

## THE HISTORY OF DEMAREST

The works of man and the works of nature have always achieved a balance in Demarest. From the beginnings of human settlement in the area until the present day some aspect of nature has always played a role in Demarest's development. Samuel Demarest utilized the waters of the Cresskill Brook to run his mill. Later inhabitants saw the gently rolling lands covered with forests and fields as a haven from the metropolis. The hotel and race track which once flourished have long gone, but nevertheless, a precedent was set for Demarest as a town for people, and not for industry. The residential character of Demarest has survived into the present century, and unlike many nearby towns, Demarest remains a community whose residents still prefer its quiet treed streets and varied terrain to the flat monotony of the city. The conveniences of twentieth century technology and the beauty of the Duck Pond and the many acres of forest and open recreation land combine to give Demarest its special character. Buildings such as the railroad and fire station, and a number of beautifully restored homes recall Demarest's past.

It is always interesting to look back at our heritage, to seek a rediscovery of the past traditions and values, and also to reflect on the great strides that our town has made in a comparatively short time. With this in mind the Trustees of the Demarest Nature Center Association are pleased to present this short history.

David Demarest, originally known as David des Marets, settled in Bergen County New Jersey in 1677. He was founder of the Demarest family in America, and was one of a band of French Huguenots who came to this country in 1663.

The earliest settlers in the area now known as Demarest were the Westervelts, whose homestead still stands as the northern wing of the Catholic rectory on Old County Road. The year was 1723, and other Dutch settlers from New Amsterdam soon followed, having obtained land grants from the British owners of New Jersey.

By the time of the Revolution there were six or seven farmhouses stretched along the length of County Road. Most of the people were patriots - prominent among them were Samuel P. Demarest (1724-1808), great-great grandson of David, whose mill just south of the intersection of Anderson Avenue and County Road, supplied flour to Washington's troops when they were stationed at Tappan, and Captain John Huyler, a militia leader who had bought the Westervelt home. Others included Mattias Bogert (whose home, near Closter on Old County Road, is now owned by the O.T. Clarke family), Roelf Demarest, son of Samuel, (whose home is near Cresskill, and the Cole family whose homestead is generally thought to be a part of the home on the corner of County Road and Hardenburgh Avenue.

These families bore the brunt of a devastating Tory raid on May 9, 1779. Most of the homes were burned and severely damaged and several of the men, including Samuel Demarest were taken prisoner to New York City. Samuel's son, Cornelius, was killed, as was a ninety year old farmer named Douwe Tallman, who lies buried in the Revolutionary cemetery on Everett Road.

After the successful conclusion of the Revolution, the fathers of Demarest returned to their homes and the little community prospered. Samuel Demarest re-opened his grist mill with the help of his sons Peter and Roelf. Roelf's two sons, Samuel R. and John operated a brewery and a woolen mill, respectively, in the nineteenth century. Business was good and in 1816 Samuel R. Demarest built the beautiful sandstone colonial home which still stands on County Road across from the Duck Pond.

In 1859 an event of utmost importance took place ... the opening of the Northern Railroad of New Jersey, which ran from Jersey City to Piermont, New York. It no longer took two days by ferry and stagecoach to reach Demarest. One of the men responsible for the line was the great-grandson of the patriot miller-Ralph S. Demarest, who was at the time State Senator from Bergen County. The community which was his home was named 'Demarest Station' in his honor, and became a well-known resort in the victorian era, complete with a fine hotel built on the site of the present United Methodist Church and a race track on the site of the Northern Valley Regional High School. The Demarest Railroad Station, designed by J. Cleveland Cady, architect for the Metropolitan Opera House and the Museum of Natural History, was built in 1874 of stone quarried from the slopes of the Palisades. It stands today as a monument to the achievement of the Demarest family.

The late 1800's saw many changes in Demarest. A school was built in 1852 on the corner of Hardenburgh and Brookside Avenues. This structure eventually became the first Catholic Church, and is now a private residence. The Baptist Church, the community's first, was built in 1874. This building now houses the Old Church Cultural Center. John Demarest's woolen mill became an optical company and later a piano factory. A saw mill was operated east of Anderson Avenue, and on what is now Park Street, there was a wheelwright, blacksmith, livery stable and coal yard - the later in operation as late as the 1930's. Records show that in 1876 Demarest had thirty-six homes and several farms. There are two victorian homes on Van Horn Street that are lovely reminders of that period. These were built for brothers during the time when Demarest was a fashionable resort. They stand, side by side, complete with several beautiful stained glass windows.

On April 8, 1903, the Borough of Demarest came into being, after having separated from the township of Harrington. The first Mayor was John H. Z. Demarest. By this time the town had a new church congregation - the Methodists, who originally met in the old bowling alley of the resort hotel, which had burned down in 1896. There was also a new school - a three classroom, granite structure on Piermont Road. This building, with several additions over the years, still houses our Middle School.

The First World War saw a flurry of military activity in the Demarest area. While Camp Merritt was being built in Cresskill and Dumont, troops were quartered in tents on the Demarest race track (where the Northern Valley Regional High School presently stands). A beautiful old home that still stands on Woodland Road, became a hostess house for eighteen secretaries employed at the camp, at the insistence of the United States government. It became a center of many social activities for the soldiers.

The 1920 census indicated that Demarest had a population of 634. The real growth of the borough started after the opening of the George Washington Bridge in 1932. Many land development companies had tried unsuccessfully to develop the town after the opening of the railroad, but the new bridge proved to be the catalyst for success.

Today we have over 1800 homes in our town and a population of approximately 4800. Our three "houses of worship" are in lovely buildings, and we are the proud possessors of six schools - two of them high schools. Our Volunteer Fire Department, which has served us since 1894, still stands guard, The Demarest Fire Department Volunteer Ambulance Squad was started in 1961. Its new building was dedicated in 1990 and is located on Wakelee Drive, behind the Post Office. The Demarest Public Library Association was founded in 1964, and is located in the old Methodist Church building on Hardenburgh Avenue. The Peace Site Gazebo, located at the Duck Pond was built in 1986. An ecumenical group of Demarest citizens, who were interested in human concerns and wanted to promote peace in the community and in the world, were instrumental in making the Gazebo a reality. For over 200 years Demarest residents have striven to preserve and protect its beauty. It is truly a nice place to live.

Demarest prides itself in its volunteers, who make our town a caring and safe community. There are many volunteer opportunities and all efforts are appreciated . . . . It's Your Town . . . . So Please Get Involved.

Written By Constance R. De Mott,  
Former President, Demarest Historical Association (1976)

Edited & Updated By Demarest Nature Center Association  
(1995)