Darlington Schoolhouse restoration to begin soon

by Frank J. McMahon

The Darlington Schoolhouse restoration, rehabilitation, and adaptive reuse project in Mahwah is expected to begin this fall when work will begin on the exterior of the building, which is located at the end of Darlington Avenue.

Edward Goodell, executive director of the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, which, along with the Township of Mahwah, is a joint owner of the historical site, advised that it could cost $3.1 million to restore the structure and the architectural elements of the building, and create a 21st century workplace for the trail conference, which will operate out of this site when it is completed.

Bergen County Executive Dennis McNerney recently helped unveil the sign in front of the building. That sign announces that part of the cost of preserving the building is being covered by matching grants from the Bergen County Historic Preservation Trust Fund and the state's Garden State Historic Preservation Trust Fund.

He voiced his thanks to the trail conference for taking on this project. "I want to thank the New York New Jersey Trail Conference for their support in preserving something as important as this building," McNerney said. "It is really an important milestone for the county."

The Darlington Schoolhouse was built in the 1880s as a gift to the Mahwah community by Alfred B. Darling and Theodore Havemeyer. Darling, owner of the Fifth

Avenue Hotel in New York City, established the Valley Farm in the Ramapo Valley in Mahwah in 1872 and he employed scores of workers there. The area around Darling's farm estate became known as the hamlet of Darlington.

Soon thereafter, Darling's neighbor, Theodore A. Havemeyer, one of the proprietors of the American Sugar Refining Company, forerunner of today's company that makes Domino Sugar and is now known as Domino Foods, Inc., established his dairy farm estate known as the Mountainside Farm. Havemeyer, with assistance from Darling, financed the building of a new schoolhouse in the hamlet and hired Dudley Newton, architect of Havemeyer's Newport, Rhode Island residence, to design and oversee its construction.

The Darlington Schoolhouse, also known as Havemeyer Hall, was regarded as one of the finest schoolhouses in New Jersey. The large room on the first floor was the classroom for grades one through eight and those students had two teachers. The second floor served as a social and community hall, and as a chapel that was used by Darlington members of the Ramapo Reformed Church on Island Road.

The building served as a public school from 1890 until 1944, then as administrative offices for the Mahwah school district. When the school district vacated the premises in the 1970s, ownership reverted to the original owners, the Havemeyer family.

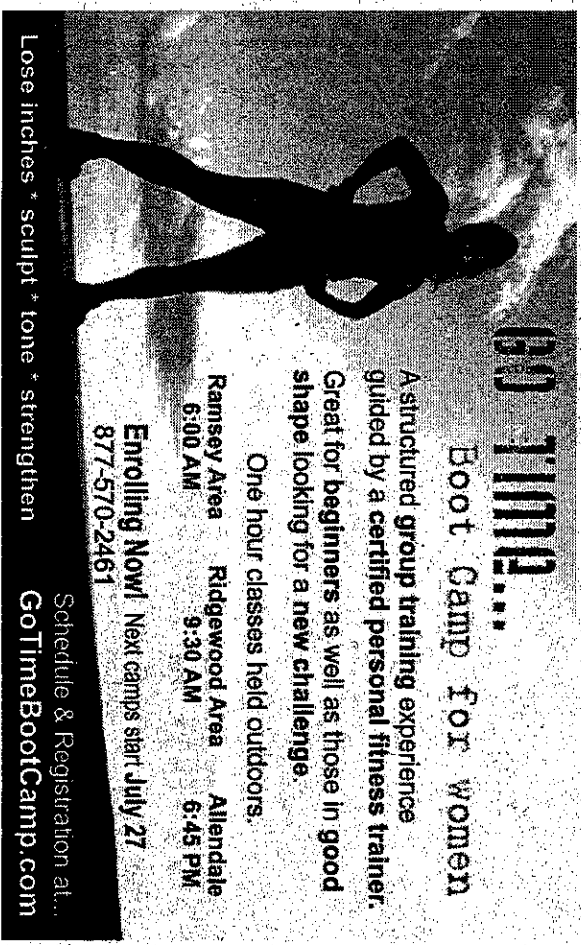In the late 1980s, a consortium led by township resident William Dator consoli-

dated ownership, purchased the property, and stabilized the building. Dator's effort saved the structure, although the building continued to sit unoccupied. In 2000, the schoolhouse was sold to an individual who intended to turn it into a residence. That plan never materialized, and the unused site was subject to local vandalism and continued neglect.

On Nov. 29, 2007, after a four-year effort and with crucial support from the Morris Land Conservancy, Bergen County Open Space Trust Fund, and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection Green Acres Program, the trail conference

and the Township of Mahwah became joint owners of the Darlington Schoolhouse.

The trail conference is now conducting a campaign to raise funds for the restoration and adaptive reuse of the schoolhouse building and it intends to build a two-story addition onto the rear of the schoolhouse building. When all the work is completed, the trail conference will be the sole occupant the building, but the structure will be open to the public.

"When renovation is complete, the Darlington Schoolhouse once again will be a vital center of activity in the Mahwah community," Goodell said.