

# URSINO

A study of history of the Hillside area would be incomplete without consideration of Ursino, the Kean estate on the Union-Elizabeth boundary line.

Since erection of Liberty Hall in 1773 by William Livingston, later first governor of the State of New Jersey, the estate has been a political and social center.



MARKER IN FRONT OF LIBERTY HALL

It was the rallying point for patriots during the Revolution and has served as a center of Republican activities from the Civil War period to April 10, 1958, when a reception was held there by Mrs. Mary-Alice Barney Kean for her brother-in-law, former Representative Robert W. Kean, Sr., then a candidate for the United States Senate.

George C. Woodruff, Hillside historian, recalls attending New Year's Day open house observances conducted by the late United States Senator John

Kean at Ursino as a child with his father, former Township Committeeman Charles T. Woodruff.

The estate's properties in 1874 gave its name to the reservoir, Ursino Lake, developed by the Elizabethtown Water Company, Consolidated, in the adjacent Elizabeth River.

In one of the seven secession plans suggested during the independence movement of today's township from Union Township, Joseph T. Hague of Elizabeth prepared a bill in 1911 for the formation of the "Township of Ursino." This proposed township was to include all of Lyons Farms, Saybrook, Salem and the estate of Ursino from which it was to take its name. The bill was defeated.

More recently parts of the property were transformed into the Woodruff Area of the Elizabeth River Park here in 1953-54 and on October 14,



SOUTH BRANCH OF THE ELIZABETH RIVER

1953, the State of New Jersey purchased 120 acres on the southwest side of Morris Avenue between North Avenue and Conant Avenue, all in Union Township, for the Newark State College in Union.

The property is located in the old Woodruff Farms area of Elizabethtown and has extended between Conant Street, Hillside and Trotters Lane, Elizabeth and along both sides of the Elizabeth River and on both sides of Morris Avenue. It was part of Elizabethtown until 1808, when Union Township was formed. When the Township of Hillside separated from Union Township in 1913, part of the land was included in Hillside.

The first eighty acres was purchased by Mr. Livingston in 1760. He built the original two-story white stone house in 1773.

Alexander Hamilton, then only a school boy, arrived at the house in 1774 with letters of introduction from officials in his West Indies home. He remained at the house for several months while attending school in Elizabethtown, just a little more than a mile away.

In the house in the same year, Sarah Van Brugh Livingston, one of Mr. Livingston's four daughters, became the bride of John Jay, then a young lawyer and later the first Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

Mr. Livingston was a member of the Continental Congress from 1774 to 1776 and was named commander in chief of the New Jersey Militia and elected first governor of the State of New Jersey in 1776.

Because of his importance in the Revolutionary cause, his life was in danger throughout the war and the British and Hessian forces stationed on Staten Island visited the house frequently on raids during the war. Fortunately unlike other dwellings in the Elizabethtown area, the house was not burned.

There is an unverified report that at one time in 1777, troops were quartered at the house, although this seems unlikely.

It is reported on one occasion in 1780, Governor Livingston retreated hastily from Liberty Hall leaving some important state papers behind him in a small mahogany box. His daughter, Susan, managed to get the Hessians to take a large batch of valueless legal documents in exchange for the small box, which she apparently led them to believe contained papers of sentimental value to her. The Hessians, reportedly angered because they failed to capture the governor, hacked the bannister with their sabers leaving marks which may still be seen today.

On another raid by drunken soldiers the same year, Mrs. Livingston gathered her daughters into a small hidden room between the first and second floor. One daughter, dressed in her nightclothes, opened the door to take a look and the soldiers thinking that she was a ghost of the murdered wife of Rev. James Caldwell fled.

The guest list of the visitors at Liberty Hall reads like a Who's Who of the Revolutionary War. General George Washington is supposed to have visited the hall on many occasions and his wife,

Martha, spent the night as a guest of the family in 1789 when she was enroute to New York City to attend her husband's inaugural.

Another guest, William Henry Harrison, later the ninth president of the United States, eloped from a first floor window with Anne Symmes, a step-granddaughter of Governor Livingston.

Others included General Henry Knox, Robert Morris, Elias Boudinot, Dr. John Witherspoon of Princeton University, Richard Stockton of Princeton and representatives of most of the colonial families of the time.

Governor Livingston was still in office when he died July 25, 1790. His son, Brockholst Livingston, sold the estate to George Richard St. John, the third Lord of Bolingbroke, in 1792, who owned it for a brief period.



WOODRUFF AREA OF THE ELIZABETH RIVER PARK

The first John Kean, a member of the Continental Congress from South Carolina, married Susan Livingston, daughter of Peter Van Brugh Livingston and a niece of Governor Livingston.

She was widowed in 1795 and remarried. As Countess Susan Livingston Niemcewicz, wife of Count Julian Ursin Niemcewicz, a Polish patriot, she purchased her uncle's property in 1811 and changed the name from Liberty Hall to Ursino, the name of her husband's estate in Poland.

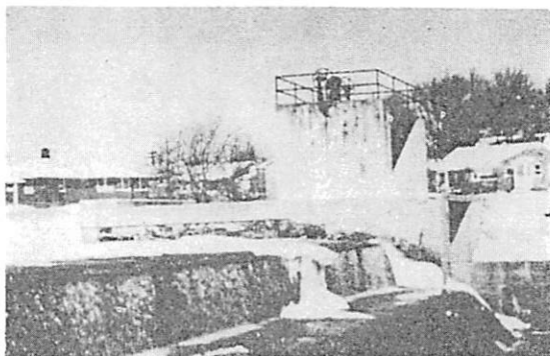
When Marquis de Lafayette made his triumphant visit to this country in 1824, he was honored at a reception at Ursino given by Countess Niemcewicz's son, Major Peter Philip James Kean. Lafayette's carriage also is said to have passed through old Lyons Farms enroute from Newark to Elizabethtown.

Countess Niemcewicz willed the property to the second John Kean, her grandson. Known chiefly as a railroad man, he also was one of the nine original founders of the Elizabethtown Water Company, Consolidated, in 1854.

This John Kean willed the property to his eldest son, the late United States Senator John Kean, who represented the state from 1899 to 1911.

Senator Kean's property went to his nephew, the fourth John Kean, whose wife presently owns the estate.

The dwelling itself has undergone many changes through the years and now contains three floors. Mrs. Kean is attempting to return the dwelling to its original colonial condition as far as possible. In keeping with this plan, she has uncovered some of the old fireplaces. Each room had at least one and some have two. The house remains one of the best



URSINO DAM

examples of colonial architecture in the country still in private ownership, according to architectural groups.

Another interesting feature of the property is the former model farm of Senator Kean's brother, the late United States Senator Hamilton Fish Kean in Morris Avenue at Conant Avenue, Union. Senator Hamilton Fish Kean served in the United States Senate from 1929 to 1935.

Erected about 1910, it was known as Green Lane Farm. It is considered to be a striking example of French architecture with its ivy covered concrete structures, slate roofs, slim towers and stone courtyards. The most unusual building in the group was the French manor house. It contained a curved stairway, a turreted tower, imported carved oak

doors and walls from Nottingham Forest, England, paneled in a cathedral effect, stone from Minnesota and wrought iron and tile from Italy. In the center of the floor of the main room is a marble formation which serves as a fountain in the summertime and a fire place in the winter when a copper chimney is dropped into place from the ceiling. This structure was copied from an old Norman French castle.

The farm at its height about 1936 comprised 180 acres and was the largest in Union County. It was operated by a manager and a crew of fourteen farm hands. It housed 5,000 chickens, pheasants, turkeys and 46 Guernsey cows. Wheat, corn, oats and vegetables were grown in the fields. A roadside stand served the public who desired to purchase the farm produce.

The last crop was harvested in 1954. The following year, the erection of the college buildings was begun and the college moved to its new campus in September, 1958.