



## SOMERSET LAKE AND GAME CLUB: A BRIEF HISTORY

“It would be hard to find a club which is more picturesquely situated and with such ideal surroundings.”

*The (NY) Morning Telegraph* February 27, 1910

Standing nearly unchanged for more than 100 years, The Somerset Lake and Game Club (SL&GC) is not only picture perfect, it is a year-round sanctuary— a truly special place where we come to celebrate, to find solace, to enjoy friendships old and new, and to embrace nature and all its splendor. SL&GC is a magical place that welcomes you to an entirely different mindset the moment you turn into the driveway.

The founders of Somerset Lake and Game Club chose its location well, in a splendid ravine produced by the North Branch of the Raritan River. The setting is so natural that no one would guess that the land had been farmland purchased from eight local families. Nor would anyone imagine that the crescent shaped lake was a man-made creation formed by damming the North Branch of the Raritan River. Above the lake across the road, at an elevation where decades ago one could see all the way to Cushetunk Mountain and Round Valley, the same founders erected Somerset Hills Country Club with a nine-hole golf course and tennis courts.

### Historical Context

The fascinating story of the Club’s founding rests in the intertwined historical contexts of the post-Civil War era, “The Gilded Age” and the discovery of The Somerset Hills by some of the nation’s most important leaders of commerce and industry. Invention, industrialization, and mechanization all contributed to an overwhelming increase in wealth from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From 1870 to 1900, personal wealth boomed from \$30.4 billion to \$126.7 billion, and to \$254.2 billion by 1914. Of that explosion of wealth, 50% of the money was owned by less than 1% of the population, about 40,000 families and individuals. With so much excess capital, the newly rich could spend lavishly in their attempt to gain entrance into the society of the old-line upper class—a goal for the newly moneyed that was of utmost importance.

At the same time, the new business class was changing social and cultural landscapes by creating new institutions that are still in existence today: The Social Register (1887), the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution (1890), the Metropolitan Opera (1880), The National Arts Club (1898), and The Explorers Club (1904). All of these urban-born organizations provided meeting places where those of similar status and interests could gather. With the expansion of rail lines in various directions from urban hubs, well-heeled families escaped the unbearably long and hot summer months by visiting the country. Once in the country, they built and founded other types of clubs and organizations for socializing and activities that fit their lifestyle.

### The Somerset Hills

As Mark Hewitt writes in the Introduction to Jack Turpin and Barry Thomson’s, two volume set *The Somerset Hills*, the Upper Raritan River Valley “did not acquire a society cachet until the late 1880’s. It was then that a select group of wealthy families from both New Jersey and New York began to colonize the area around Morristown, spreading their houses south towards Bernardsville, and what are now Peapack-Gladstone, Far Hills and Bedminster as land became more scarce.”



The area's peaceful beauty and its low key 'social cachet' provided an ideal respite from day-to-day professional demands. Here public-spirited men would create places to gather for social occasions. In the surrounding areas, country and other clubs were established such as the Morristown Field Club (1881), The Morristown Club (1884), Morris County Golf Club (1895), and Baltusrol Golf Club (1895). About then, the wealthy Upper Raritan Valley residents had adopted a grander moniker for their new found summer venue of rolling hills, rivers and quietude—The Somerset Hills— with its epicenter The Bernardsville Mountain Colony.

### **Founding of the Club**

As Allison Wright Post, a son of local resident and prominent New York architect George B. Post, wrote in *Recollections of Bernardsville New Jersey 1871–1941*, “during the year 1894 the growth of the community at Bernardsville seemed to justify an effort to form a country club, and several public-spirited men joined in an enterprise to buy what seemed to them was real estate especially suitable for development for such club purposes with a view of offering it at cost for use by a club if one could be organized and sufficient money raised.”

Those “public-spirited men” were John Holme Ballantine, George Browne Post, Robert Livingston Stevens, and Edward Taylor Hunt Talmage. Each contributed \$8,000, the equivalent of nearly \$250,000 today, and they collectively purchased from eight local families a total of 365 acres (at an average cost of \$80 per acre!) along both sides of the North Branch of the Raritan River where they planned to develop a “Country Club.”

—John Holme Ballantine was a son of Scottish immigrant Peter Ballantine who had established a brewery in Newark in the 1840's. By the 1880's, P. Ballantine & Sons, with its distinctive trademark of three interlocking rings, had become one of the largest breweries in the world, and John Holme Ballantine was the company's president. The family's country estate was in Bernardsville. Their large brick and limestone Newark mansion, built in 1885, later became part of the Newark Museum.

—George Browne Post, descended from an old and socially prominent New York family, was one of the country's most prominent and influential architects of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Known as the “father of the tall building in New York” and the “dean of our American architects,” Post designed the iconic New York Stock Exchange, the Wisconsin state capitol, and was one of the founders in the 1870's of the Bernardsville “Mountain Colony” with his Claremont estate. One of his two architect sons, William Stone Post, designed the original clubhouse of the Somerset Hills Country Club on the hill above Ravine Lake, and likely also designed the Lake Club's boathouse.

—Robert Livingston Stevens was a member of what has been called America's “first family of inventors.” The Stevens family developed what had once been their large private estate along the Hudson River into what is now the City of Hoboken. Robert's father, Edwin, established and endowed Stevens Institute of Technology. Edwin and a brother were also instrumental in organizing the New York Yacht Club and headed the syndicate that developed the yacht *America*, for which the America's Cup is named.

—Edward Taylor Hunt Talmage was a railroad man and later a stockbroker on Wall Street. The Talmage family's ties to the Somerset Hills go back to the early 1700's. Edward's father, John Frelinghuysen Talmage, was a prominent Brooklyn physician, and other ancestors included a prominent theologian



and a mayor of the once-separate City of Brooklyn. A fine horseman and coachman, Edward Talmage took the lead in establishing the first Bernardsville Horse Show in 1902.

In 1896, the four men organized and conveyed the land they had purchased along the North Branch to The Ravine Association which then solicited additional funds from other local families for the purpose of developing a suitable country club. In their 1897 letter soliciting subscriptions for stock to raise \$50,000 in additional funds, the men wrote that the purpose was, "to build a Lake in the Ravine and stock it with fish . . . to build a boat house and bathing houses and purchase boats . . . to construct a Club House and sheds, Golf Links and Tennis Courts, and, if desired, a polo field."

The solicitation had raised nearly \$30,000 by June 1897. Shortly thereafter, C. Ledyard Blair, who was desirous of buying land on which to build his own large country house, stepped forward and offered to purchase between 150 and 200 acres on the west side of the North Branch of the river from the Ravine Association. The agreement included a combination of cash and a subscription of shares totalling \$17,000, thus, bringing total subscriptions to \$46,000, excluding the \$32,000 the four organizers had initially committed to purchase the land.

Once built, the flamboyant Blair, head of the then Wall Street investment firm Blair & Company, was legendary for his opulent 60,000 square foot residence, Blairsden, and his extravagant lifestyle would become the Lake Club's new neighbor. Blairsden, a private residence no longer in the Blair family, is still visible across the lake from the Boathouse when the leaves are off the trees and has its own amazing history.

By September 1897, the group of 12 subscribers agreed to move forward to construct a club house, golf links, and tennis courts on the hill on the east side of the North Branch, build the dam and lake, and develop a network of drives and paths to connect the various components of the new club. In 1899, once the facilities had been sufficiently advanced, the separate Somerset Hills Country Club was organized and obtained a lease from The Ravine Association to operate the club house, golf course, three grass tennis courts and the lake and boathouse.

From then until 1917, when Somerset Hills Country Club moved to its new and present location on the former Frederic Pepoon Olcott estate, Round Top, in Bernardsville, the lake was part of the country club, managed by a committee of members.

### **Building the Dam**

The Ravine Association had the huge task of creating the lake and hired George Washington Howell as the Chief Designer/Architect and Engineer for the Dam. Born near Morristown, Howell was a descendant of Edward Howell, a founder of the 1640 English settlement at Southampton, New York. He was chief engineer for the construction of several New Jersey railroads and an engineer for the Morris Aqueduct, Morris County, the Town of Morristown and many other local civil engineering projects.

Another Morristown native, Frank Stone Tainter was the Construction Engineer for the Dam and also had a railroad background. He had his own engineering firm in Bernardsville and for some years worked for the engineering firm of Edwin A. Stevens, Hoboken, one of the enterprises of the Stevens family. He was a Major in the Army Corps of Engineers in World War I and was in charge of the construction of the Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland.



The cornerstone for the Dam was laid on October 1, 1898 creating Ravine Lake.

### **Separation of the Club**

By 1917, golf had become increasingly popular and the club members wanted to play 18 holes instead of the nine offered by the Club. On top of the hill where the club house, golf links and tennis courts were located, there was insufficient land to add nine additional holes and so the country club moved to the Olcott estate, its current location.

A new Certificate of Incorporation for The Somerset Lake and Game Club was filed with the Clerk of Somerset County on December 6, 1917 and with the State of New Jersey on December 8, 1917:

**The corporation is formed for social, intellectual and recreative purposes, including particularly swimming, boating, fishing, skating and the conservation of game.**

Subsequently, a letter was sent to the members of Somerset Hills Country Club, having become unconnected with Somerset Lake and Game Club, advising them that the new Club will continue with the same mission and activities of the old club and urging them to become members. The membership of the Club was limited to 125. Sixteen old members of the Club, reading like a Who's Who of industry and finance, agreed to underwrite the financial obligations for the first year up to the amount of \$500 each to help ensure its success.

### **Acquisition of Additional Acreage**

The estate of C. Ledyard Blair, who, at one time, had been worth millions, had seen his fortune evaporate. His lavish spending, other residences, staff and his stable of horses had all taken their financial toll on his estate. Upon his death and settlement of his affairs, his heirs were unable to maintain the property with what monies were left.

In 1950, the Baptistine Sisters of the Nazarene (later called the Sisters of Saint John the Baptist) purchased 51 acres from the Blair estate "including Blairsden and the property on the westerly side of Ravine Lake" for \$65,000, the equivalent of \$692,000 today. In 1953, "when it was learned that a developer was negotiating with the Sisters to acquire 20 acres of lakefront real estate on which to build a 'bungalow colony' on one acre lots, the Somerset Lake and Game Club intervened." The purchase of the acreage from the Sisters provided SL&GC with rights of every parcel of land touching the lake, ensuring its beauty and tranquility will never change.

Today, we are grateful to our founders who envisioned and brought to life this treasure of nature tucked away in The Somerset Hills. We hope that the Club's membership continues to relish the opportunity to create lifelong memories with friends and family as generations have done before in the picturesque setting of SL&GC.

### **Sources:**

John W. Turpin and William Barry Thomson: "*The Somerset Hills—Volumes I and II*"  
W. Barry Thomson, historian — who generously shared his knowledge, historical material and time.  
Compiled with the assistance of member, Pamela Hull