

Towns of New Gretna and Bass River
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
Intersection of U.S. Highway 9 and
County Road 679
New Gretna
Burlington County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1031

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
TOWNS OF NEW GRETNA AND BASS RIVER

HABS No. NJ-1031

Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, Intersection of U.S. Highway 9 and County Road 679, New Gretna, Burlington County, New Jersey.

Significance: The area of New Gretna and Bass River was first settled as farmland in the early eighteenth century. The towns developed fully in the nineteenth century, benefiting from the proximity of the Bass River, operating mills and shipping lumber to the New York market.

History: In 1713, John Mathis settled in Bass River Township, located on the southeastern border of Burlington County, and bought 250 acres of property on Biddle's Island. Over the next few years, Mathis established farms to the east and west of Bass River. Allegedly the "first white settler," Mathis was a prominent businessman and politician.¹ In 1767, his son Micajah purchased a mill on the west branch of the river and sold it to Ebenezer Tucker, the wealthy Tuckerton merchant. When the mill burned by the British in 1778, Tucker replaced it with Page's saw mill. Micajah Mathis' sloop, the Hope, transported local milled lumber from Egg Harbor to New York. The wood was also used in ship-building, an industry "carried on to a considerable extent at Bass River," throughout the century.²

In the early 1880s, historian E.M. Woodward called New Gretna a "scattered" village or hamlet. While Woolman claimed Mathis' Island was once known as Bass River, Woodward noted that New Gretna was previously named after the river.³ Despite Woodward's written reference, his map showed two separate towns. In attempting to resolve the controversy, Henry Bisbee noted that while Bass River was renamed New Gretna in 1850, the name was used interchangeably in succeeding years. According to Bisbee, Bass River or Bass River Hotel was situated three miles north of New Gretna, previously called Harmony. Bisbee suggested that because the Bass River post office was a stop on the Tuckerton to Quaker Bridge stage line, just north of the other village, the entire area was often referred to as New Gretna.⁴

As the name Bass River Hotel suggests, the village grew around the hotel, open before 1834, and the post office, established three years later. Though merchants were operating shops early in the nineteenth century, New Gretna's tiny commercial district developed during the 1850s. The Methodist Episcopal Church and The First Presbyterian Church were both built at mid-century and are still standing today. By 1853, when the first post office was founded, a hotel and a blacksmith shop were

¹ E.M. Woodward, History of Burlington and Mercer Counties (Philadelphia: Everts and Peck, 1883), 226-227.

² Woodward, 230.

³ Woodward, 230.

⁴ Henry Bisbee, Place Names in Burlington County (Riverside: The Burlington County Publishing Co., 1955), 4-5.

open for business. Adolphus Lansing's heavy wagons, produced in his "wheelwright-shop" were sold in "Western" states after 1856.⁵ In 1951, the Cranmer General Store, built in the 1860s, was moved to Smithville and placed within the historic village.⁶

Today, the land along Route 9 south of Tuckerton is sprinkled with housing developments and signs advertising further growth. The villages of Bass River and New Gretna, still scattered, also show indications of modernization. Bass River boasts a yachting center with full service marina. A new bank and some convenience stores are mixed in with the Victorian buildings composing the tiny business district. The quiet sidestreets often taper off into the pinelands, where small farms and sheds can be discovered tucked among the trees. Boats are frequently seen in front of houses and near the river bank. Except for the traffic along Route 9, New Gretna is a quiet village offering few tourist attractions; the Renault Winery Bottle, proudly situated in a grassy field near the Parkway, is perhaps the most intriguing sight. The cement bottle, dating back to the 1930s, suggests the traffic is also historical.

Prepared by: Sarah Allaback
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- Sources: Bisbee, Henry. Place Names in Burlington County. Riverside: The Burlington County Publishing Co., 1955.
- McMahon, William. South Jersey Towns. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973.
- Woodward, E.M. History of Burlington and Mercer Counties. Philadelphia: Everts and Peck, 1883.

Project Information:

This project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of HABS historian Sara Amy Leach, project supervisor. Three historians completed the research during summer 1991: Field supervisor Sarah Allaback (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Alfred Holden (University of Vermont), and Camille Gatza (North Carolina). David Ames (University of Delaware) made the large-format photographs. Historian, Elizabeth Harris May (George Washington University), edited the HABS reports.

⁵ Woodward, 230.

⁶ William McMahon, South Jersey Towns (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 215.