

Pennington Historical Signage Initiative

Preliminary Site List, Selection Framework, and Proposed Phase 1 Direction

Draft for HPC Discussion — May 19, 2026

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1. Purpose of This Discussion

The Historical Signage Subcommittee has been developing a preliminary list of potential sites and themes that could form the basis of a historical signage program in Pennington.

At this stage, we are **not asking the HPC to approve final sign locations, final language, sign designs, or costs**. The purpose of the May 19 discussion is to review the general direction of the project, consider a preliminary list of sites, and agree on a practical framework for selecting and phasing future signs.

The goal is to move from a broad list of possible sites toward a more structured recommendation that can later be refined for review by the HPC, Borough staff, and Borough Council.

Some potential sign locations may fall within the Crossroads Historic District, while others may be located elsewhere in the Borough.

2. Preliminary Site List

The following list is intended to show the range of stories and locations that could be considered. The list is divided into **primary candidate sites** and **secondary / future-phase candidate sites**.

The primary sites are not yet final recommendations. They are the sites that appear to offer the strongest combination of historical importance, public engagement, and feasibility for early consideration.

3. Primary Candidate Sites / Themes

Crossroads Historic District

Established by Pennington Borough in 2011, the Crossroads Historic District is centered on North and South Main Streets and Delaware Avenue. It is notable for the variety of building

styles it contains, reflecting Pennington's growth during the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries.

This district may serve less as a "headline" and more as an organizing framework for telling several connected stories about Pennington's development as a town.

Revolutionary War / December 1776

Thousands of British troops under Lord Cornwallis occupied Pennington and the surrounding farm community from December 5–10, 1776. Cornwallis' headquarters were in a tavern across the street from the Pennington Presbyterian Cemetery.

Incidents of plunder and violence in the area were widespread during this brief period, likely helping to radicalize local residents who may still have been ambivalent about the Revolutionary cause.

African American Community History

Pennington's African American community is historically centered around the two churches it founded: Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, now a residence, at 246 South Main Street, and First Baptist Church of Pennington at 5 Academy Avenue.

The community grew around these churches and founded the Pennington African Cemetery on South Main Street, which contains the graves of a significant number of Civil War soldiers.

The Pennington School

Built in 1838 as a Methodist Seminary, the Pennington School played an important role in the growth of the Borough. The school supported hotels, restaurants, tailoring establishments, and other local businesses, while also creating employment related to the needs of students, faculty, and visiting parents.

Railroad Station / Railroad History

The completion of the Delaware and Bound Brook Railroad to Pennington in 1876, and the construction of the passenger station in the same year, marked the beginning of Pennington's suburbanization.

The expected passenger traffic to the Centennial celebration in Philadelphia was a powerful motivation for completing the line and building the stations. Passenger service to Pennington ended in 1964.

Cheroot Barn / Railroad Freight and Commercial History

The Cheroot Barn was part of the Woolsey & Cadwallader coal and lumber yard. It represents Pennington's commercial dependence on freight deliveries from the adjoining Delaware and Bound Brook Railroad line, completed to Pennington in 1876 and now part of CSX.

Peter Benchley / *Jaws* Writing Site

Peter Benchley, part of a notable family of writers, used this building as a workshop while writing his first book, *Jaws*, the nationwide bestseller published in 1974. The blockbuster movie followed in 1975.

The site has cultural significance and should be recognized in the signage plan, with final placement coordinated with any future redevelopment planning.

4. Secondary / Future-Phase Candidate Sites

The following sites and themes should remain part of the broader signage inventory, even if they are not selected for the first phase:

- Reed's Feed Mill on North Main Street, north of the Old Station Building freight yards.
- Nursery founded by William P. Howe, Sr., which reached approximately 300 acres at its largest and was a major local employer.
- Svetlana Alliluyeva residence in Pennington, subject to verification.
- Colonel John Kunkel, late 19th-century developer who purchased land and laid out lots and streets for new residences, including the Eglantine Avenue and East Delaware Avenue area.
- Cointreau Distillery, 1942–1967, on West Franklin Avenue, now the Straub Center buildings.

These sites may require additional research, verification, ownership review, or practical consideration before being advanced.

5. Relationship to State Guidance and Historic Register Criteria

The subcommittee should consider whether the proposed framework aligns with relevant New Jersey guidance for historical markers.

The New Jersey Historical Commission's marker guidance provides a useful reference point. It emphasizes that marker subjects should have demonstrated significance, which may be local, regional, statewide, or national; that factual claims should be documented; and that proposed locations should be visible and accessible to the public.

At the same time, it is important to be clear that this signage initiative is **not the same as nominating properties to the New Jersey Register or National Register of Historic Places**.

These proposed signs would not themselves designate a property as a National Register or State Register historic site, nor would they necessarily imply that a building or property meets the formal criteria for listing. The purpose is to tell Pennington's history in a clear and engaging way: to identify locations, stories, and themes that add character, meaning, and historical context to Pennington for residents, visitors, students, and others walking through town.

6. Proposed Selection Framework

To move from a broad list to a practical first phase, the subcommittee recommends using a simple selection framework.

A. Historical Significance

Does the site tell an important part of Pennington's story?

This may include the Revolutionary War / December 1776 period, early town formation, African American history, railroad history, educational history, commercial history, literary or cultural history, architectural history, or other major themes.

B. Visibility and Public Engagement

Is the site in a place where people will actually see and engage with the sign?

Can the story be told clearly and effectively to residents, visitors, students, and people walking through town?

C. Feasibility

Is the location practical?

Are ownership, placement, redevelopment plans, physical conditions, pedestrian access, or other factors likely to make the sign relatively easy or difficult to accomplish?

7. Type of Signage

The subcommittee should also consider the type of signage best suited to each site.

The strongest examples are not merely simple name/date markers, but storytelling signs that allow for compact, meaningful explanations of why a site matters. Some signs may include a short narrative, image, map, quotation, or other visual material.

Not every site requires the same type of sign. Some may deserve a more developed panel. Others may be better suited to a simpler marker, or to a later phase involving a walking-tour brochure, website, QR code, or digital component.

8. Proposed Phase 1 Direction

Using the selection framework, certain sites naturally emerge as strong candidates for early consideration.

A possible Phase 1 direction could include:

- Revolutionary War / December 1776 story.
- Crossroads Historic District / town-origin context.
- African American community history.
- Railroad station / railroad history.
- Peter Benchley / *Jaws* writing site.
- One or more Main Street / commercial-history sites, potentially including the Cheroot Barn.

This is not intended as a final list. It is a proposed direction for further refinement.

9. What We Are Asking the HPC to Consider on May 19

For the May 19 meeting, the subcommittee is not asking for approval of final signs, final wording, or final locations.

The desired outcome is agreement on the following:

1. The general selection framework.
 2. The general Phase 1 direction.
 3. The idea that signs should allow for real storytelling, not just labels.
 4. The value of keeping secondary sites in the broader inventory for later phases.
 5. The next step of refining a short list, possible locations, sign types, documentation needs, and preliminary cost considerations.
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10. Proposed Next Steps

If the HPC agrees with the general direction, the subcommittee would continue work on:

- refining the Phase 1 short list;
- confirming ownership and placement issues;
- identifying documentation for each proposed sign;
- considering whether any sites may align with New Jersey Historical Commission marker guidance or RevolutionNJ, New Jersey's official 250th-anniversary initiative;
- developing possible sign types and rough cost ranges;
- coordinating with Borough staff and, eventually, Borough Council.

The goal is to develop a signage program that is historically grounded, visually accessible, practical to implement, and meaningful to Pennington's residents and visitors.