

## NATURAL BEAUTY: SOMERSET COUNTY PARKS

By Clifford W. Zink

*Published in October 2013 by the  
Somerset County Park Foundation*

The Somerset County Park Foundation's new book, *Natural Beauty: Somerset County Parks*, chronicles the remarkable inception and growth of one of the finest county park systems in New Jersey and perhaps in the nation.

Businessmen and political leaders worked tirelessly to establish the Somerset County Park Commission in 1956 by public referendum, and they adopted a visionary plan to preserve prime open space and provide excellent recreational opportunities for the public. Since that time, inspired public officials and professional staff have implemented and expanded the plan into a countywide network of 26 parks encompassing more than 13,500 acres.

Somerset County parks today include award-winning facilities like the Environmental Education and Equestrian Centers at Lord Stirling Park, the horticultural centers at Colonial Park and Leonard J. Buck Garden, the Torpey Athletic Center, and the Neshanic Valley Golf Course. The Parks also contain exceptional landscapes and natural areas like Natirar and Sourland Mountain Preserve, the largest county park in the New Jersey.

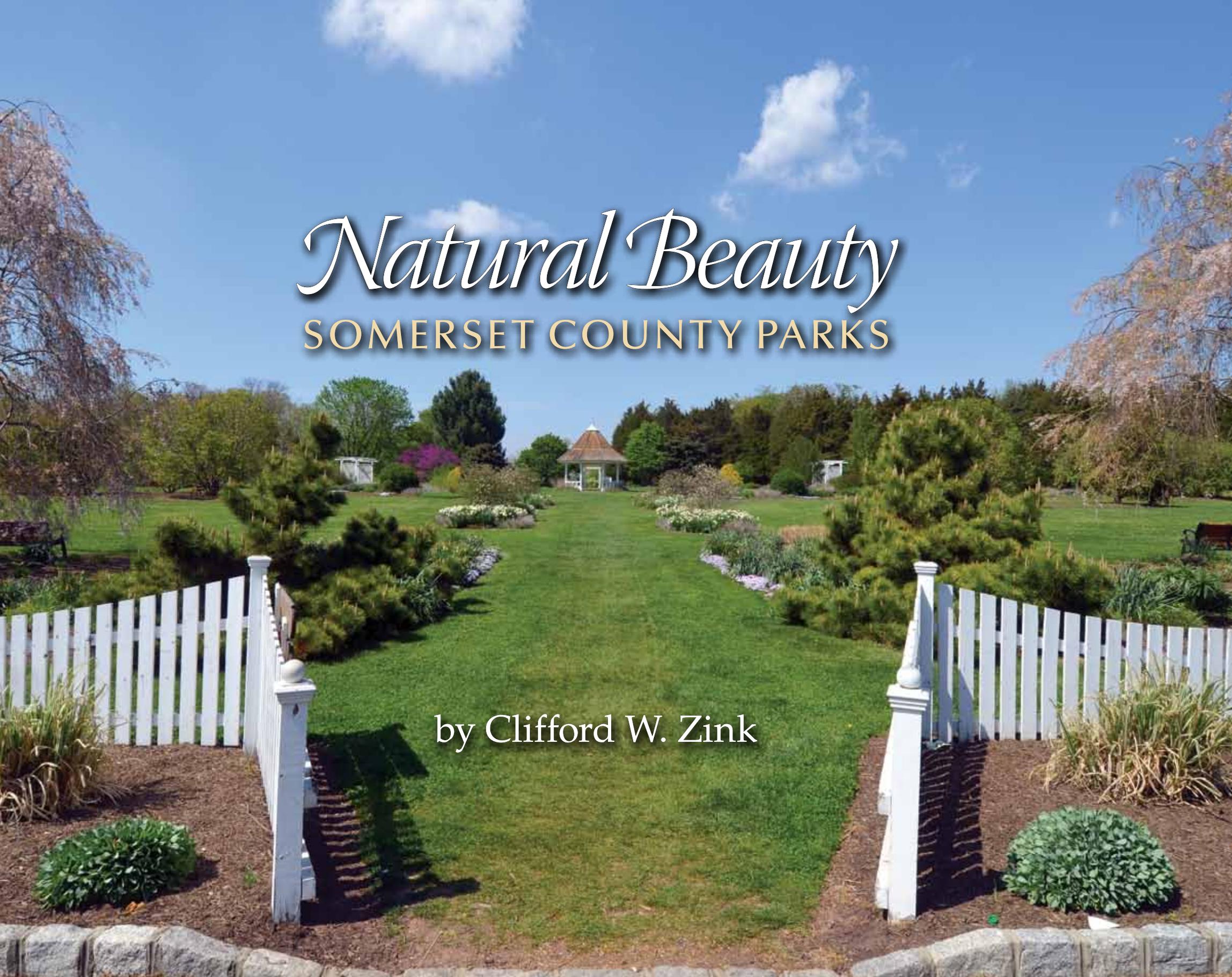
*Natural Beauty* traces the development of Somerset County's park system from its roots in the County's agricultural past through its evolution over nearly six decades into an organization utilizing creative public-private partnerships to preserve open space and serve more than 2,000,000 visitors and program participants annually. The book highlights information and excerpts from historic documents and interviews with former and present elected officials, commissioners, directors, planners, naturalists, rangers, and recreation staff. With 425 illustrations, the book also features sections on each of the County's 26 parks.

Clifford Zink, a resident of Princeton, NJ, is an award-winning historian, preservation consultant, and author of five books on New Jersey's historic landscapes and industries.

The Somerset County Park Foundation was established in 1994 to enhance Somerset County Parks and the experience of visitors with special facilities, equipment and programs.

*Natural Beauty* is available at the Somerset County Park Commission Headquarters 355 Milltown Road, Bridgewater NJ 08807 for a \$40 donation. For more information, please call 908 722-1200 ext. 236.

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# *Natural Beauty*

## SOMERSET COUNTY PARKS

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**SOMERSET COUNTY:  
PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS,  
CHARLES K. AGLE, 1956.**

The County enjoys unique potential advantages. The wooded Watchung Mountains in the north and the northeast, and the Sourlands in the southwest provide a beautiful setting for parks and low density residential use not available in southern New Jersey.

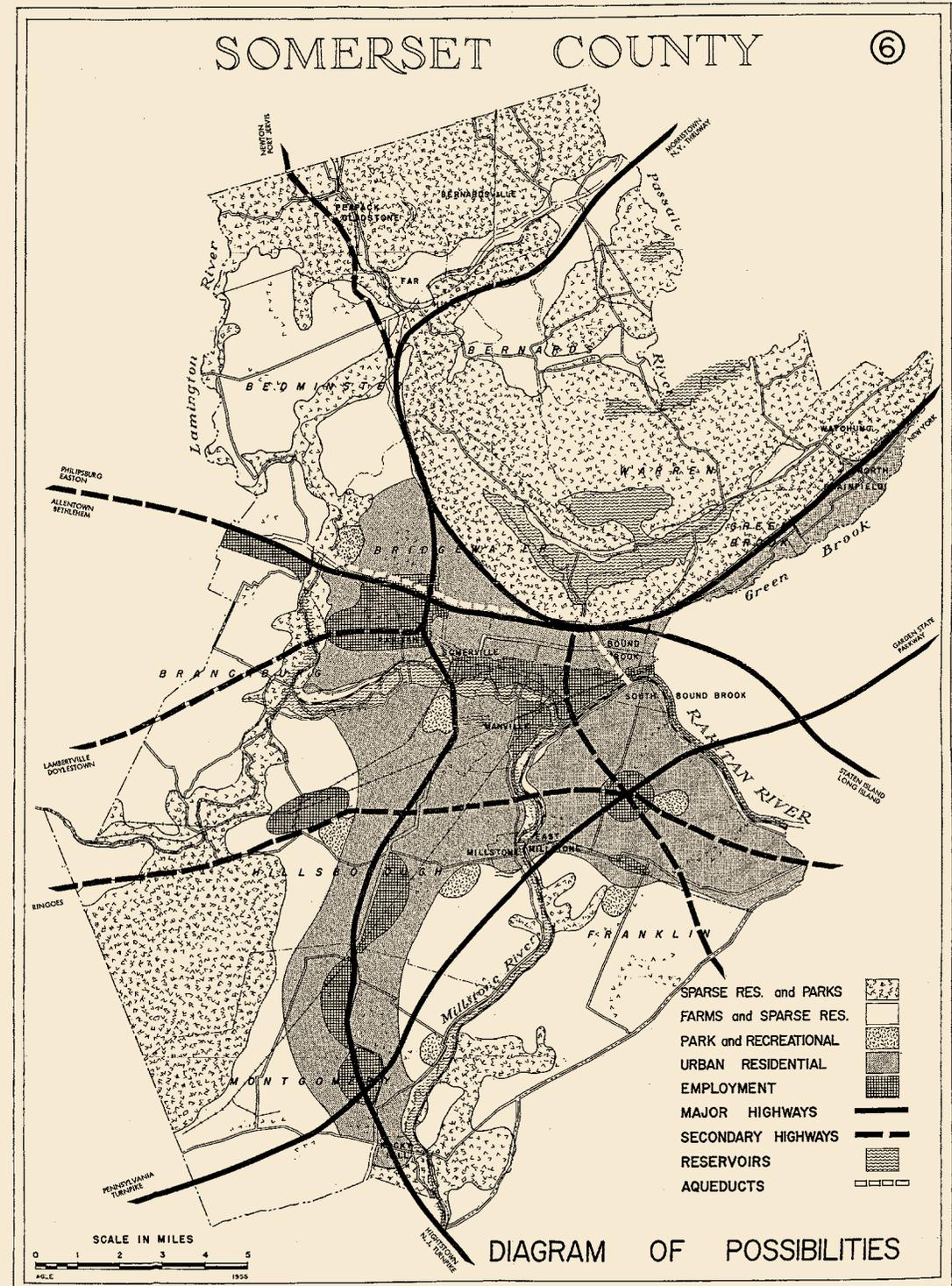
The flat land and good building conditions in the balance of the county provide opportunities for industrial and urban residential development not possible in northern New Jersey. Somerset County can achieve the best balance between attractiveness and livability, and economic prosperity, of any County in the State.

Some parks should be provided in the northern half of the County, but these may be more in the nature of forest reservations, since compact residential use in that area is unlikely.

Park land in Bridgewater, Hillsborough, Montgomery, and Franklin is of major importance. These areas probably will have complete urban subdivision and development in the future, and potentially can become as crowded and deficient in open land as Essex and Bergen.

The immediate support and formation of a County Park Commission is highly desirable.

**Figure A8:** "Diagram of Possibilities."



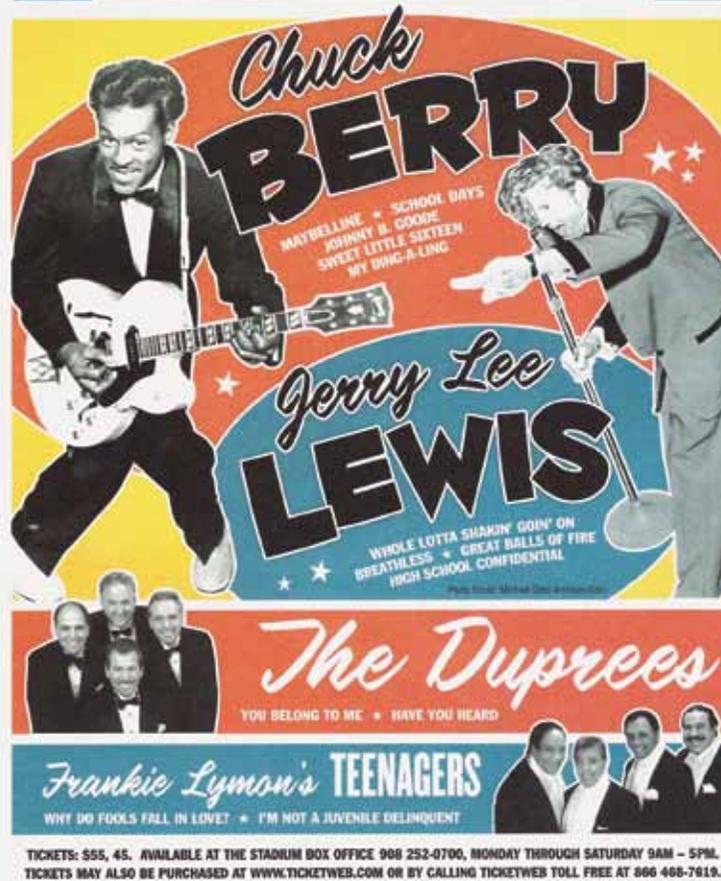


**Figure E20:** Gulf Coast Hurricane Relief Concert at Duke Island Park, October 2005.

**Figures E21-22:** (right & below) Famed musicians Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis thrilled the sellout crowd at the Park Commission's 50 Years of Rock and Roll Concert at Commerce Bank Ballpark in 2006.

# COMMERCE BANK BALLPARK SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 24 5:30PM

1956 SOMERSET COUNTY PARK COMMISSION 50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION 2006



In November, 2006, Park Commission President Fred Quick and Secretary-Director Ray Brown welcomed more 300 officials, friends and staff at the Bridgewater Marriott to celebrate the Park Commission's 50th anniversary. As Quick noted:

*This celebration represents more than a half century of dedication, dreams, and fulfillment of many plans.*

*There are many stories along the way—and many staff who have always believed in providing the best facilities, programs, and services. The 82 national and state awards bestowed on the Park Commission testify to the veracity of that statement.*

Rocque Dameo stepped down from the Commission in 2007 after serving 29 years, including as Chairman of the Open Space Advisory Committee from 1991 to 1998, and as Commission President from 1998 to 2005 (Fig.E23). The Freeholders appointed him in 1978 to take the place of his father, Rocco Dameo, who had served for 10 years.

Steven Fuerst was elected President of the Park Commission in 2007, and with the acquisition of 16 parcels of land totaling 394 acres, the County's Recreation and Open Space Inventory surpassed the 10,000-acre mark to a total of 10,161. With the assistance of the Delaware and Raritan Greenway, the Freeholders added 127 acres, including the 90-acre Hornickel property, to the Sourland Mountain Preserve, raising its total acreage to more than 3,000 acres.

The Freeholders also acquired the 197-acre Maverick Construction Company on the Raritan River in Hillsborough and Manville. Freeholder Director Robert Zaborowski noted that "This addition of almost 200 acres is a tremendous asset to our preservation efforts in the Raritan River Greenway." About half the site included the former Manville Landfill, which has been capped and will remain unused, while the remainder of the property is slated for passive recreation.

The Park Commission paid tribute to our servicemen and women in 2006 when it was approached by local businessman Frank Valanzola, who along with local service organizations, wanted to host a bocce tournament to raise funds to send care packages



**Figure E23:** Frank Valanzola, center, spearheaded a bocce tournament in Colonial Park in 2007 to raise funds for care packages for American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

After the Bound Brook/Washington Valley Reservoir was decommissioned for water supply in the 1970s, the lake level was lowered several feet to comply with dam safety regulations. The County acquired the reservoir from Elizabethtown Water Company in 1993, and the 21-acre lake today provides habitat for waterfowl and aquatic animals and a beautiful destination for hikers.



The Commission's Fourth of July Family Festival, begun in 1967, notably attracts more than 10,000 visitors to North Branch Park. Entertainers perform folk, country, and American music from the park's main stage, while children's performers conduct sing-a-longs and magic shows under its pavilion. Fife and drum corps stroll the grounds and legions of soldiers demonstrate life in a Revolutionary War camp. Family members of all ages meet costumed characters, play games, and children have their faces painted. At nightfall, spectacular fireworks illuminate the sky.





With its gently sloping farm fields and pastures, the Dunn Farm was ideally suited for conversion to active recreation and events. With nearly a mile of frontage along the Raritan River, the park provides habitats for herons, egrets, and waterfowl, and opportunities for visitors to enjoy fishing, picnicking, and hiking along the banks. North Branch attracted more than 400,000 visitors in 2012.





In 1968, the Commission hired Rudolf W. van der Goot, a Dutch horticulturalist who had worked at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden and the Duke Foundation Gardens in Hillsborough, as the horticulturalist for Colonial Park. Retaining the estate garden's office, walkways, reflecting pool, and bed designs, van der Goot created the Rose Garden that has become nationally prominent among horticulturalists and rose enthusiasts. He designed the west section of the garden in the style of Dutch rose gardens, and he also established an Arboretum and a new Perennial Garden at the park.

The Colonial Park gardens today contain thousands of specimen plants. With 4,000 rose bushes and nearly 300 varieties, the Rudolf van der Goot Rose Garden has been called "a living encyclopedia of roses." The Commission named the rose garden for van der Goot in 1981 as a tribute to all effort he put into creating it. The garden is an accredited for All-American Rose Selections displays of new varieties each year.





The Millicent Fenwick Walk in the Rose Garden features polyantha roses and honors the four-term U.S. Congresswoman from Bernardsville (top, left).

In 1980, van der Goot and Lynn Loveland designed and planted a "Sensory and Fragrance Garden for the Blind and Handicapped," sponsored by the Franklin Lions Club. The Fragrance and Sensory Garden features raised beds and Braille labels designed to be of special interest to visitors with visual or physical disabilities. The sunken garden is surrounded by a stone wall and raised beds, enabling visitors to easily touch the special plants and enjoy their fragrance and texture.

Over the years, numerous other clubs, as well as corporations and individuals have generously supported the enhancement of the Colonial Park Gardens, which have become a prime destination for thousands of garden enthusiasts each year.



The acclaimed Morgan Pellowski Playground features state-of-the-art innovative and inclusive play equipment for children of all ages and abilities. The “Evos” play system encourages imaginative play and fitness with no prescribed entry points to flex both mental and physical muscles.

Bocce courts, built in 2007 for a tournament to raise funds for U.S. troops, attract both local leagues and casual players. Dogs and their owners abound in the 3-acre fenced leash-free area in which dogs are free to roam and play.





## 6. LORD STIRLING PARK ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION CENTER AND LORD STIRLING STABLE, *Bernards Township*

• 1967 – 429 ACRES; 2013 – 981 ACRES

THE lowlands of the Passaic River Valley in northwest Somerset County form the western part of the “Great Swamp,” a wetlands remnant in Somerset and Morris Counties of the 30-mile long Glacial Lake Passaic that formed with the retreat of the Wisconsin Glaciation—the last age—approximately 18,000 years ago. After the lake drained about 10-12,000 years ago, Native Americans followed game into the region as part of their migration into present day New Jersey.

William Alexander, who was born in New York but known as Lord Stirling, inherited several hundred acres in Basking Ridge in 1756 and built a manor that burned down in the mid 19th Century. In the 1890s, Dr. Charles Frederick Baker, a Newark physician, established a cattle farm west of the manor site. John Jacob Astor VI purchased the farm and expanded it to 429 acres.

In his 1958 *Park & Recreation Plan for Somerset County*, Russell Van Nest Black highlighted the Passaic Valley lowlands as one of the five best areas for a County park. With “wide floodplains of swampy woodlands,” marshes, farm fields, meadows, and drier forests, the river valleys remained largely open and susceptible to postwar development.

A proposal to build a regional jetport on the Great Swamp led local conservationists including Helen Fenske and Marcellus Dodge, owner of Hartley Farms, and others to form the Great Swamp Wildlife Committee in 1961 to raise funds to preserve the land. Their efforts led to the establishment of the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in Morris County in 1964. In 1965 the Committee established the North Jersey Conservation Foundation, now known as the New Jersey Conservation Foundation. The Foundation provided \$75,000, donated by Sarah Mellon Scaife of Western Pennsylvania to preserve “prized unspoiled land in the Great Swamp Basin,” to Somerset County to purchase the “Astor Farm” in 1967. The County used grants from the N.J. Green Acres Program and the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund to purchase adjoining properties, including Lord Stirling’s manor site, and the Commission named the Park in his honor for his service as a general in the Continental Army.





With three of the four other County golf courses at or near capacity for golf rounds in 1999, the Park Commission engaged Hurdzan/Fry Environmental Golf Course Design of Columbus, Ohio, to design a sustainable, world class golf course that would preserve as much of the natural environment of the Branchburg farms as possible.

Hurdzan/Fry designed three distinctive par 36, 9-hole courses to fit individual portions of the landscape: a Ridge Course on the highest elevations with the best views, a Meadows Course on former agricultural fields, and a Lake Course on the lower areas closest to the South Branch.

The 350-acre Championship Course can be played between 5,050 yards and 7,200 yards. Each of the 27 holes has five tee boxes and presents an inviting challenge to golfers of all skills. A par 32, 9-hole Academy Course provides learning opportunities for new and improving golfers.

The 12,000 sq. ft. Neshanic Valley Clubhouse includes a Pro Shop, Grill Room, and a Community Room for meetings, banquets, and events.

The environmentally sensitive design features a links-style layout that takes advantage of the natural topography with rolling fairways, three ponds, and large undulating greens. The Commission has set aside nearly 80 additional acres for future parkland.



## Somerset County Park Commission Donors

### MAJOR DONATIONS OF LAND

1958	Arthur and Jean Tuttle, 47 acres, Washington Valley Park
1958	George Davis, 16 acres, Green Knoll Golf Course
1959	John's Manville Corporation, 16 acres, Washington Valley Park Houdaille Construction Company, 74 acres, Washington Valley Park (through Bridgewater Township)
1959	Anna V. Walter, 93 acres, Duke Island Park
1967	Merck & Company, 8 acres, North Branch Park
1970	Elizabeth Babbott, 65 acres, Little Brook Sanctuary
1971	Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Co., 650 acres, Sourland Mountain Preserve
1972	Asa and Norma Farr, 45 acres, Sourland Mountain Preserve
1973	Bell Laboratories, 6 acres, Sourland Mountain Preserve
1974	Mr. and Mrs. Stanford C. Mallory, 42 acres, Little Brook Sanctuary Mr. and Mrs. Wilmer Kingsford, 5 acres, Little Brook Sanctuary
1975	Ralph T. Reeve, 35 acres, Ralph T. Reeve Cultural Center
1976	Helen Buck, 35 acres, Leonard J. Buck Garden
1976	Bertram F. and Corella Bonner, 205 acres, Quail Brook Golf Course
1997	Hovnanian Development, Inc., 9 acres, North Branch Greenway Park
2005	Bridgewater Township, 8 acres, Raritan River Greenway
2006	Moir Hogan, 10 acres, North Branch Greenway
2006	Bridgewater Township, 6 acres, Green Knoll Tennis Center
2010	Hillsborough Township, 24 acres, Sourland Mountain Preserve

### DONORS AND SUPPORTERS

Access Fund	Coach Stop Saddlery, LTD
Advance Realty Group	Paul Consiglio
AJ Santye & Company	Cooper and Rodgers LLC
All Risk Property Damage Experts	Courier News
Art Print Company	Dameo Trucking
ATON Computing	Deer Park Water
AT&T	Della Pello Paving
Automated Climate Controls, Inc.	Delta Dental
Barton Nursery, Inc.	DiFrancesco, Bateman, Coley, Yospin, Kunzman, Davis, Lehrer, & Flaum
Base Camp Adventure Outfitters	DoubleTree Hotel
Basking Ridge Fire Co. #1 and First Aid Squad	Doris Duke
Senator Kip Bateman	Eastern Mountain Sports
Bateman Agency	Efinger Sporting Goods
Bell Atlantic	Ernst & Young, LLP
Belle Mead Nursery/Hillsborough Irrigation	Ethicon
Bellemead Development Corporation	F & G Mechanical
Bernards Township Road Department	Farmers' Insurance Company of Flemington
Bernardsville Garden Club	Kathy and Alan Fischetti
Assemblyman Peter Biondi	Flemington Car and Truck Country
Blue Ridge Mountain Sports	Four Seasons Nursery and Landscape Company
Bradley Gardens Community Action Committee	Friends of Lord Stirling Stable
Bradley Gardens Rescue Squad	Fullerton Automotive Group
Brandstetter Carroll, Inc.	Fulton Community Bank
Bridgewater Marriott	Gallagher Advertising
Callaway Golf	Garden Club of America
Cammps Hardware and Lawn Products	Garden Club of Somerset Hills
Central Jersey Road Runners	Gladstone Equestrian Association
Chimney Rock Hawk Watch	Gourmet Events Catering
Chimney Savers	Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge
Chubb Corporation	Great Swamp Watershed Association
Country Hills Volunteer Fire Department	Chuck Hackel
	Hale Insurance Brokerage
	Helen R. Buck Foundation
	Hesco Electric Supply
	Hillsborough Massage Therapy