In addition to the Black Horse Inn located at the crossroads, Mendham Borough is fortunate today to still enjoy the other keystone buildings located at core intersection of the village. In the early 1800s a post office was established in the village center. Throughout the nineteenth century, the residents of Mendham Township came into Mendham Village to pick up their mail, and buy the few things that they could not make themselves, at one of the two general stores in the center of town, Robinsons and the Sandford-Phoenix General Store.

Around 1800 a building was constructed across the street from the Black Horse Inn to serve as a girl’s seminary. Acquired by William Phoenix, successive generations of the Phoenix family operated it as a general store, tavern and inn for almost one hundred years. The building offered food and lodging to travelers along the Washington Turnpike and helped make Mendham a popular summer resort. From 1820 until after WWII the Phoenix House roadhouse was a mecca for vacationing gentry searching for bucolic views, peace and quiet and American-style fine dining.

The Phoenix House is a registered historic American building and an architectural legacy of the Borough and the Township. Township residents Senator and Mrs. Arthur Whitney, along with others purchased the Phoenix House and its furnishings in 1919 from William N. Phoenix. From that time on, it was used as a teashop, antiques store and dress shop. In 1929 the Whitney’s acquired full title. Aware of the building’s historical significance, Whitney and his wife donated the vacated mansion to the people of Mendham Borough in June 1938. Since then, many groups including the Mendham Borough Historical Society, the Mendham Garden Club, and the Historic Preservation Commission have used the house as a meeting place. The Police Department was initially located on the first floor and later in the basement for many years. Since 1960, the building has housed the Borough offices. A million-dollar preservation of the building was completed in 2005.
When grass grew on Main Street, the villagers gathered in the crossroads around a “liberty pole” that displayed the “stars and Stripes” in the center of the intersection. These are the crossroads at which “Mendhamites” have gathered to share news, celebrate, parade, and wish a safe journey to those leaving town. These are the crossroads that still maintain the four original buildings, and the crossroads that form the hub of the Historic District that fans out from it.

Adapting Uses........

The original village, home to laborers, farmers, and craftsmen adapted its buildings and it uses over the years as the needs of the town as well as the resident population changed. By allowing the mixed uses and renovations for the preservation of the buildings, the Borough has been able to maintain much of its initial historic character. Mendham Borough developed ordinances for preservation in the Historic Business Zone, before the formal Historic District Overlay District was formed.

Commercial buildings in Mendham’s Historic District reflect the town’s history as a local center for business. Some structures were converted to business uses from houses; others were constructed originally for commercial use, but the nature of the businesses within have changed. Throughout the
years, the commercial buildings in the village included hardware stores, general stores, shoemaker shops, dry goods and grocery stores, butcher shops and ice cream parlors. Mendham even had a coach factory in operation prior to 1860, but the businesses did not survive after the Civil War. There was also a tannery north of West Main Street, which supplied leather for harnesses.

Some of the commercial buildings have also become mixed uses. In 1902 a shopping trip could have been started at the “Freeman Brothers”, a new three-story structure built on West Main Street which today is the home to a dry cleaners and nail salon with apartments above. Apartments can also be found in the renovated Freeman Garage and Blacksmith Shop that currently also has a fitness and retail business.

While today’s businesses in the Borough have a large population of service and retail functions, years ago there was a need for hardware and plumbing businesses. There were several plumbing businesses throughout the Borough. The Groendykes had a plumbing business on West Main Street in what today is a business office and La Familia food service. There was also a plumbing shop behind 2 and 4 West Main Street in the 1890s that became a barbershop in 1932, and was ultimately renovated to serve as a residence. In addition, one could obtain plumbing and hardware in the Sanford Building and in the building that today is the rectory for St. Mark’s Church.
While some continuation of original uses in our commercial buildings has been a key to preservation, change of use, although altering some structures quite significantly, has kept buildings standing that might otherwise have come down. The hardware, plumbing and general stores have been replaced by hair and nail salons, retail clothing, and jewelry stores, offices and apartments to meet our current needs, but the buildings and their history have been left for us to enjoy and remember.

(Continued in Part C)