



# Toms River Township Celebrates 250 Years Ago

By: Victoria Ford



A small semiquincentennial committee is hard at work planning a birthday celebration for the Township of Toms River, the likes of which come along only once every 250 years. The township will mark the special occasion June 24, but the festivities stretch out over much of a whole year.

Even while the planning is still underway the celebration has already begun, and it's taken many forms. A thousand copies of a special anniversary wall calendar for 2017 full of historic photos, facts, figures, people, places and things have been printed and are available to purchase for \$5. Commemorative T-shirts, mugs, water bottles and baseball hats have also been printed.

Monthly history and civics lessons are being planned, à la "Toms River Talks," Township Clerk and Historian Mark Mutter's panel discussion road show; the Ocean County Library main branch will screen "Toms River Blockhouse Fight," a documentary produced locally in 1976; and several community organizations are planning their own events in conjunction with the yearlong observance. The Ocean County Historical Society, for example, from May through the end of the year, will host an exhibition of artifacts, each with a story – about, for example, the local Civil Defense Council during the Cold War, evidence of which was found in the form of white army helmets discovered in the basement crawlspace in the older part of town hall. A look back in the old meeting minutes revealed what the helmets were used for.

Over the winter, a Christmas tree stood inside the Toms River municipal building, decorated with 250 ornaments handmade by students of Toms River Schools. That tree was an added attraction for the roughly 500 people who showed up for the Business Improvement District's annual tree lighting outside town hall – a scene that illustrates the love Toms Riverites feel for their town.

According to Mutter, the anniversary festivities are "not just for the government; this is about the community."

The anniversary theme will also run throughout this year's Food Fest, May 6, a town-run street fair that draws tens of thousands. This is about the 10th year of it, Mutter said. Opening ceremonies will be led by the Old Barracks Fife and Drums

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Corps; there will be civic organizations and other vendors, games and bands; and the fire company will have a beer and wine garden.

The year will end with a time capsule. One was made in 1992, for the 225th. The question was posed, what was life like in 1992? Another was made in 2006 in honor of the name change and with a theme of hope: collectibles, newspaper articles and other items were added. A full inventory hangs in the Clerk's office. That capsule will be opened in 2026.

The town's actual birthday (i.e. the passage of the legislative act) is June 24, 1767. This June's celebration will include the re-dedication of the newly revitalized Huddy Park, with great pomp and circumstance.

In 1767, there was not yet an Ocean County government, Mutter pointed out. A petition was filed in the Royal Legislature of the "Royal Colony of New Jersey" asking for a new town, called Dover, to be chartered in what was then the southern portion of Shrewsbury. So Dover would be 9 years older than the country itself. Dover accounted for the northern portion of modern-day Ocean County and its geography included what is now known as Lacey, Jackson, Lakewood and Brick. During the Revolutionary War, what is now Ocean County was part of Monmouth County.

Of note, New Jersey's last Colonial Governor, William Franklin (Ben's son), was appointed by George III in 1763 with help from Dad, who remained favorable toward the British until early 1770s, at which time father and son had a great rift. William spent the first half of 1776 under house arrest by colonial militiamen and was taken as a prisoner of war in July, after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and held in Connecticut for two years. Upon his release he moved to British-occupied New York City, where he served as President of the Board of Associated Loyalists. Eventually in 1782 William Franklin would authorize the attack on Toms River that led to the capture and hanging of Joshua Huddy.

The story goes Huddy was watching for the British to attack from the south, so he set up a lookout on a bluff at the top of Robbins Street. But the British surprised Huddy and his men by attacking from the east, having marched seven miles over land from Cranberry Inlet. A monument stone stands at the top of Robbins Street, placed there by the Daughters of the Revolution in 1930, in the approximate location of Huddy's post.

Toms River was always a patriot stronghold, with easy access to the bay and river, Mutter explained.

By 1798, the name was officially "the Township of" Dover, when New Jersey, by then a state rather than a colony, allowed for the creation of townships. That name stuck for 208 years, until in 2006 it was changed, by voter referendum, to the Township of Toms River.

According to the late Pauline S. Miller, Ocean County Historian, however, the first known record of Toms River as a place was recorded in 1712. Tom Luker was an English settler and honorary Unami Indian, and the namesake and founder of Toms River. The Luker Bridge, located in Huddy Park, dedicated in his honor in 1992, was spared in the reconstruction project that has been underway at the park since last summer.

Before Huddy Park became Toms River's first municipal park in 1905, according

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to Township Clerk Mark Mutter, it was Gowdy’s Island. By special referendum (in a vote of 191 to 12), the citizens approved a plan to acquire the swampland and backfill it with dredge material. It was renamed Huddy Park sometime in the 20th century.

Today it gets used for public and private events; “it truly is a community park,” Mutter said, looking out over the construction zone last fall. A set of three-part gazebos went up in the ’90s and had their green tops replaced about 10 years ago, he noted. Another gazebo with a wood shingle roof stands not far off.

The crew from R. Kremer and Son Marine Construction were replacing and shoring up a 450-foot stretch of bulkheading (both sides of the river), then laying irrigation, concrete and landscaping.

Site foreman Dennis Cofer is from the Silverton section of town. For him the job is meaningful, he said, because he has fond memories of the park as a kid. “I fished here,” he said. “It was due for a makeover.” It’s a tough location to maintain, at a major intersection where a lot of local traffic goes through, but once it’s spruced up, it will be a beloved landmark once more.

“It’s gonna look awesome when it’s done,” he said.

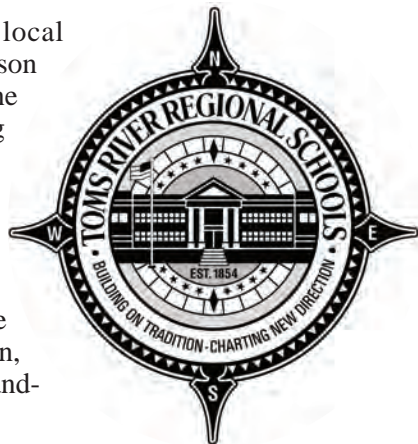
During the excavation process, the crew had pulled a lot of stuff out of the ground, he said, such as footings from old buildings, bottles, even bicycles.

“People go by in their little boats, saying how nice it looks,” he said.

According to Mutter, the original park, when it was created over 100 years ago, cost the town \$3,000. Today, the total cost to refurbish it is about \$1.6 million.

The impetus for the project was the bulkhead reconstruction, which accounts for a little over \$600,000. The bulkhead had been in urgent need of repair since Superstorm Sandy – a blessing in disguise, given the timing with the 250th. The remaining \$967,000 is for park improvements – central to which is the new Toms River Block House monument. The previous structure, a 15-by-30-foot replica of the original Toms River Block House, was placed there in 1976, but over the years it had become an “attractive nuisance” for vandals and hoodlums to hide out, so it was removed. The new version will be a wall, rather than an enclosure, with black metal silhouettes of patriot soldiers.

In a “historic fabric” design contest in the local high schools, three students, Sami Card, Allison Ruppe and Aubrey Binkley, came up with the soldiers’ silhouettes. The whole planning process took about six months, Mutter said, from the engineer’s plan to the incorporation of the students’ elements. For Mutter, the young people’s contributions are the most special part of the whole project. When he saw their work, “it was like, ‘boy, these are some neat ideas.’” They’re the next generation, the future of the town, they can tell their grand-kids, “I was there.”



The finished project will have a walking trail with benches through the park. The nine patriot soldiers killed defending Toms River will be honored.

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“The park tells the story of Toms River during Revolutionary times,” Mutter said. But the anniversary encompasses the town’s entire history.



*Huddy Park Renovations Under Construction*  
Photo credit: C & H Staff



## **2018 Local Arts & History Program Grant Applications Available This Summer**

Grant applications become available in late July/Early August. Grants are offered in Special Project Support and General Operating Support. These grants are competitively awarded based on project/program merit and other criteria. Grants are to be matched dollar for dollar by the organization.

Contact the Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission office at (732) 929-4779, or at [culturalheritage@co.ocean.nj.us](mailto:culturalheritage@co.ocean.nj.us) for more information, or to request an application at your earliest convenience. More information on the FY 2018 applications will be available on our website at <http://www.co.ocean.nj.us/ch/frmGrants.aspx> in late July or early August.

