



Quaker pattern-brickwork farmhouse. Salem County, New Jersey.  
Photo by David S. Cohen.

*The New Jersey Program has been made possible through many generous corporate and private donations to Festival New Jersey '83!, a non-profit corporation established and chaired by Governor Thomas H. Kean to fund New Jersey's participation in the 17th Annual Festival of American Folklife.*

# New Jersey Folklife: An Overview by David S. Cohen

When most people think about folklore, they think about some place other than New Jersey. Folklore is commonly identified with rural settings, and New Jersey is basically urban, suburban, and industrial. There are some rural areas in New Jersey – the truck farms of “the Garden State” and the Pine Barrens of South Jersey – but the former are fast disappearing and the latter survive only because they are preserved by the state. Most New Jerseyans live and work in the densely populated corridor that cuts across the mid-section of the state. But folklorists today recognize that there is also a folklore of the factory, a folklore of the city, and a folklore of ethnicity, and New Jersey provides a rich source for their study.

While New Jersey was one of the first states to industrialize, its earliest industries were rural, not urban. The colonial iron industry was located in the mountains in the north and the bogs in the south, and there are still some today who know the art of producing charcoal – the fuel used in these early iron furnaces. Glass blowing was another rural industry in South Jersey, although abandoned iron-mining and glass-blowing towns in the Pine Barrens are New Jersey's ghost towns of today.

There was plenty of opportunity for industrial and labor lore to develop early in New Jersey. In 1792 Alexander Hamilton and some businessmen founded the Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures in order to develop Paterson as the first American industrial city. In the nineteenth century Paterson became a center of silk manufacturing in America. Newark developed a leather and tanning industry, and Trenton had the John A. Roebling Iron Works. The industrial development of the state was aided by the construction in the early nineteenth century of two canals – the Morris Canal across North Jersey and the Delaware and Raritan Canal across Central Jersey. The “tiller sharks” (boatmen) on the canals developed their own occupational folklore. Even today some scholars perceive a high-technology folklore in the form of jokes circulated in offices by copying machines and noncopyrighted games played on computers.

The streets of New Jersey's cities abound with traditional life as practiced for generations. One need only to walk through Hoboken or Bayonne to see children playing stick ball, hop scotch, and Double Dutch jump rope. Paterson has a farmers' market where vendors peddle their produce. In “The Burg” (the Italian-American neighborhood in Trenton) one can see people sitting on their stoops visiting and talking with their neighbors. In fact, New Jersey even offers a rich variety of suburban folklore, which includes such diverse genres as jokes told by housewives at coffee klatsches, bridal showers and Tupperware parties, and masquerading by teenagers at the “Rocky Horror Picture Show.”

New Jersey is populated by a large number of ethnic groups, many of which have clustered in city neighborhoods. There is a Cuban community in Union City, a Portuguese community in Newark, a Hungarian community in New Brunswick, and a Japanese community in rural Seabrook Farms. They are not the only ethnic groups in their locales, but they are the largest and give the neighborhood its identity, often reflected in foreign language signs in stores and restaurants. For many ethnic groups folk traditions are their symbols of identity. Their ethnicity is expressed in foodways, language, music, dance, and festivals (often in ethnic costume). Some festivals, such as those presented weekly each summer at the Garden State Arts Center, are designed to present ethnic traditions to the public at large. Others, such as Italian-American saints' festivals, are intended primarily for the members of the community, although the public is welcome. Such American expressions of ethnicity differ from those in the Old World, having been adapted to new settings. Music, such as Ukrainian *troyisti muzyky* (trio music), once performed informally at

weddings, is now formally presented on a stage at a public festival with dancers in folk costume. Craft traditions that used to be a vital part of rural economy in the mother country are now miniaturized and made into a hobby.

Blacks comprise one ethnic group in New Jersey with a particularly varied history. Because New Jersey had slavery, there are some Black families (many of whom have Dutch surnames) who can trace their ancestry to these New Jersey slaves and free Blacks. Most Blacks in New Jersey came north as part of the Great Migration during World War I. To their number were added West Indian Blacks, such as Haitians, Jamaicans, and Afro-Cubans.

There are also two enclave populations in New Jersey – the Ramapo Mountain People, who descend from free Blacks who were culturally Dutch, and the Pineys, who used to live isolated in the Pine Barrens. The origin of both groups have been forgotten and legends have taken the place of history. While the past of the Ramapo Mountain People has been reconstructed, that of the Pineys is yet to be researched.

New Jersey was once two colonies – East Jersey and West Jersey. The boundary line ran from a point of the upper Delaware River to the mouth of Little Egg Harbor on the Atlantic. There is still a distinct difference between North Jersey and South Jersey which is reflected in the major linguistic distinction between the Inland Northern and Midland dialects. In the north a small stream is called a “brook,” while in the south it is often called a “run.” There is also a difference in folk furniture styles; for instance, between North Jersey ladderback chairs, which resemble those from New England, and the South Jersey versions (such as those of generations of the Ware family of Cumberland County), which resemble chairs from Pennsylvania. There is even a difference between the split oak baskets made in South Jersey and the variety of basket types made in North Jersey.

Beyond this basic north-south division, New Jersey is characterized by many other folk cultural regions. Red sandstone farmhouses with bell-shaped roofs, Dutch barns, and hay barracks (hay stacks with moveable roofs) define the Dutch culture areas in the northeast. Pattern-ended brick farmhouses and “plain-style” (simply decorated) meeting houses delimit the Quaker culture area in the southwest. Log houses and split-level bank barns reflect the Pennsylvania German culture area in the northwest. Wood-frame saltbox houses and wing-headed tombstone carvings mark the Puritan influence in the north-central region.

There is also a maritime cultural complex along the New Jersey Shore. It can be seen in such indigenous New Jersey boat types as the Sea Bright skiff (used in pound net fishing), the garvey (used in clamming), the sneakbox (used in duck hunting), and the schooner (used in oystering). Also part of the maritime tradition is the art of decoy carving, perhaps New Jersey’s most famous folk art. There are still “mudwallopers,” who make their living from trapping in the wetlands bordering on Delaware Bay.

Because of its small size and complexity, people have concluded that the state lacks an identity. The identity of New Jersey, however, is found in the very diversity of its folklife.

*David S. Cohen is Coordinator of the Folklife Program at the New Jersey Historical Commission and has written on New Jersey folklore and local history. He has taught for nine years at Rutgers University in Newark prior to his present position.*

#### *Suggested reading*

Cohen, David Steven. *The Folklore and Folklife of New Jersey*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, forthcoming.

\_\_\_\_\_ and Donald P. Lokuta. *Ukrainian-Americans: An Ethnic Portrait*. Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1982.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Ramapo Mountain People*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1974.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Folklife in New Jersey: An Annotated Bibliography*. Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1982.

Halpert, Herbert. “Folktales and Legends From the New Jersey Piney: A Collection and a Study.” Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1947.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Some Ballads and Folk Songs from New Jersey.” *Journal of American Folklore*, 52 (1939): 52-69.

#### *Suggested films*

*In the Barnegat Bay Tradition*. New Jersey Network, 1573 Parkside Avenue, Trenton, New Jersey 08638.

*The Burg: A State of Mind*. 30 min. New Jersey Network, 1573 Parkside Avenue, Trenton, New Jersey 08638.

*Famous Tiller Sharks*. 30 min. New Jersey Network, 1573 Parkside Avenue, Trenton, New Jersey 08638.

*Aquí Se Habla Español*. 1 hr. New Jersey Network, 1573 Parkside Avenue, Trenton, New Jersey 08638.



South Jersey ladderback rocker attributed to Maskel Ware.

Photo Courtesy of the New Jersey State Museum.