant burials the earliest being 1744. The Readington Township Historic Preservation Committee has agreed to hear our proposal for preserving this neglected site on January 13th.
- **Hunterdon County Historical Society** - Bob Leith MTAP member and Trustee of the HCCHS has formed a cemetery committee within the society to identify and organize the diverse sources of information of all of Hunterdon's cemeteries. The MTAP is an active member of the committee and has helped to create a master list of cemeteries.
- **MTAP Cemetery Committee** - The MTAP will create pending board approval a similar committee concerned solely with preservation. This group will complement the HCCHS committee and meet on alternate months. The primary focus will be on historic cemeteries that are at the greatest risk of destruction.

Hunterdon 300th

What a year! As the Hunterdon 300th anniversary draws to a close we can reflect on the success of the yearlong celebration organized and planned by the Tri-centennial committee and tireless efforts of Chairperson Marcia Karrow. The MTAP members had significant participation in some of the more 150 events throughout the year. A short recap:

Jan 1st, MTAP members Dave Reading and George Muller performed in the reenactment of the county's formation in full costume directed by Gayle Maher.

March 22nd, Dave Reading dressed as Col. John Reading, rode on the lead float in the Flemington parade celebrating the actual date of the County's creation.

April 5th, Dave Reading presented lecture at the County library on "English Migration Patterns". Sold 6 copies of John Reading's Diary.

April 6th, MTAP members Pete Kinsella and Dave Reading assisted MTAP member Richard Stothoff (owner) in hosting tours of the Reading Mansion.

May 10th, Dave Reading co-lectured with Dennis Bertland at the Stockton Inn as one of the sites Tavern tours organized by Pete Kinsella. The subject was the Reading-Howell family connection.

July 8th, Former Freeholder George Muller and MTAP member read the Declaration of Independence on the Old Courthouse steps.

October 25th, Dave Reading lectured at the County library on Gov. John Reading.

November 16th, Marfy Goodspeed presented lecture on Col. John Reading and the Creation of Hunterdon County. Sold 8 copies John Reading's Diary.

December 31st, Planned event to include a copy of John Reading's Diary in the time capsule behind the courthouse as the final event of the 300th.

New Members

We welcome new life members Doug Martin and John M. Reading.

Remember. To access member page on website www.mtamwell.org, member/mtap2008

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