

## BOROUGH OF DUMONT COMMUNITY FORESTRY MANAGEMENT PLAN COMMUNITY OVERVIEW – PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

### A. HISTORY OF THE BOROUGH OF DUMONT:

In 1966, Dr. Charles A. Selzer described Dumont as “one of the small towns along the eastern seaboard which has always been and will continue to be part of a much larger canvas.”<sup>1</sup> As we contemplate a management plan for our now-urban forest, it is useful to remember what was here and what has changed over the last four hundred years. Trees have provided not just a lovely green backdrop or landmarks to the generations but have held historic artifacts, been used in advertising to attract new people to our lovely community, stood as memorials to loved ones who have died, and have quietly worked to improve our neighborhoods.

#### 1. COLONIAL ERA:

The Hackensack Valley is historically a temperate deciduous forest surrounding the Hackensack River. Until the early 1600s it was inhabited by the Lenni-Lenape nation who lived in the wooded areas. Oratam was known as the Great Sachem of the *Ackingh-sacks* (Hackensacks) who lived in the area of present-day Ridgefield-Bogota. Their relatives, the Tappans, occupied the area north of New Bridge Road to Tappan. David Demarest, a Frenchman and Huguenot, obtained an “Indian Deed” from the Tappan Indians in 1677. He eventually acquired over 7,000 acres.

It is well known that some time in the late 1600s the area between New Bridge Road and Tappan, including present-day Dumont was called Schraalenburgh (pronounced *Skrawlenburg*), the Dutch *schraalen* freely translated as “scraggly hill,”<sup>2</sup> referring to the rocky terrain.

In the ensuing century French Huguenots such as the Demarests, Scotts as the Christies, Dutch such as the Quackenbushes and Poles like the Zabriskies settled the area and developed extensive farmland. Slaves were a matter of business on these early plantations, and the “scraggly” terrain was transformed to well-cultivated fields. Any trees left standing would have been near the main homes and roads, sometimes used as landmarks.

Joost Zabriskie built a stone homestead in 1712 that still stands at 2 Colonial Court in Dumont. Zabriskie had a gristmill and a fulling mill operating on the Long Swamp Brook. While examining old deeds and surveys, one, dated 1796, contained a descriptive reference to “the vault near the black oak sapling.” It was Joost Zabriskie’s burial vault, built at Dixon and Prospect Aves. Traces of only three such burial vaults have been found in Bergen County. This was an exciting discovery. In an interview with Everett B. Cole, born in 1891, he recalled “as a small child my grandfather would take me for a walk to the mill-pond, and we would pass the crumbling vault as we walked down the wooded slope. In 1900, Benjamin Oldis, custodian of the Woodside Cemetery, removed the remains from the hillside and reinterred them in an unmarked grave in the

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cemetery.” The sapling had grown to a giant oak by 1954 when Adolph Boecher who built a house on the filled-in site, on Dixon Ave., cut it down.<sup>2</sup>



The Joost Zahriskie homestead and mills as they might have appeared in the early 1700s. (Drawing by Joel M. Alshuler)

According to Gen. Sir Henry Clinton, Schraalenburgh was the most dangerous place on the American Continent during the Revolutionary War. The bountiful crops, cattle, and the extensive supply of wood for fuel made the farms of the area a rich preserve for the foraging troops of both armies and marauding gangs of outlaws.<sup>4</sup>

Evidence of the embattled Schraalenburgh emerged in 1998 when Bergen County workers were removing a “mammoth” Norway Maple near the Inganamort strip mall northwest of the Camp Merritt monument at Madison Avenue. Suddenly the chain-saw started “shooting sparks” and the workers found embedded in the tree a 2¼” cannonball.<sup>5</sup> Several theories arose regarding how the ordnance came to be lodged in the tree; Mr. John E. Spring, Historian of the Borough of Cresskill, favors this one: *A regiment of Tories (Loyalists) marched on “The Road to the New Dock,” present day Madison Avenue, attacking locals with musket and field guns, leaving death and destruction in their wake. The attack occurred on a Sunday in May when the local militiamen were attending services at the church next to Cooper’s Pond. When word of the attack reached the church in present-day Bergenfield, the men rode north on Prospect Avenue and east on Madison, and as they approached the enemy, the cannon shots were fired.*

The community at Schraalenburgh had been torn asunder in the decades leading up to the time of the Revolution from terrible conflicts and divisions within the church, which tore families apart. The further division between patriots and loyalists ruined lives and caused untold destruction of homes and the landscape.

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Washington Avenue is named for George Washington who led the Continental Army from Tappan to Liberty Pole, riding his horse past the demolished Banta Homestead (the present Dixon Homestead Library) in 1780.



George Washington leading the Continental Army past the ruined Banta homestead on August 22, 1780. The rebuilt homestead is now the Dumont Public Library. (Drawing by Joel M. Altshuler)

In the years following the war, much was rebuilt, and Schraalenburgh continued to exist primarily as a rural farming hamlet until 1883 when the West Shore Railroad transformed the community.

### 2. THE 1800S:

The railroad brought new leadership to Palisades Township, as it had come to be called. Charles R. Osborn, an importer of fine wines, purchased a lovely home, which was soon called the “Osborn House.” It was situated on about five acres, which ran south from



Osborn’s Hill on E. Madison Ave. along Chestnut Street, lined with fine old trees.<sup>6</sup> Dumont Clarke was president of the American Exchange Bank, New York City, for many years, purchased the Osborn home and in 1894 became the first mayor of the newly incorporated “Borough of Schraalenburgh.” In 1898 the name was changed to the “Borough of Dumont” to honor our first mayor.

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Developers like Boston Land Company and Kensington Land Company began enticing potential lot-buyers from New York City with spectacular advertisements, refreshments and tours, and the people began to move out to the country.

### 3. THE 1900s:



By 1900 the borough's population had reached 634 and within the next decade it had grown to 1,763. There was little change in the appearance of the town, however, which retained much of its fields and woodland. Dumont Realty Company's

1906 promotion brochure, describes the area: "Dumont is not a treeless farm... Its streets are shaded by stately trees, and its houses present an air of comfort and refinement... where nature is at her best... where a trip to her woods is only a matter of minutes."<sup>7</sup>

In 1917 construction began of an enormous camp, the location chosen for its proximity to 2 railroads and Alpine Landing. More than a million American soldiers passed through Camp Merritt on their way to serve in "the war to end war," and on their return. The only reminder of the enormous embarkation camp is the monument at the circle, and some dogwoods planted at Memorial Park to remember our fallen heroes.

The twentieth century was marked by a great movement to the suburbs, of which Dumont became typical, with developments of homes, building of schools and creation of public parks for renewal and play. In 1951 a short movie was made, describing "MY TOWN—DUMONT":

*We are a commuting people, departing by bus or train—bankers, financiers, sales girls, secretaries, architects, professors, students, artists, artisans, lawyers, dentists, and doctors. In the cool of the evening we return to a community free from smoke or smog. The air is pure, clear crisp—where birds carol in melodious notes of welcome to a town sedate, calm, quiet, and clean. A delightful place of shaded streets lined with pleasant, homey homes and*



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*gardens most attractively informal, with all the amenities for happiness and contentment. Travel where you may, you will find no place more attractive in its simplicity than my town.*



*Early picture of Dixon Homestead (with 2 trees).* In 1944 it was noted that the cooper beech tree in front of the library is considered to be one of the finest specimens in the county and has been preserved from the ravages of destructive insects by expert treatment.<sup>8</sup>



*According to library records,* the old copper beech tree continued to receive care (feeding and trimming) but declined in 1993. In 1995 it was in need of intensive care but there were no funds to save it and in late 1996 it was removed. Library records showed that in January 1997 the stump was scheduled for removal.<sup>9</sup>



In February 1997 \$100 was donated by Carol Banicki's fifth grade class at Grant School. A new copper beech tree was planted in late April 1997.<sup>9</sup> The young tree (at right, growing in front of the new wing) is currently not being tended professionally but appears to be thriving.

By the end of the twentieth century virtually all of Dumont had been developed, and a new kind of expansion had begun. Families had become dependent on two incomes; property owners were desirous of increased square footage within their homes and began outsourcing the exterior care of their homes to landscape professionals in order to maximize their leisure time.

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In 1997 an old home on Washington Avenue was torn down and a developer introduced Washington Court, a cul-de-sac with six single-family homes. A healthy white birch tree over 100 years old stood alongside one of the new homes that the developer promised to try to save but couldn't guarantee that the new road hadn't damaged the root system. Within a year the birch was taken down.<sup>10</sup>

### 4. THE YEAR 2000 AND BEYOND:

The development trends of the 1990's continue with property owners increasing interior living space with "add-a-level" renovations, seeking variances for larger footprints for house on their lots, doubling or tripling the width of driveways to allow for more and larger vehicles, installing backyard swimming pools, etc. Part of this process involved the removal of many trees, and in some cases the homeowners removed all plantings. Trees that are planted tend to be small exotic specimens (Flowering Dogwood, Japanese Maple, Callery Pear), not native or larger species.

2005 saw the beginning of construction at all five public schools, causing a number of healthy trees on public land to be removed. Grant School students mourned one large oak tree behind their school that was removed for the new construction.



In January 2006 a small group of concerned citizens came together to *speak for the trees*. The AD HOC COMMITTEE FOR THE FORMATION OF A SHADE TREE COMMISSION in the Borough of Dumont began work by planning to develop a Community Forestry Management Plan under the NJ Shade Tree and Community Forestry Assistance Act, and to initiate activities required to have Dumont become a Tree City USA by the Arbor Day Foundation. The committee received a grant from the New Jersey Division of Parks and Forestry to develop a five-year plan to manage trees in the borough. Three members completed CORE Training by the New Jersey Community Forestry Council and three attended Tree Planting Training by the New Jersey Tree Foundation.

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On April 29<sup>th</sup> the group hosted DUMONT ARBOR DAY 2006 at the Dixon Homestead Public Library, where a red oak (NJ state tree) was planted. Librarian Carolyn Blowers presented a list of books purchased with the \$275 donated by local businesses and private individuals. Twenty winners of an Art, Photography and Poetry contest were named and Mayor Matt McHale proclaimed the day as ARBOR DAY IN THE BOROUGH OF DUMONT.

As we look to the future the Committee anticipates a survey of trees on public lands to be completed, the implementation of a Tree Ordinance and continued focus on public awareness and education about the benefits of maintaining and caring for mature trees.

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### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Altshuler, Introduction

<sup>2</sup> 1944 *HISTORY of DUMONT*, p. 5

<sup>3</sup> Altshuler, p. 119

<sup>4</sup> *Walking Tour*

<sup>5</sup> Conversation with John E. Spring, Historian of the Borough of Cresskill, May 19, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Altshuler, p. 88

<sup>7</sup> Altshuler, p. 97

<sup>8</sup> 1944 *HISTORY of DUMONT*, p. 12

<sup>9</sup> Conversation with Carolyn Blowers, Librarian of Dixon Homestead Library on May 9, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Conversation with Carol Banicki, Historian of the Borough of Dumont on May 5, 2006.

### Bibliography:

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*BLASTS from the PAST*, by Raphael Lewis, reporter for THE RECORD, August 19, 1998.

*DUMONT HERITAGE: Old Schraalenburgh, New Jersey*, by H. Jeanne Altshuler, 1969.

*GUIDE TO DUMONT*, presented by the Dumont Jaycees and Dumont Chamber of Commerce, 1974

*HISTORY of DUMONT (Formerly Schraalenburgh)*, Issued to Commemorate 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Borough's Incorporation, 1944.

*My Town—Dumont*, by World Wide Association of Movie Makers, 1952.

*250 Years at Old North Church*, a talk by John E. Spring, 1973