

NJS Presents**Exhibit Reviews****In this Issue:*****Raritan Landing: A Permanent Exhibit at East Jersey Old Town Village*****By Maxine N. Lurie and Richard Veit****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v2i2.58>**

This review inaugurates a new section in New Jersey Studies: Exhibit Reviews. The intent of this section is to provide readers with timely information about new exhibits relating to New Jersey history and related fields, and to assess the scholarship behind and potential impact of those exhibits.

Raritan Landing: A Permanent Exhibit at East Jersey Old Town Village, 1050 River Road, Piscataway, N.J. Open M-F 8:30 to 4; Sunday 1-4. The exhibit is provided by the Middlesex County Cultural & Heritage Commission and Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders, with funding from the New Jersey Historical Commission/Division of the Department of State, the New Jersey Department of Transportation, and the Federal Highway Administration. Curated by Mark Nonesteid, then Director of Exhibits and Programs with Guest Curator, Rebecca Yamin.

Raritan Landing was an eighteenth century settlement built in Piscataway just above New Brunswick, which was on the other side of the river. As far as sailing vessels could navigate, it developed as a trading center where imported goods were unloaded for local sale, and agricultural produce was collected for shipment to New York and Atlantic ports. A number of warehouses were constructed for storage, along with homes, shops, and other buildings. Because it was built on low lands along the river, flooding was an issue. But more important was the

Revolutionary War, with the use of some of the buildings for a British cantonment, and the soldiers' destruction of buildings and property. Despite some post-war rebuilding, afterwards the community declined as new roads, railroads, and the Delaware and Raritan canal favored the development of New Brunswick.

By the middle of the twentieth century Raritan Landing had disappeared, much of the land was later incorporated into Johnson Park. With the exception of the Low and Metlar-Bodine houses on the bluff above, its history had been buried under grass and trees. This community was rediscovered in the 1970s during an archaeological survey for a proposed sanitary sewer. Archaeological testing revealed traces of the former community. Since then several later projects (a consequence of the widening of Route 18), and research into historical records, have provided much information about the lost community, and tens of thousands of artifacts, including architectural items, ceramics, glassware, and personal items. Particularly noteworthy is the rich collection of military artifacts relating to the British occupation of the community during the American Revolution.

This permanent exhibit, located in the Runyon House, tells the story of the Raritan Landing community, and of the archeologists who explored it. Included in the exhibit are numerous artifacts from the excavations, maps of the area, portraits of those who lived there, and recreated shops. All the images and items are clearly labeled containing information gleaned through research.

The curators have considered their audience, providing information in formats suitable to all ages. They are however limited by the layout of the historic building used for the exhibit, so that visitors proceed from topic to topic, but not necessarily in chronological order. Thus a

section on Native Americans is on a second floor landing, where it fits physically but not in terms of period.

The first room, "Introduction to Raritan Landing," introduces visitors to the site and provides the broad historic context both for the exhibit and for the archaeological excavations. This is followed by a second room titled, "Introducing the Past." The exhibits in this room provide a basic introduction to archaeology. Specialized techniques like ground penetrating radar and dendrochronology that have informed the research at Raritan Landing are introduced. The first floor rooms also contain a reconstructed store, fully furnished with reproduction historic artifacts.

Visitors then go upstairs where they are introduced to the original champion of Raritan Landing, C.C. Vermeule, a noted civil engineer and local historian, who grew up at the Landing and kept its memory alive through his publications. The 1978 sewer project that reidentified the site is discussed, as are the major excavations led by Joel Grossman and the Rutgers Center for Archaeological Research. Here a third room focuses on trade, and uses artifacts found at the site paired with documents and modern reproductions to illustrate life at the landing, thus including a recreated wharf and market. Other exhibits introduce us to the recent (2000s) excavations, the role of African-Americans in the colonial community, and the site's occupation by British and Hessian troops during the American Revolution. We also come face to face with the past in the portrait of John Bray, one of the traders who made Raritan Landing a going concern. Bray also served as local Judge, and his painting is one of very few contemporary illustrations that survive of Raritan Landing or its inhabitants. Artifacts are liberally employed to illustrate the historical events that shaped the landing. The exhibit closes with a mural of Raritan Landing today.

Several publications accompany the exhibit. The first, *Voices from Raritan Landing, An Educational Guide to a Colonial Port Community* (County of Middlesex, 2013), is designed for use by teachers and tells the stories of twenty-six people who lived there during the eighteenth century, written as first person accounts. *Raritan Landing Activities Guide: Uncovering a Forgotten Past* (Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission, 2014) contains lesson plans for use with High School students. This one is available on the Commission's website. The third *Rediscovering Raritan Landing* by Christee Curran, author and illustrator, is a story specifically written for younger children. And Rebecca Yamin's, *Rediscovering Raritan Landing: An Adventure in New Jersey Archaeology* (Prepared for The New Jersey Department of Transportation and The Federal Highway Administration, 1911), is a detailed account by an archeologist involved in the excavations for more than 40 years. It tells the story of the process of discovery, as well as what archaeology has told us about the Landing and those who lived there, and includes 107 illustrations, plus a bibliography. The volume is available as a downloadable PDF from the New Jersey Department of Transportation's website, see: <http://www.state.nj.us/transportation/works/environment/pdf/rediscoveringraritanlanding.PDF>

In addition to the exhibit and these popular publications, interpretive signage has been erected at select sites at Raritan Landing, a series of detailed technical reports were published on the excavations within the community—and are available in a small research library on site, and a website and video were also created.

Raritan Landing was, to steal a phrase from Henry Charlton Beck, one of New Jersey's "forgotten towns." Thanks to the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission's fine exhibit and several decades of archaeological research it is forgotten no more. Indeed, the exhibit is a model for how historical archaeology can be employed to help bring the past to life.

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