

MASTER PLAN
BOROUGH OF PENNINGTON
NEW JERSEY

10. Historic Preservation Plan Element

The Historic Preservation Plan element draft released by the writing team was conditionally adopted by the Planning Board on February 12, 2024, and posted on the Borough website for public comment. This element will be available for comments until April 22, 2026, prior to final adoption at a public meeting of the Planning Board on May 13, 2026.

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1. Introduction

This Historic Preservation Plan Element of the Pennington Borough Master Plan is prepared pursuant to the Municipal Land Use Law (NJSA 40:55D-1et. Seq). This enables the Planning Board to adopt a Historic Preservation Plan Element as part of the 2025 Municipal Master Plan Update. According to NJSA 40:55D-28b (10), the purpose of the element shall be to: “(a) indicate the location and significance of historic sites and historic districts; (b) identify the standards used to assess worthiness for historic site or district identification; and (c) analyze the impact of each component and element of the Master Plan on the preservation of historic sites and districts.” Historic sites may include buildings, structures, sites and objects. In Pennington Borough, districts may include residential, commercial, industrial or other historically significant areas.

The Borough of Pennington is fortunate to retain a remarkable collection of early 19th C. through early 20th C. structures, generally well-maintained and in good condition. The result is an intact historic district at the core of the borough with a consistent historic character. In 2011, Pennington enacted a Historic Preservation Ordinance and created the Historic Preservation Commission and Crossroads Historic District. Prior to 2011, Pennington’s surviving historic structures had no protection from demolition or inappropriate renovation.

Since 2011, demolition of contributing historic structures within the historic district has been practically eliminated. Appropriate renovations have become more common, guided by the Historic Preservation Commission. A critical component of the ordinance is that it is a regulatory ordinance, rather than an advisory ordinance. A regulatory ordinance strongly discourages demolition and compels owners, especially developers, to make improvements in a historically appropriate manner. Revisions to the ordinance recently approved by the Borough Council have strengthened and clarified the language to minimize ambiguity in the original text.

Looking forward, several goals have been established by the Historic Preservation Commission:

- Pursue state-level designation of the Historic Preservation Commission as a Certified Local Government (CLG) enabling access to state grants and technical assistance
- Coordinate with the Planning/Zoning Board on zoning changes impacting the historic district and historic character of the Borough, including identification of the Crossroads Historic District as an “Overlay Zone” on the borough zoning map.
- Recognize the need for affordable housing, encouraging increased “infill” density and contextually appropriate development within the borough.
- Recognize additional impacts of climate change and the need for energy efficient, sustainable strategies for historic structures

Change to the Borough’s historic built environment is inevitable and can be positive. The recommendations of the Historic Preservation Element, combined with actions recommended in other Master Plan Element sections, can promote the Borough’s historic resources as a valuable asset for the improvement of the Borough.

2. General Goals and Objectives

- a. Safeguard Pennington's historic and varied architectural heritage by preserving building sites, structures and objects which reflect its history.
- b. Identify, designate and provide appropriate advice regarding historic landmarks and historic districts in order to preserve their historic character.
- c. Discourage demolition of historic resources.
- d. Encourage continued use of historic sites and districts and facilitate their appropriate use or reuse, including adaptive re-use to accommodate growth and changing needs. Manage change of historic sites and districts by encouraging appropriate alteration and/or new construction.
- e. Balance historic preservation efforts with the public interest in smart growth, greater housing choice, sustainability, equity, and economic development.
- f. Prepare and promote user-friendly information for public awareness and stewardship of historic resources, policies, and design guidelines. Continue to facilitate awareness through multi-platform outreach to promote historic resources.
- g. Promote resiliency of historic structures vulnerable to climate change-related natural hazards.
- h. Consider other future designations of building sites, structures and objects.
- i. Promote appreciation of Pennington's architecture and history for the education, pleasure and welfare of its inhabitants.

3. Specific Recommendations

- a. Pursue Certified Local Government (CLG) status with NJ Historic Preservation Office (NJHPO) enabling eligibility for State-level grants and technical assistance. Explore other options available to municipalities under the New Jersey's Municipal Land Use Law.
- b. Promote the NJ Rehabilitation Building Subcode Subchapter 6, Historic Buildings Section (5:23-6.33) encouraging retaining historic fabric within the district and promoting historically appropriate rehabilitation.
- c. Coordinate with Planning/Zoning Board for zoning update to identify "Historic District Overlay" in zoning code and map.
- d. Provide Historic Preservation Commission position and advice on other zoning updates including setbacks, ADU's, density, new development.
- e. Provide Historic Preservation Commission position and advice on Planning/Zoning "Areas in Need of Development."
- f. Promote historically appropriate energy/sustainability strategies for property owners.
- g. Promote preservation of threatened historic resources, including identification and documentation where needed. Monitor status of potentially threatened structures such as the Railroad Station and the HVRSD Administration Building.
- h. Promote public awareness and education of historic district requirements and benefits.
- i. Continue to provide technical assistance to owners of historic properties.

4. Description of District

a. Description and limits of the district

Pennington's Crossroads Historic District is centered on the Borough's historic crossroads, North and South Main Street, and East and West Delaware Avenue. Specifically, the structures on these streets comprise the core of Pennington's early and mid-nineteenth century development. Approximately 160 structures are contained in the district, including all of the historic downtown area, most of the significant 19th C houses as well as several significant early 20th C houses, and the five historic church buildings. In addition, the district includes the Pennington African Cemetery, a non-contiguous plot added to the district in 2018. Within the district the majority of structures are identified as "contributing," 12 significant structures are identified as "key contributing," and most mid to late 20th C structures are identified as "non-contributing." There are no properties listed independently in the Borough Ordinance, although there are 2 properties listed on the State and National Historic Registers.

b. Survey history, status and availability

The Historic Preservation Commission has prepared a survey of all properties within the district. The survey is based on survey descriptions prepared in 1984 by Bill Schmidt and others, and has been updated with recent photos on current NJ Historic Preservation Office forms. Key contributing, contributing and non-contributing status is identified for each building. The survey is in digital format and is publicly available on the Borough Website.

c. State and National listed properties

The Pennington Crossroads District is established locally by Borough Ordinance, but is not listed on the State or National Registers of Historic Places. The NJ Historic Preservation Office issued a Certificate of Eligibility (COE) in 2018 indicating that the district would meet the standards for listing.

Two properties in the Borough are listed on the State and National Registers. The Railroad Station on Railroad Place is listed, as is the Presbyterian Church at the intersection of East Delaware and South Main. The Presbyterian Church is within the district, the Railroad Station is outside of the district.

5. District Significance

a. Periods of significance

The District includes many 19th C and early 20th C houses, as well as town center commercial structures from the same periods. Accordingly, the period of significance for the District runs from the 18th C pre-revolutionary era for some of the earliest structures, through the early 20th Century when the district was essentially built out.

b. 50-year threshold for review

The ordinance previously specified the year 1945 as the end of the period of significance, noting that properties constructed after that date are not subject to review. As part of the

recently approved revisions to the ordinance, the 1945 date has been eliminated. In its place, review of any structures more than 50 years old from the date of review is included, consistent with State and National historic preservation standards.

6. Integrity & Existing Conditions Issues

a. General conditions statement

The Crossroads Historic District is remarkably intact with most street-facing facades retaining their historic character. In addition, most properties are well-maintained, with very few neglected or deteriorated conditions. Fortunately, the historic character of buildings in the district has not suffered widely from poor-quality siding and window replacements or other inappropriate changes. Changes to siding, windows and exterior trim are important character-defining features that are carefully reviewed by the Historic Preservation Commission.

b. Public response

Since the enactment of the Historic Preservation Ordinance and formation of the Historic Preservation Commission in 2011, the Commission has been generally well-received within the community. On one hand, regulations are not considered onerous by most homeowners, and, more importantly, at least 10 houses in the district have been spared demolition because of the Preservation Ordinance and Historic Preservation Commission review. Also, the ordinance is intentionally written to focus on the preservation of primary historic structures, without review of outbuildings, accessory structures, landscape elements, signage, etc., which are often already regulated by zoning. Where there has been some pushback it has been from some developers and house-flippers, intending to purchase some of the more neglected properties in the district to either demolish or renovate them. In each case, the Historic Preservation Commission has worked with the developer to maintain certain quality standards. In most cases, this has meant retaining the most historic street-facing portion of the structure, preserving its character-defining features, and allowing replacement or dramatic renovation of additions toward the rear of the lot.

c. Ordinance text issues and proposed amendments

Revisions to the Preservation Ordinance have been approved by the Borough Council. The revisions focus on clarifying vague language and being more specific about replacement material – specifically “in-kind” replacement, which has been interpreted too broadly by some applicants. Revisions expand the “Minor Work Application” section to insure the appropriateness of replacement materials. “Minor Work” applications do not require attendance or review at a Historic Preservation Commission meeting, and can be approved by the Commission chair or designated Commission member.

Other ordinance revisions include clarifications recommended by the NJ Historic Preservation Office to verify compliance with the MLUL – for instance, deletion of a “Type D” member, not permitted by MLUL.

d. Threats

The Historic Preservation Commission’s regulatory (as opposed to advisory) status has provided essential protection against the most common threat of demolition. However, other threats exist, mostly associated with historically inappropriate repairs, replacement and renovations. In particular, repair and replacement of siding, windows and trim are considered “maintenance” in the Building Code and therefore do not require a building permit. Property owners can undertake these repairs without being aware that the materials are subject to Historic Preservation Commission review. Fortunately, Borough occupants are vigilant and the Borough office or the Historic Preservation Commission is usually notified when work is being undertaken. When identified, the Borough Zoning officer can issue stop work orders for unauthorized work. Ideally, a program to improve property owner’s awareness could help address this issue.

e. Successes

The Historic Preservation Commission has seen many significant successes starting with the preservation of the Alumni Center (former Headmaster’s House) at the Pennington School, and followed by the subsequent rehabilitation of several other houses in the district – all spared from demolition. Coincidentally, protection of existing houses in the district helps the Borough retain some of its lowest cost rental and owner-occupied housing. Other successes include the following:

- As property owners have become more familiar with the Historic Preservation Commission, they have sought the advice of the Commission for renovations and upgrades. Many properties have been appropriately upgraded with advice from the Commission.
- The Pennington African Cemetery is an important addition to the district, offering it historic protection and the ability to apply for grants.
- Revised and approved ordinance text has replaced vague text with clear language specifically noting non-approval of certain materials and process for “Minor Work” approvals.
- The Historic Preservation Commission page of the Borough website has been updated to include:
 - digitized district survey posted on the webpage for easy public access
 - added links to design guidelines, applications, ordinance, maps
 - added meeting agendas and meeting minutes.

7. Interface with other Master Plan Elements

a. Land Use

(Note: The Land Use Element had not been prepared when this section was written. Accordingly, this section may be edited in coordination with the Land Use Element when available)

The Pennington Historic Preservation Commission reaffirms its commitment to preserving the integrity of the Historic District while accommodating thoughtful, compatible development. Revising zoning maps and ordinances to designate the Historic

District as an "overlay zone" will provide a valuable tool to ensure its unique character is safeguarded. Zoning adjustments, including setbacks and lot coverage, must respect the aesthetic and historical significance of the area.

New buildings within the Historic District should comply with-Section 119-10(f) of the Historic Preservation ordinance, noting consistency with “visual compatibility” factors listed in the ordinance. New buildings adjacent to or outside the Historic District should respect the scale, density and character of the surrounding architectural context. While preserving the existing-density and character of the district is a priority, the Historic Preservation Commission supports innovative proposals - provided their design seamlessly integrates with the historic fabric.

Additionally, the Historic Preservation Commission emphasizes climate resilience and sustainability for historic properties, advocating for energy-efficient retrofits and strategies to mitigate climate-related impacts while preserving historical features

b. Housing

(Note: The Housing Element had not been prepared when this section was written. Accordingly, this section may be edited in coordination with the Housing Element when available)

The Pennington Historic Preservation Commission prioritizes preservation of the Historic District while also acknowledging that sensitive new housing development can be compatible with its character. Density and extent of multi-family housing must be appropriate, maintaining architectural harmony with existing structures, and ensuring they complement the area's historical and aesthetic value.

The Historic Preservation Commission supports proposals that adaptively reuse existing buildings, provided the additions are architecturally appropriate. Historically, (before modern zoning ordinances) mixed use and multi-family buildings were common within the district.

The Hopewell Valley Regional School District Administration Building at 425 South Main Street presents a significant opportunity to develop affordable housing while preserving its historical integrity. Additionally, the Historic Preservation Commission champions the preservation and rehabilitation of-lower-cost historic homes ensuring they remain a vital resource for diverse residents.

This balanced approach underscores the Historic District's role as a living, evolving community while maintaining its historical identity.

c. Mobility

The Pennington Historic Preservation Commission underscores the need to integrate mobility enhancements with the preservation of the Borough's historical character. Improvements in pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure within and around the Historic

District should align with Complete Streets policies, ensuring that new facilities respect the district's aesthetic while improving safety and connectivity. Enhanced lighting and walkability will support both residents and visitors, encouraging appreciation of the district's historical assets.

Parking solutions within the district should prioritize compatibility with its historical setting. Measures such as strategically placed EV charging stations must balance modern mobility needs with the preservation of historical integrity.

Additionally, careful planning is required to address the potential impacts of increased traffic from regional developments, ensuring the district remains accessible without compromising its charm or safety.

By considering these factors, the Historic Preservation Commission aims to enhance mobility while safeguarding Pennington's unique heritage.

d. Community Services and Facilities

The Pennington Historic Commission recognizes the importance of preserving historic structures while repurposing them to meet evolving community needs. Many buildings within the Historic District, including its five churches, offer unique opportunities to serve as community facilities. The adaptive use and reuse of these structures can provide venues for cultural, educational, and recreational activities while maintaining their historical integrity.

Given the potential for church closures or consolidations due to declining attendance, the Historic Preservation Commission advocates for proactive measures to repurpose these historic buildings. These spaces could accommodate a range of services, such as daycare centers, meeting halls, or cultural hubs, ensuring their continued contribution to the community fabric.

Integrating these historic facilities into the Borough's service offerings allows Pennington to honor its architectural heritage while meeting modern needs, fostering a sense of continuity and shared purpose.

e. Economic Development

The Pennington Historic Preservation Commission emphasizes the proven economic value of historic preservation as a driver of sustainable growth. Preserving and promoting Pennington's Historic District enhances its appeal as a destination for heritage tourism, a growing sector supported by New Jersey's State Heritage Tourism initiatives. By drawing visitors to experience the Borough's unique architectural and cultural history, historic preservation generates revenue for local businesses and strengthens the community's economic vitality.

The Historic District, serving as a “Crossroads” in the heart of Pennington, is pivotal to fostering desirable economic activity. This historic downtown area provides an inviting backdrop for retail, dining, and cultural events, attracting both residents and visitors. Integrating historic preservation into economic development strategies ensures the Borough maintains its character while leveraging its heritage as a foundation for future prosperity.

f. Green Buildings and Environmental Sustainability

The Pennington Historic Preservation Commission advocates for the integration of environmental sustainability into the preservation and adaptive reuse of historic structures. Historic buildings in Pennington offer inherent sustainability advantages through their adaptability for modern uses, reducing the need for new construction and preserving embedded energy. Enhancing these structures with appropriate green building improvements ensures they contribute to the Borough’s environmental goals without compromising their historical integrity.

Upgrades such as envelope insulation, energy-efficient windows, and renewable energy sources like solar panels can be seamlessly incorporated into historic buildings. The Historic Preservation Commission supports measures to minimize fossil fuel use by adopting sustainable energy solutions while maintaining the character of these structures. By prioritizing thoughtful retrofitting, Pennington can achieve a balance between historic preservation and environmental stewardship, fostering a more sustainable and resilient community.

8. Appendices

- a. A Brief History of Pennington
- b. Map: Pennington Crossroads Historic District
- c. Sites currently listed on NJ and National Register of Historic Places
- d. Other potentially significant historic sites
- e. Link to Historic Preservation Commission page on Borough Website, including District Survey
<https://www.penningtonboro.org/historic-preservation-commission>

Appendix a. Brief History of Pennington Borough

Pennington first appears in the historical record in 1725-1726, as a place called Pennytown. At the annual Hopewell Township meeting of that year, the citizens agreed to hold future town meetings at the “new meeting House by John Smith’s Alias Pennytown.” Thus Pennington began as the seat of government for Hopewell Township. Due to its position on a north-south road connecting the market called Trent’s town with the developing northwest portion of New Jersey, it enjoyed the advantages of traffic on the road. John Smith owned a tract of land in the southeast corner of the intersection of the two forest trails that are now Main Street and Delaware Avenue, and Jonathan Furman owned the facing tract in the southwest corner. It was on these two tracts that the town began. Smith may have owned a store or tavern prior to the construction of the Meeting House (Presbyterian Church), hence the earlier place name “John Smith’s.”

Enoch Armitage arrived from England in 1719. He provided the impetus for the church and hence the town by becoming ruling elder of the area Presbyterians and providing the timber and iron work for the 1726 building at Pennytown. By 1737, Furman operated the Red Lyon tavern opposite the present Presbyterian cemetery, and by the 1750’s, a half dozen houses were added, bringing in a blacksmith and a wheelwright. By 1740, a new name was sought for the town. Smithfield and Queenstown were tried, but Pennington became the final form in the 1750’s.

By the time of the Revolution, there was a third tavern, at the site of the former Bank, and just a few houses more. On December 10 of 1776, a large detachment of the British army came through Pennington at night and returned the next day to quarter in the taverns and on neighborhood farms. A few days later a contingent of 500 cavalry arrived, no doubt the source of the tradition that the cavalry men exercised their horses over the cemetery wall. The second most famous American general, Charles Lee, was brought to Pennington on the 13th after his capture at Basking Ridge.

The town we see today, along Main Street north of Curlis Avenue, and along the first blocks of East and West Delaware Avenue, is the result of a rapid 19th century expansion. It began with the construction of a new public school at 135 South Main about 1815. Four nearby houses were added in the 1820’s along south Main Street, bringing the Moore farmhouse and blacksmith shop within the village. A fourth tavern was added on the west side of North Main. The Methodists built a church on South Main in 1826, and other new lots were laid out on South Main in the 1830’s. The Female Seminary and the Pennington Male Methodist Seminary were built in 1836 and 1839, and this triggered a faster expansion of the town. Dry goods and grocery vendors, shoemakers and tailors came to town to serve the student population. Isaac Bergen began his carriage-making business on West Delaware.

Meanwhile the traffic on the road increased, and blacksmiths and wheelwrights were added. Houses were added outward along all four directions from the crossroads intersection in the 1830’s, 40’s, and 50’s. The Methodists erected a new church closer to the center of town in 1846. Just before 1850, frontage on Joshua Bunn’s farm on both sides of Main Street south of the Female Seminary, was acquired by black families. The African Methodist church was erected in 1850. By 1850 Pennington’s population was about 500.

Writing in 1876, Rev. George Hale, Presbyterian minister in Pennington from 1838 to 1863 said,

“During those twenty-five years there has been a perceptible advancement . . . In this village, where there are now standing about one hundred dwellings, at least sixty (more than half) have been put up within this time, and many of the others have been improved and enlarged.”

In 1875 the railroad came through town, opening up another set of business possibilities, and allowing residents to commute for work and travel for recreation. A lumber yard, coal yard, and stockyards for importing dairy cows, and farm and carriage horses were built in the north end of town, and T. P. and C. A. Reed built the grain silo on North Main, near the new railroad Station.

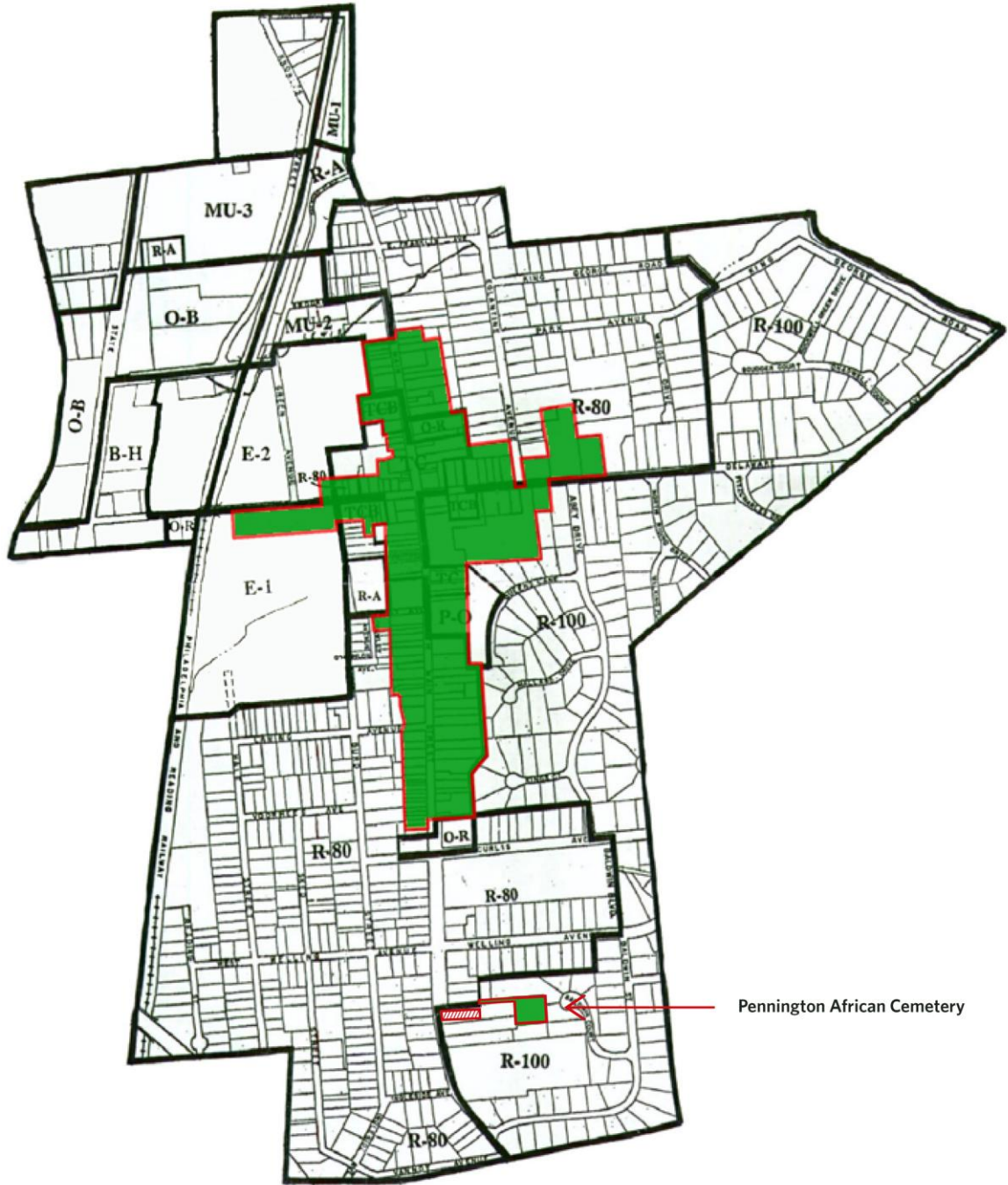
In 1890, under this new business climate, the town incorporated to separate its interests from the Township. Immediately the Pennington Fire Company was formed, and the new equipment was soon housed in the Odd Fellows’ new three story brick building. Sidewalks and street lights were introduced. At this moment of improvements, Col. John A. Kunkle came to town. He purchased the Ketcham farm that lay on the north side of East Delaware Avenue. He then built Stony Brook Lodge and developed Eglantine Avenue. In 1897, telephones were introduced into Pennington, and a newspaper was inaugurated the following year. Electricity was also brought to Pennington at this time.

In 1898, the first Catholic church was built in Pennington, and the new brick school, now Academy Court, was built. As the new century came in, The First National Bank was founded at the northeast corner of Main and Delaware in the Irving house, the old colonial tavern where the town had been incorporated ten years earlier. In 1902, trolley service was extended to Pennington and the African Baptist congregation acquired the use of the relocated 1850’s public school, which still stands at Academy Street and Crawley Avenue.



In 1910, William Howe, Sr. arrived in Pennington and continued the role of developer begun by Col. Kunkle. He first acquired a small farm at the site of the Pennington Professional Center and began his famous nursery business there. Selling that small farm, he purchased the Sked farm opposite the Tollgate House, and expanded his nursery operation there. He soon sold that property and bought the land adjacent on the north, next creating Burd Street and building a new house, at the corner of Laning Avenue. Over the next several decades, Howe laid out streets and lined them with Norway maples. In 1919, he purchased the Curlis farm, lying from the Tollgate house to the north side of Curlis Avenue and extending far to the east. A new network of streets was added, and houses were built through the 1960’s. His nursery operations were interwoven with the house lots. He donated the location for the Tollgate school, and his office at the northwest corner of South Main and Curlis Avenue still serves a commercial purpose.

After the arrival of the railroad and the trolley, the invention of the automobile finished the work of turning Pennington into a quiet suburban town, where new families and long-term residents enjoy their lives in a beautiful historic setting. Walking or driving the course of Main Street and Delaware Avenue, we still see much of the town that Reverend Hale knew in 1876. Few towns are as fortunate in the preservation of their history as Pennington. History on display is the source of property value and our town’s unique identity. Let it always be so.

Appendix b. Map of the Pennington Crossroads Historic District



Pennington African Cemetery

-  Pennington Crossroads Historic District
-  Property Subject to HPC Review

June 15, 2021

Appendix c. Sites currently listed on New Jersey and National Register of Historic Places

Delaware & Bound Brook Railroad Station
#2 Railroad Place
NR: 12/31/1974, SR:11/4/1974

First Presbyterian Church of Pennington
13 South Main Street
NR: 8/24/2011, SR: 6/2/2011

Appendix d. Other Potential Historic Sites and/or Districts

1. Delaware & Bound Brook Railroad Station
2 Railroad Place
2. "Tollgate" House (subject to HPC review per Variance approval)
417 South Main Street
3. Sked Farmhouse – Rose Garden Inn
410 South Main Street
4. William Howe Sr. House
304 Burd Street
5. Clarkson / Woolsey & Cadwallader Lumber Yard Barn
Brookside Avenue at Green Street
6. Clarkson / Woolsey & Cadwallader Lumber Yard Manager's House
20 Brookside Ave
7. Pennington Canning Company
Brookside Avenue
94 ½ North Main Street
8. Clarkson / Woolsey & Cadwallader Lumber Yard Office
16 West Franklin Ave
9. Daniel A. Clarkson House
230 West Delaware Avenue
10. Mercer & Somerset RR Depot and House.
240 and 238 West Delaware
11. Farmhouse
302 North Main Street

12. Freight Depot & Siding
Green Street

Appendix e. Link to Historic Preservation page on Borough Website, including District Survey

<https://www.penningtonboro.org/historic-preservation-commission>

Conditionally Adopted