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The Story of Beverly Mills

Shedding Light on a Rich Hidden History



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Cover by Benoit Cortet Photography



The Story of Beverly Mills

Shedding Light on a Rich Hidden History

By Catherine Blalkowski | Photos by Benoit Cortet Photography

Beverly Mills' greatest passion in life is telling stories—about history, about her own life in Pennington Borough, about the people who have helped shape Hopewell Valley into what it is today. Throughout her life, she has been a student, a model, a restaurant owner, an author, a historian—the list goes on and on. But through it all, a love of storytelling has stayed with her.

"I like stories to be told that people have not heard before," she says. For Beverly, one of these stories is that of the African American contribution to this region, which, she says, is "a rich history that has been overlooked and largely forgotten."

Beverly herself has lived in Pennington for most of her life. The house on South Main Street she lives in now—a home in which her great-grandparents once lived and which has been in her family for 106 years—was built in 1856. "It is quite amazing," she says of her family's ties to the area. "There are a few dwindling houses in Pennington that have similar longevity. In many instances, home ownership had been difficult."

The difficulties Beverly, born in 1950, refers to are those of the African American community, especially during and after the

Civil War. In a predominantly white town, African American families formed a close-knit neighborhood. "We weren't allowed to live just anywhere," says Beverly.

The formation of this community was largely due to the building of the Bethel A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) Church in 1847, after the land was sold from Joshua Bunn, a white Methodist, to Samuel Blackwell, a black Methodist—and Beverly's third great grandfather. Once the church was built, parishioners were able to purchase 100 feet worth of frontage on which they could build homes. As a result, a community-centered around the celebration of the African Methodist Episcopal faith—formed.

Although Beverly was born more than 100 years after the building of the church, she still experienced that same closeness formed by the original parishioners of the Bethel A.M.E. Church. "Everyone on the block was related. We had a very robust African American community."

Religion was a bond between many members of this community. Beverly remembers going to church as well as Sunday school every week. "It was right down the street from my house," she

says. Later in life, she would go on to sing in a Baptist Gospel choir. "I had never heard anything like it before," she says. Today, Beverly calls herself "officially a Baptist," although she has attended both Methodist and Baptist services. "Religion has always been a part of my life, and particularly my ancestors."

After graduating from Hopewell Valley regional schools in 1968, Beverly stayed at home for a year. Her mother passed away shortly after giving birth to Beverly's brother, who had been born prematurely. When he was strong enough, he went to live with an aunt, and Beverly went off to school in New York at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, where she studied for a few years before taking a break in order to work.

"I started working with every intention of going back to school, but it never happened."

Beverly's first job was with New York City mayor John Lindsay in the Bureau of the Budget. She then moved over to his newly-formed Mayor's Council on the Environment Office before returning to New Jersey in 1972. At this time, she was already engaged to her fiancé, Robert.

Beverly and Robert's own story reads like a fairytale. It begins with Beverly working at Litt Brothers' department store in Trenton. "I was a fourteen-year-old model. I used to go every

Saturday into Trenton to model teen clothes." Robert worked there as a stock boy. At the time, he was 19. "He would always look at me because he thought I was pretty, but he was too shy to say anything. Finally, one weekend, he mustered up enough courage to ask me if I was coming back the next weekend, and I said 'yes.'"

But Beverly did not end up ever returning because her assignment as a model was over. "I never got a chance to see him again," she says—that is, not until seven years later, when they were guests at the same wedding. "By this time, I was 21. He had been in the service but had come home. He asked if he could come visit me."

Beverly, of course, said yes. In March, they will have been married for 45 years.

Beverly's life in Pennington has been filled with an array of experiences—she has worn many different hats. Over the years, she has been a restaurant owner (Flavors Cafe, then, later, Four Girls catering business); a college graduate (she returned to school and received a fine arts degree from The College of New Jersey in Ewing in 1988); and an author (*If These Stones Could Talk*). She is currently near completion of the book, co-authored with friend and associate Elaine Buck. *If These Stones*

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Could Talk discusses accomplishments and contributions of African Americans, as well as their historical experience, in the Hopewell Valley region. Beverly and Elaine both currently serve on the board of the Stoutsburg Cemetery Association in Hopewell Township, a burial ground off Provinceline Road for African American citizens and veterans from the surrounding area. The book, based on research they have been working on for 11 years, is set to be released in 2018.

What, then, is Beverly up to now? Perhaps a better question might ask what she isn't up to. When she isn't writing, she might

be giving a presentation—along with Elaine and her husband, John—on her historical work on African American contribution, especially to Sourland Mountain and the surrounding area, to an eighth grade class, historical society or community group. She might be doing research with the Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum Board, which plans to open the first African American museum in central New Jersey in spring of 2018 at the old Mount Zion A.M.E. church on Hollow Road in Skillman. She might be selling strawberry shortcakes from a stand in front of her home on Pennington Day (they always sell out). Or, she just might be spending time with family. Beverly has two adult sons, Jason and Drew; five grandchildren, Charde,



Aviel, Hayden, Jameson, and Megan; and two rescue dogs she adopted with Robert from a kill shelter in Kentucky. In other words, "free time" is not a term with which Beverly is familiar.

For Beverly Mills, living in Pennington is "quite an honor." Today, there are only three black families left on her street. Watching the world change around her for all these years—combined with her extensive historical research—has left her



in awe. "My true passion is African American history," she says. "I'm a storyteller; I bring history into my stories."

Perhaps, then, it is only fitting that Beverly's own story—one deeply rooted in history, family, religion, and the closeness of a community—is so moving. Her passion has helped her create an impact on her own life as well as the lives—and legacies—of so many members of Hopewell Valley, the memories of whom will continue live on as part of this community's incredible past.