

# Inn Hits Century Milestone

Hotel and restaurant has been at Bernardsville's heart for 100 years

By MICHELLE REGAN

RECORDER COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS

The grand dame of Bernardsville, The Bernards Inn, has turned 100. To mark the milestone, the great lady has received a multi-million dollar renovation and redesign, and a series of events and galas are underway.

"I've always felt that The Bernards Inn is really the heart and soul of the area," said proprietor Harold Imperatore, a resident of Basking Ridge. "When the inn has thrived, so has the community. It's an anchor not just of Bernardsville but also the Somerset Hills, because it's such a unique property, from the events, the weddings, the engagements, to the holidays, the special dinners — people think of it as a special place to come.

"Everyone around here has a memory of a special time spent at the inn. The fact that it's been here for 100 years, from an era long gone, and the values are still what they have always been in the cuisine, the décor, the styling and the service make this a very rare and special place."

The inn first opened its doors on Feb. 12, 1906. The original three-story building held 40 guest rooms — which were furnished with pieces bought at auction from the old Plaza Hotel in New York City — and was much larger than the building today.

Through the years the inn has housed a bowling alley, the town's first movie house, the Borough Hall, a butcher shop, a grocery store, a pharmacy, a post office, a jail and various pubs in addition to its guest rooms.

A fire on March 31, 1930, believed to have been started by the cigarette of a local drunk incarcerated in the jail, destroyed a large section of the inn, reducing it to its current size. Today, The Bernards Inn consists of 20 guest rooms, the restaurant, the bar and banquet facilities.

In addition to some of its more colorful sidelights over the years, such as the bowling alley and the jail, The Bernards Inn has accommodated some very interesting

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guests. Silent film star Mary Pickford stayed at the inn in October 1914 and again in September 1915 while filming "Madame Butterfly" in the area.

Silent film stars Eva Tamguay, Norma and Constance Talmadge, Tom Moore and Stuart Holmes, as well as director Sidney Oldcott, are also counted as some of the inn's past guests. In later years, Jackie Onassis, Elizabeth Taylor, Malcolm Forbes and, more recently, James Gandolfini, as well as sports personalities including Mike Tyson, Yogi Berra and Darryl Strawberry have visited the historic building.

Although the inn has had its share of celluloid celebrities, it has also been a magnet for political personalities. Former New Jersey governors Brendan Byrne, Thomas Kean and Christine Todd Whitman are all known to patronize the restaurant.

The local Republican Party, which has held many a dinner, meeting and election-victory celebration at the inn over the years, still holds its annual candidate screening meetings at the inn.

The Bernards Inn has always been a reflection of the tenor and the climate of the town. When the Inn has prospered, so has Bernardsville; and, during difficult times, both the inn and the town struggled. During prohibition just after World War II, the inn actually closed for two years. It closed a second time for two years in 1966.

After a succession of different owners, the inn was renamed Widow Brown's Inn the early 1970s before another set of new owners restored its name.

### New Owner, New Direction

The inn regained its glory when yet another group of owners, led by Alice Rochat of Bernardsville and Mark Johnson of Gillette, took over the property and spent approximately \$1.5m on renovations between 1987 and 1992.

Dick Schlott, a Bernardsville realtor, bought the inn in 2002, and then sold it to current owners, Hampshire Destination Properties, in April 2006. Hampshire, which had bought and renovated other area landmarks — including the former library on Route 202, the historic Station Bar and Grill

on Route 202 and Jerolaman's general store on Claremont Road — plans to spend \$2m on the current renovation and redesign of the inn, which it expects to complete in about a year.


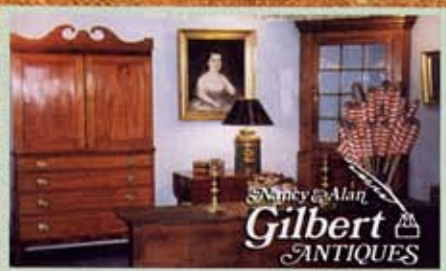
"We started the renovation about 16 months ago," said Imperatore. "We've done nothing to the actual structure of the building. It has stayed the same. It's the decorating and colors that have changed."

Jeffrey Haines of Butler's of Far Hills has been charged with the task of remodeling and redecorating the inn.

"People will find it less stuffy, with a warmer feeling walking through," said Imperatore. "It is definitely elegant, but a softer elegance. It's a more relaxed elegance Jeff has tried to create. The feel that we've tried to create is you are walking into someone's mansion. We want to make you feel welcome with gracious hospitality."

The inn offers four distinct dining options: the Library bar and lounge area, where guests can order off the bar menu; the Conservatory for breakfast and more casual evening dining; the more formal Great Room with fireside dining; and also

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