

• Historic Highlights of Chatham Township •

Ages ago Chatham Township was the southerly edge of a glacial field. A large deep lake was located over what is now the Great Swamp. The same glacier gave the Township many of its distinguishing features – the Passaic River that runs along the entire southern border, the wooded ridge that runs parallel to the river, and the gentle rolling hills that offer an expansive view over and beyond the Great Swamp.

Lenape Indians first came to inhabit New Jersey several thousand years ago. Their well-worn paths through the forests and over the rivers remain today as the basis for many of our modern highways. Main Street in Chatham Borough follows the old Minnisink Trail from the Delaware River through Morristown and Chatham over the Passaic River and through the gap in the Watchung Mountains at Short Hills.

The first white settlers arrived circa 1710, attracted by the fertility of the soil and the rich iron ore deposits in the region. During the Revolutionary War, the entire area shared in the activity of the Morristown encampments of 1777 and 1779-80.

In 1806, the Township of Chatham was incorporated and included the areas that are now the Boroughs of Chatham, Madison, and Florham Park. It was named Chatham in honor of British Prime Minister William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, who had protested taxing the American colonists. These areas were connected by turnpikes and toll roads originally built by private corporations to transport their goods to market. Local residents later built Shunpike Road to avoid paying tolls.

The most important transportation development was the coming of the Morris and Essex Railroad in 1837. This led to sharp increases in the population, which resulted in incorporating Chatham, Madison, and Florham Park as separate boroughs.

In the 1870s and 1880s Chatham Township became a center of the rose growing industry. The specialty of the Louis M. Noe Greenhouses was the American Beauty rose. At Christmas, he sent them to European royalty. Customers included Queen Victoria who received fifty roses for her golden anniversary of her reign.

After a five-year construction ban during World War II, home-hungry families invaded the Township, and large farms gave way to luxurious home sites. Former rose farms became two major shopping centers at the corner known as Hickory Tree, named for a hickory tree planted during President Madison's term.

In 1959 the Port Authority focused on the Great Swamp as the ideal location for a major metropolitan airport. Through the efforts and financial donations of the residents of Chatham Township and neighboring municipalities, the Swamp was secured as a protected wilderness area. This part of Chatham Township is now open space where joggers, hikers, and nature lovers can see the land as it once was. The Great Swamp wilderness together with its proximity to metropolitan New York makes Chatham Township an attractive place to live.