Photographs by Eddie Hausner for The New York Times

If You're Thinking of Living In/Allendale

A Tower Symbolizes Its Aspirations

Renovation gives a Bergen downtown a traditional feel.

By JERRY CHESLOW

A RED-BRICK clock tower presides over an island of flowers at a key intersection on West Allendale Avenue, the main business street in the Bergen County borough of Allendale.

The tower, which matches the new, brick-paved sidewalks of the three-block, 19th-century business district, was the finishing touch of a two-year renovation. It was paid for by private donations in honor of Allendale's previous Mayor Clarence L. Shaw, the driving force behind the renovation, which was completed in 1993.

"The tower gives the town that traditional feel that I love," said Joan Berndt, who moved to Allendale from East Brunswick, N.J., two years ago with her husband, Bryan, and their two children.

Although Allendale is in the heart of heavily populated Bergen County, it has the feel of a sleepy country hamlet, with tree-lined streets and houses set far back on large, well-kept lots.

Most of the houses were built after 1950, as the last but one of the large farms were subdivided into housing sites.

Both of the Berndts are certified public accountants. He works in Manhattan, just a 40-minute commute. Mrs. Berndt is taking the year off to be with her children, aged 9 and 5.

"We chose Allendale because its school system has a very good reputation, yet is small enough so that the children don't get lost in it," she explained. "We also wanted a town feel. Allendale is small enough for the store owners to get to know you quickly."

Mrs. Berndt said that despite the fact that they had moved into their four-bedroom colonial on Franklin Turnpike during a blizzard, the neighbors had come over to welcome them. She has since joined the Holiday Observers Club, one of three dozen volunteer organizations. The club raises money for holiday celebrations such as an Easter egg hunt and a Fourth of July fireworks display.

Allendale celebrated its centennial with a parade last September, marking the time in 1894 when it split from the surrounding Orvil Township in a dispute over where a school was to be built.

The local history is summed up by a large mural painted on the outside of a building in the shadow of the tower. It shows settlement, the railroad and strawberries, the mainstay of the farmers until the tourists began arriving in the late 19th century.

ABOVE David Otterby waters plants outside his family's San Jacinto Estates home in Allendale, N.J.

LEFT The borough purchased the 70-acre Crestwood Park, with a lake, in 1972.

The first white settlers were Dutch and English farmers who arrived in the late 1600's. Allendale went through a growth spurt that started in 1848, with the coming of the Paterson & Ramapo Railroad, which allowed farmers to send crops to markets all over New Jersey and to New York City.

The station was named Allendale after the railroad's surveyor, Richard Allen. By 1900, much of what is now the downtown had sprung up around the station. And summer visitors had discovered the lakes in the area, leading to the construction of numerous boarding houses and three hotels on West Allendale Avenue. One of those hotels, the Allendale House, still exists as a rooming house.

"Babe Ruth used to come to vacation at the Allendale Hotel," recalled Stiles Thomas, 71, who has lived his entire life in Allendale. "He was always chasing women in town, including my mother."

HOUSING is expensive and taxes are a high $2.27 per $100 of assessed valuation. Prices start at about $200,000 for some small three-bedroom Cape Cods and older colonials on streets such as Mallison Street, Dale Avenue or Park Avenue near the center of the borough.

"It's rare to find anything decent for under $250,000," said Borough Administrator Thomas F. Carroll.

According to Richard Van Houten, a real estate broker who is a descendant of one of the town's early settlers, the typical house in the western section of the borough is a three- to four-bedroom split-level, bilevel or colonial on one acre. Such homes go for $325,000 to $375,000.

In the San Jacinto neighborhood in the southwestern area, 30-year-old four-bedroom colonials go for $400,000 to $450,000. A handful of large, five- or six-bedroom contemporaries on one-acre lots on Carteret Road in the southern section are valued at more than $1 million.

There are four condominium communities, the largest of which is the 45-unit Rio Vista town-house complex off Allendale Avenue. Prices of the three- to four bedroom units range from $290,000 to $340,000, according to Mr. Van Houten.

Rentals are scarce and command high prices. Two-bedroom apartments in two-family homes or over stores in the downtown rent quickly for $750 and $900. Some three-bedroom town houses rent for up to $2,000 a month.

The largest piece of borough-owned land is the Celery Farm, an 87-acre nature preserve that was once a celery, onion and lettuce farm. At the turn of the century it was sending vegetables to Boston, Philadelphia, New York and the Campbell's Soup factory in Camden, N.J.

Most of the property was bought in 1981 for $140,000. Today it is a bird-watcher's paradise, with more than 225 species sighted last year, including the rare black rail, king rail and bald eagle.

"It is a rare jewel in the heart of a developed area," said Mr. Thomas, who is also the marsh warden.

The most widely used recreational site in the borough is the 70-acre Crestwood Park. Purchased in 1972 from the Van Houten family, the property includes a nine-acre artificial sand-bottomed lake, two baseball diamonds and four tennis courts. The lake is open to residents for swimming from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Family memberships cost $139 a year.

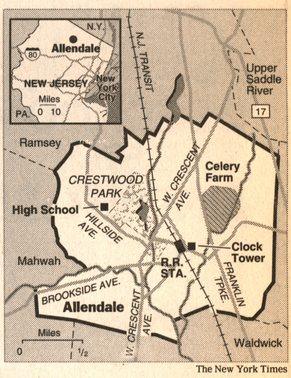
"My father acquired the property in the 1920's to subdivide it into building lots," said Mr. Van Houten. "The Depression hit and he could only sell one lot. So he developed the lake and charged 25 cents a head admission. At one point, 10,000 people were coming to Crestwood on weekends."

The best known commercial establishment in the borough is the Allendale Bar & Grill, opened on West Allendale Avenue in 1935. Known to locals as the A B & G, it draws a lunch crowd of corporate executives from all over Bergen County. The downtown's 50 stores include several banks, florist shops, a bagel shop, specialty stores and one supermarket. For major shopping, residents go to malls in Paramus, a five minute drive away.

The borough's children attend the K-3 Hillside School on Hillside Avenue and the 4-8 Brookside School on Brookside Avenue. Of the 65 K-8 school districts in Bergen County, Allendale's scored highest on the statewide Eighth Grade Early Warning Test last year, with 70.8 percent of the students scoring as "clearly competent," the top rating.

"Our students come from highly motivated, involved families," explained Dr. J. Thomas Morton, the superintendent. "The parents volunteer to work in the library and as volunteer classroom aides." And, he added, "Allendale voters have never defeated a school budget."

According to Dr. Morton, computers are introduced in kindergarten and are available in each classroom and in computer laboratories in each schools. By eighth grade, the students can use word processors and spreadsheets and can access information via computer.



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Allendale's students go on to Northern Highlands Regional High School, which the borough shares with neighboring Upper Saddle River. The school, on Hillside Avenue in Allendale, has one of the highest per-pupil expenditures in the state — $13,600. The superintendent, Dr. David Garrahan said that parents were getting value for their tax money.

LAST year the high school was rated fifth in excellence in the state by New Jersey Monthly magazine. In 1993, it received national recognition as a Drug Free School by the Federal Department of Education at a White House ceremony. The agency also recognized Northern Highlands in 1987 as a Blue Ribbon High School, the highest national academic award. Of last year's 176-student graduating class, more than 96 percent went on to higher education. Of the 142-member class of 1995, five students are National Merit Scholarship finalists and five others are semi-finalists.

The high school has several unusual features, including a planetarium, a physical-fitness center, complete with exercise machines, and a cultural arts center that includes a ballet room and a fully equipped electronic music studio.

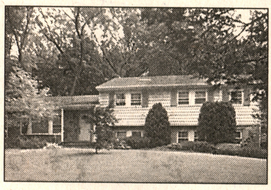
"At the beginning of the year, each child is examined and given a computer printout on his or her physical condition, including body-fat percentages," said Dr. Garrahan. "Physical fitness goals are set for each student and when report cards are issued, each receives a computer-printed report on progress toward those goals."

Dr. Garrahan said that the fitness program was part of the school's overall program to keep students drug and alcohol free.

"We survey our students each year to find out the major deterrents from taking drugs," he explained. "An overwhelming number of students say 'health.' So we emphasize healthy bodies, as well as healthy minds." ■

On the Market

3-bedroom, 1½-bath ranch on .33 acre at 108 Elmwood Avenue, $254,900.



3-bedroom, 3-bath split level on 1 acre at 28 Crescent Road, $399,500.

6-bedroom, 3 full-, 2 half-bath colonial at 25 Cambridge Drive, $675,000.

GAZETTEER

POPULATION: 6,100 (1995 estimate).

AREA: 2.9 square miles.

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME: $107,000 (1994 estimate).

MEDIAN PRICE OF ONE-FAMILY HOUSE: $360,000.

TAX ON MEDIAN HOUSE: $7,000.

MEDIAN PRICE A YEAR AGO: $351,000.

MEDIAN PRICE 5 YEARS AGO: $330,000.

MEDIAN PRICE OF 2-BEDROOM CONDOMINIUM: $220,000.

MEDIAN PRICE A YEAR AGO: $220,000.

MEDIAN PRICE 5 YEARS AGO: $240,000.

MEDIAN RENT ON 2-BEDROOM APARTMENT: $850.

PUBLIC-SCHOOL EXPENDITURE PER PUPIL: Elementary, $8,000; high school, $13,600.

DISTANCE FROM MIDTOWN MANHATTAN: 18 miles.

RUSH-HOUR COMMUTATION TO MIDTOWN: 40 minutes via Short Line Bus, $8.15 one way, $15.50 round trip, $51.35 10-trip; 45 minutes via New Jersey Transit train to Hoboken, $5.50 one way, $8.25 round trip, $142 monthly, then 10 minutes via PATH, $1 one way.

GOVERNMENT: Mayor Albert H. Klomburg, Republican, and 6 council members elected to 4-year terms.

CODES: Area, 201; ZIP, 07401.

RAILS (NO TIES) TO SIBERIA: In 1911 the North Jersey Rapid Transit Company inaugurated its trolley service from Paterson to Suffern, passing through Allendale. The line operated for 14 years until 1929, when service was stopped because the line was losing money. The tracks were shipped to Russia for use in the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway.