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WHO WAS ARCHIBALD RIDDELL?

By Donald Johnstone Peck

Excerpted from his forthcoming book, *Changing Tides: Rediscovering Woodbridge, New Jersey 1665-1702* *

As their spiritual leader, Archibald Riddell nurtured Presbyterian exiles from Scotland sailing aboard the *Henry and Francis* arriving in the port of Perth Amboy on December 7, 1685. The surviving passengers went on to settle in Perth Amboy, Woodbridge, and Bound Brook and established the first Presbyterian Church in New Jersey in 1692, "Old Scots," at Wickatunk, Monmouth County. Old Scots was constructed at the site where its pastor, the first Presbyterian minister John Boyd, was ordained on May 29, 1706.

In Scotland in 1674, Riddell had actively attended illegal meetings of Presbyterian Covenanters, which was considered high treason for "any exercise of religion in other manner than is allowed by the liturgy or practice of the Church of England." He was imprisoned in the dungeon of the notorious Bass Rock prison outside of Edinburgh.

Riddell was the cousin of Lady Margaret, the wife of Sir George Scott. Scott arranged for Riddell's release and passage, together with 200 other exiles who sailed aboard the *Henry and Francis* to East Jersey. Riddell's wife was among the 80 passengers who died in crossing the Atlantic but their son survived.

Woodbridge, New Jersey, chartered as a township on June 1, 1669, was established as a theocracy until New Jersey became a royal colony under Queen Anne on April 15, 1702. The first school established by the Congregational Puritans in Woodbridge was held in their Town Meetinghouse, circa 1675. Here the school master was also the town's preacher, giving religious instruction. Frontier education was primitive. Reading was the main course, supplemented at times by writing, spelling, and arithmetic. In the seventeenth century most people were nearly illiterate. Literacy became more universal as it also became essential for people to be able to read the Bible.

This was an age when children grew up in the atmosphere of the home or farm and sometimes learned a trade. The church dominated the political, religious, and educational activities of Woodbridge townspeople. The church made it the duty of the parents to teach their children so that they could read the Bible and learn the catechism. News was sourced from discussions at church or public meetings, from conversations in taverns or in homes.

On January 1, 1686, a committee was appointed to communicate with Archibald Riddell "to encourage him concerning his Settling in this towne," as its preacher and schoolmaster. This Riddell did while serving between 1686 to 1689. Riddell, the only Scots minister to serve in Woodbridge, had graduated from Edinburgh University July 9, 1656. He was one of the few non-Harvard graduates who served the Woodbridge Church.

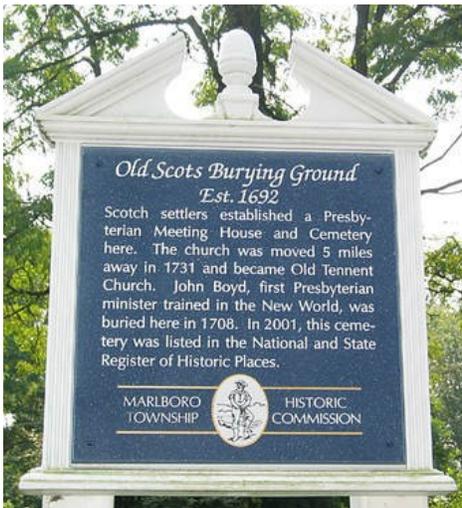
On October 11, 1686, Riddell was granted 8 acres of land "adjoining to the Meetinghouse Green" – present-day 12 Freeman Street, Woodbridge. Here a house was constructed as Riddell's residence. It still stands today and is known as the Towne House. It is the only surviving residence in Woodbridge Township that dates from the seventeenth century. Riddell was also admitted as a town freeholder and allowed 120 acres of upland for a farm and ten more "for planting" – (Continued on page 3)

Old Scots Meeting House

“Old Scots Meeting House was built in the year 1692 by Scottish Presbyterians (Calvinists) on this ground known as Free Hill. This sight (sic) was the location of the first recorded Presbytery meeting and the sight (sic) of the first ordination of a Presbyterian minister in North America in the year 1706. Now these Scottish exiles could worship freely in their own fashion. The granite border around the central monument marks the dimension of the small log structured (sic) that was the boundary of the Old Scots Meeting House. In 1731 the congregation moved to its present location in Tennent called Old Tennent Church.”

This is the location of the Old Scots Meeting House built in the early 1700's by a group of Scottish exiles. It was a small log building on land called Free Hill. The immigrants acquired the land in 1692. In 1706, it held the first recorded Presbyterian service in North America. Reverend John Boyd was ordained during this event and was the first American Ordination. The church became known as Old Tennent Presbyterian Church. In 1708, Reverend Boyd died and was the first burial here on the land now known as Old Scots Burial Ground. The congregation moved five miles to the present location of Old Tennent Church in 1731. The Old Scots Burial Ground is also one of the sites of the Battle of Monmouth. The one acre lot is on both the National and State Registers of Historic Sites (2001). In the center of the lot is the Boyd Monument marking the reverend's grave. The monument honoring Reverend Boyd is over 110 year

old being placed in



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The Towne House

Riddell, who computed time (as did the Woodbridge Puritan community) in Biblical terms, had no idea that the land he farmed was part of New Jersey's inner coastal plain and was more than 100 million years old. Neither did he have any idea that dinosaurs once roamed the local landscape. We have no evidence that Riddell questioned why his fields contained clay and loam as well as fieldstones and enormous timeless glacial erratics (large boulders) deposited during the last great ice age. Nor do we have any evidence that Riddell was at all disturbed by the presence of slave laborers who worked the farms and plantations of Woodbridge Puritans.

Riddell certainly would have been aware of the welcomed frost, ice, and snow that permitted sleighs to travel where, in warmer weather, wagons would bog down in swampy and deeply rutted "roads." Even on horseback a person could have trouble getting around under such conditions. We can be absolutely sure Riddell had no idea that Woodbridge Township would become a major crossroads for transportation, a circumstance that would lead to its expanded development.

After the Glorious Revolution in England and the succession of King William and Queen Mary to the throne, religious restrictions were lifted in Scotland and Riddell and his ten-year-old son boarded a ship in June, 1689 to return to Scotland. Unfortunately, his homecoming was delayed. On August 2, he was captured by a French man-of-war. He and his son were imprisoned at Nantes, Rochefort, and Dinard, this time for two years. Groping through this darkness, he was finally traded for two French priests who had been held prisoner at Blackness Castle in Scotland.

Riddell sold his 120-acre farm in 1700 to William Sharp, who had also been a passenger on the *Henry and Francis*. This farm was known for many years as "Bald Hill Farm" but is now known as Edgar Hill. The Edgar family, also from Scotland, were later owners for several generations.

Nearby the farmhouse was a country wagon road and a tumbling-down fence with lines of blackberry brambles that climbed down the hillside. Beyond its fields of brown and yellow in late fall one could see the hazy blue marshland patches around the Woodbridge River as it ebbed and flowed out to sea.

For nearly 300 years, the first "non-Conformists" who worshipped in the Town Meetinghouse from 1675 to 1702, and the Presbyterians who came afterwards, have provided strong leadership for all areas of the town's life. Religious and patriotic giants adorn the pages of this church's long history.

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RARITAN MILLSTONE HERITAGE ALLIANCE

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