

## Larison's Turkey Farm History 2000-2009 Timeline Since 1800

Edward Ng – March 2013  
Chester Historical Society

"landmark", "historic", "Chester identity", "restaurant", "bank", "pharmacy", "townhouses", "condominiums", "Liberty Village", "town hall", "B&B/motel", "rezoning", "conference center", "traffic", "rateables", "Whole Foods", "up scale hotel", "recession", "downtown hurting", "open space", "sewage treatment"

2013? No, those words are from the 2000-2009 discussions on the future of Larison's Turkey Farm site. We are hearing the same words in the current discussion about the future of the Turkey Farm.

We may disagree about the future of Larison's Turkey Farm, but we shouldn't disagree about its recent past. In 2010 Chester Library had the Chester Historical Society's collection of Observer Tribunes from 1950 to 2009 scanned into a database. Using that database I searched for articles about the Larison's Turkey Farm property. Here are the relevant articles I found since 2000. I tabulate the date, the author, the headline, and excerpts from the news article. There is more to a story than the headline so reading the excerpt is helpful. I hope that we can learn from past events and debates and apply insights and observations to current decision making.

The story starts with the owner of Larison's, Arthur McGreevy deciding to retire and sell the Turkey Farm.

	<b>Date- Author</b>	<b>Headline</b>	<b>Excerpts</b>
1	2000-10-26 Robert Ford	<b>Historic turkey farm may be developed</b>	"Larison's Turkey Farm Inn, a landmark at the intersection of Route 206 and Route 24 since the 1940s, might fall under a developer's wrecking ball. Borough Engineer Charles Balut said while no formal plans have been presented to the Planning Board, there has been some discussion about constructing a CVS Pharmacy and a bank on the corner lot and either demolishing the restaurant or moving it back towards the rear of the site. Mayor Hugh Newman, who also sits on the Planning Board, said he would not look favorably on any plan that calls for the destruction of the popular site. Several years ago, when the borough was setting up its Historic District, Larison's was left out by an oversight, Newman said. The district stopped at the Route 206 border. If the farm had been included in the district, a developer would not be permitted to remove it. For many years, Chester has been identified with the

			restaurant as a landmark, Newman said.”
2	2000-11-09 Robert Ford	<b>Fight on to save Larison’s from wrecking ball</b>	“Residents are up in arms over reports that the historic Larison’s Turkey Farm Inn is slated to be sold and either moved or destroyed to make room for a CVS pharmacy and a bank. The uproar has left Borough Council members scrambling for a way to save the historic structure...” Council members proposed several ways to save the inn. Arthur McGreevy who has run the Turkey Farm for the last 25 years is under contract to sell the 70 acres to Site Development Inc.
3	2000-11-30 Robert Ford	<b>Board to review Larison’s Farm Demolition plan</b>	At tonight’s Planning Board meeting, Site Development Inc. will informally present their plans to build a CVS and bank on the Turkey Farm site. Earlier this year a developer (unnamed) had proposed demolishing the historic restaurant and farm buildings to erect townhouses. “Residents, businesses, Borough Council, Planning Board, and Zoning Board of Adjustment members have all been vocally opposed to changing Larisons from its popular, family style dining format.” Several other uses were suggested for the site: 1. bed and breakfast, motel, 2. maintain historic front of site but allow higher density housing in the rear, 3. town buys the land.
4	2000-12-07 Jon Slusher	<b>Larison plan a big turkey, says Planning Board</b>	The Planning Board reacted negatively to Site Development Inc.’s informal presentation of a plan to build a 3,670 sq. ft. Commerce Bank, a 10,880 sq. ft. CVS, and 82 parking spaces on the 3.3 acre lot containing Larison’s Turkey Farm Inn. Four days later, the Borough Council agreed to rezone the property. “Borough officials said they have received a flood of letters and phone calls from area residents opposed to moving or destroying the inn.”
5	2000-12-07 Robert Ford	<b>Larison’s to be saved by rezoning</b>	On Dec. 1 the Borough Council voted to rezone the Larison’s Turkey Farm site. “The planned ordinance would change the zone from B-3 which permits commercial retail stores to OP which permits only offices and professional buildings....Under terms of the new ordinance the restaurant building would be protected...the restaurant use would be ‘grandfathered’ and would not be subject to the zone change.” “In addition to rezoning the front three acres of the 70-acre Larison tract, the council also will extend the Historical Preservation District from borough border to border encompassing all

			properties which front 513 formerly known as Route 24. The rear 67 acres of the Larison property are zoned residential."
6	2000-12-07 Editorial	<b>Saving Larison's is no easy task</b>	"The best idea is to convince people to put respect for heritage and architectural beauty, a love of history and a concern for its preservation above profit. That being unlikely, the borough can only try to work with the future developer to find some compromise so he can profit and the tradition of Chester won't be devastated."
7	2001-01-04 Robert Ford	<b>Chester officials eye saving landmark</b>	"Local residents, patrons of the popular family style eatery and the Borough Council were busy trying to figure out how to prevent a developer from building on three of the 70 acres of Larison's Turkey Farm on Route 206."
8	2001-01-04 Robert Ford	<b>Compromise may be works for turkey farm development</b>	"Potential developers of the Larison's Turkey Farm tract may be willing to compromise on their controversial plan to build a drug store and a bank on the tract. Borough Council members, however, are moving forward with two ordinances to change the zoning and protect the Route 24 site from commercial development. At Tuesday night's reorganization and regular meeting, the council introduced two ordinances. One would rezone the front 10 acres of the 70-acre historic turkey farm site from commercial to office and professional buildings and a second would extend the town's historic district along Route 24 from town border to border."
9	2001-01-11 Robert Ford	<b>Larison's says town missed big opportunity</b>	"In an interview on Monday, Lousie Blaine, who has run the restaurant for her cousin Arthur McGreevey for the past 27 years, said the town missed the opportunity to preserve the site seven years ago. At that time, an architect, planner and engineer for McGreevey presented a proposal to the Planning Board to construct a commercial/ retail village on several acres behind the popular family style restaurant. The village would have been similar in design and execution to Liberty Village in Flemington.."
10	2001-01-18 Robert Ford	<b>Officials say Larison's never followed through</b>	"...longtime Planning Board members said they weren't shortsighted; the problem was that Larison's never followed through on its plans. Julia Robinson is currently a member of the Borough Council and has been a Planning Board member since 1969. She said the Larison plan presented to

			the board seven years ago was only a concept and "not an application." "We never saw an application, everything was informal," Robinson said."
11	2001-01-25 Robert Ford	<b>Chester may buy farm for town hall</b>	Mayor Hugh Newman appointed Councilmen Robert Davis and Valle Schloesser at the Tuesday, Jan. 16 meeting, along with Planning Board members William Kay and Edward Hanington to study whether the borough should buy the site for a new municipal building. At the same time, the council adopted two ordinances they hope will limit development on the site. One changes the zoning on the front portion of the 70 acre property from commercial to office/professional office. Another extends the downtown historic preservation district from the border with Washington Township to the border with Mendham along Route 24". "..commercial development would create an unsafe traffic condition at the intersection of routes 206 and 24. Council members said office and professional buildings create less traffic. "
12	2001-02-15 Robert Ford	<b>Deal would preserve Larison's Farm but permit new drug store and bank</b>	"Larison's Turkey Farm could remain standing if the borough permits construction of a bank and drug store on adjacent property. A proposal has been made by a developer to give the borough the front three acres of the Larison's restaurant property including the historic turkey farm. In exchange, the developer wants permission to build a CVS Pharmacy and Commerce Bank on a portion of the property just west of the inn on Route 24 and to be allowed to build townhouses to the rear of the site." "The property is being purchased by Harold Wachtel who is selling the front portion of the site to Site Development Inc. of Mount Laurel. In November, Site Development presented plans to demolish the inn to make room for a pharmacy and bank on the corner." "Last month the council voted to rezone the front of the property to only permit offices and professional buildings. At the same time, the council created the committee to see if Wachtel would be interested in selling the inn and its out buildings to the borough. During the last month, Wachtel has offered to give the borough the turkey farm inn and its out buildings in exchange for commercial and townhouse approvals." "If a deal is reached, Wachtel would still sell a portion of the front of the tract to Site Development while either

			contracting out the rear of the site or building the townhouses himself," The committee is also looking at another option which Hannington said has some merit. Wachtel has proposed building a conference center with a hotel on the site and using the inn as a restaurant for the center."
13	2001-03-08 Robert Ford	<b>Turkey Farm is possible town hall site</b>	<p>Officials are continuing their study of converting the Larison's Turkey Farm building into a town hall or building a facility on adjacent land. Harold Wachtel is scheduled to close on his purchase of the property from owner Arthur McGreevey later this month. He has agreed not to demolish the historic structure as had originally been proposed to make way for a CVS Pharmacy and a Commerce Bank."</p> <p>"Despite the zone changes and the town's possible interest in acquiring the front of the site for municipal uses, Wachtel still wants to build the pharmacy and bank, Newman said. At one point in the talks, Wachtel had offered to give to the borough the restaurant and the out buildings at no cost in exchange for approvals to build the pharmacy and the bank. If the borough does not purchase the front acreage of the site, Wachtel still intends to sell it to Site Development Inc. of Mount Laurel, the company that has proposed building the pharmacy and bank. "The rear of the site is zoned for two-acre residential lots. Newman said Wachtel would like to be build homes at a greater density, either on one acre or half acre lots."</p>
14	2001-03-15	<b>Zoning suits pile up over two Chester laws</b>	<p>"Property owners and prospective property owners are lining up to sue the Borough Council and Planning Board over two ordinances adopted in January aimed at protecting the historic nature of the town and preventing demolition of Larison's Turkey Farm Inn. One of the ordinances bars commercial development and only permits office and professional uses along Route 24 from Route 206 to the Chester Township border. The second ordinance extends the historic preservation zone along Route 24 from one end of the borough to the other. Eight property owners who own land and buildings that are impacted by the two new laws have jointly filed suit in Superior Court in Morristown to have the laws overturned. Harold Wachtel, who is under contract to purchase the 74-acre Larison's property, also has sued to have the two laws</p>

			<p>vacated. Wachtel is scheduled to close on the purchase of the land from owner Arthur McGreevey later this month."</p> <p>"We want to keep the historic look of the town," Davis said. The Victorian Era look of many of the buildings "is what makes Chester the historic village that it is." "It's the quaintness that makes it such a great place to visit and shop," Davis said. "People from New England, Pennsylvania and New York come to Chester to walk the streets and shop in the stores because of its quaintness, not because there are mega malls here." The council is also proceeding with its discussions with Wachtel to possibly buy part of the front of the tract as the site of a new municipal building."</p>
15	2002-01-24 Robert Ford	<b>Future still uncertain for Chester landmark</b>	<p>"It will be several months before borough officials meet with Harold Wachtel, owner of the vacant Larrison's Turkey Farm Inn building and its accompanying 70 acres, to hash out what can be done with the land. "</p> <p>"Objecting to the zone change, Wachtel filed suit in Superior Court, Morristown, but after negotiations with the borough, the suit was put aside. Both sides agreed that Borough Engineer Michael Spillane and planner Robert Guelich would study the site and propose the best development, taking into consideration what the desires of the town and the developer, Newman said. As part of the agreement, Wachtel's engineer and planner are to provide Spillane and Guelich with maps of the site and information on wetlands and other environmental constraints. However, they have yet to provide the information, Newman said. Once the information is received it will take several months to review, he said. Newman said a cursory review shows Wachtel can develop the front 10 acres with commercial or retail, still save the Larrison building and get about 16, single-family homes on the rear of the lot. Of the 60 acres to the rear of the tract, only about 30 are useable because of wetland constraints, Newman said."</p>
16	2002-02-01 Robert Ford	<b>Landmark Larison's lives: reopens in May</b>	<p>"A year after it closed, the popular Larison's Turkey Farm Inn is scheduled to reopen in May with few changes to the homey style of service and dining that has made it a local landmark. A local businessman, Lou Mont, has purchased the</p>

			<p>restaurant and will rent the building from Harold Wachtel who purchased the 71-acre Larison site from William McGreevey more than a year ago.”</p> <p>“Wachtel was unable to find anyone willing to operate the restaurant at the time he purchased the property and the landmark closed its doors in January 2001. Last summer, Wachtel nearly sold the restaurant to Pal's Cabin, a restaurant in West Orange; however, the deal eventually fell through because of the failing economy.”</p>
17	2002-04-04 Robert Ford	<b>Historic eatery to reopen in May</b>	<p>“After being shuttered for more than a year, the popular Larison's Restaurant at the intersection of Routes 206 and 24 will reopen its doors for business on Monday May 6.”</p>
18	2002-05-09 Robert Ford	<b>Future of growth in Chester pondered by Planning Board</b>	<p>“The Larison's tract provides a double concern for the Planning Board as they seek to preserve the historic Larison Inn while making sure the remaining 72 acres of land is developed in such a way as to not add traffic to Route 206 while providing positive rateables to the town.”</p>
19	2003-10-30 Claire Knapp	<b>Open space tax on Tuesday ballot</b>	<p>Voters will give their opinions on Tuesday as to whether the borough should impose a new tax to buy and protect undeveloped land. "With the establishment of an Open Space Trust Fund, the borough becomes eligible for grants through the New Jersey Green Acres Program and the Morris County Open Space Trust Fund," Verbaro said. "This leveraging of county and state grants can substantially increase the ability of the borough to acquire open space which would otherwise be too expensive with just local tax dollars."</p> <p>“Without a local open space tax, the borough is only entitled to a 25 percent grant from Green Acres with the remaining 75 percent cost of any acquisition in the form of a loan that has to be repaid. If the borough adopts an open space tax, the grant amount would automatically double, making it eligible for a 50 percent grant with only a 50 percent loan, Verbaro said.</p> <p>“A second tract is a 70-acre parcel that includes Larison's Turkey Farm on the corner of routes 206 and 24. The land is already owned by a developer who has begun preliminary negotiations to develop the tract.”</p>
20	2004-09-02 Julie Lange	<b>Towns are vying for</b>	<p>“Chester is also hoping for \$2 million iii county open space funding to help save 50 acres of the 70-acre</p>

		<b>open space grants</b>	Larison's woods tract from imminent development. According to Mayor Dennis Verbaro, the borough has already been promised \$575,000 from the state's Green Acres program. The tract, which includes open fields, wooded areas and a trout stream, is located behind the Larison's Turkey Farm restaurant on Route 24. Once preserved, it would be used for passive recreation, Verbaro said. Developer Harold Wachtel owns the property and has made overtures to the Planning Board to build on it. But the developer also showed some interest in the borough's offer to preserve it, Verbaro said."
21	2004-11-18 Michael F. Byrne	<b>Chester wins \$2 million dollar county grant</b>	"Larison's Woods, a 50-acre tract behind the landmark restaurant on Route 24, is closer to being preserved as open space after the Morris County Freeholders awarded the borough a \$2 million grant for its purchase on Nov. 10, officials said. But the landmark restaurant itself is not being preserved as open space, said Mayor Dennis Verbaro. The \$2 million grant from the freeholders for the open space purchase is being added to a previous grant this past July of \$575,000 from the state Green Acres fund, Verbaro said in a statement. The money will go a long way toward the purchase of "this pristine wooded parcel"."
22	2005-06-30 Michael F. Byrne	<b>Developers: Verbaro stalled plan</b>	Two area developers who want to build an upscale food store on the site of the Larison's property at routes 206 and 24 claim Mayor Dennis' Verbaro "hijacked" the deal from them. Verbaro denied the claims at a Borough Council meeting on Tuesday, June 21, and Councilman Valle Schloesser said the mayor had acted properly. Developers Steve Lapper and David O'Connell, both of Chester Township, said in an interview on Tuesday that earlier in the year, they began negotiations with Harold Wachtel, owner of the Larison's property. The developers discussed their plans to build a Whole Foods store, a chain that offers premier foods, on the site.
23	2005-07-14 Michael F. Byrne	<b>Hotel, stores, housing possible</b>	Representatives of the Bocina Company of Basking Ridge outlined their plans for an upscale hotel, stores and townhouses on the Larison's property on Route 206 at the Borough Council meeting on Tuesday, June 28. One principal in the company, Rob Fernandes, said he was concerned if a sewer plant could be built because the site is in



			<p>a Highlands planning area. A sewer plant would be necessary for any development at the site because the borough's sewer plant is at capacity, according to Mayor Dennis Verbaro." " Dante Di Pirro, deputy executive director of the state Highlands Council, said on Friday, July 8, that any sewer plant built in a Highlands planning area would have to meet strict standards to preclude polluting Category C-I streams, which are considered "pristine or trout-producing streams." "The Bocina Company also operates the Olde Mill Inn in Benards, a hotel with 102 rooms, the developers said." "Verbaro said at the council meeting that the Bocina Company was chosen by the owner of the Larison property, Harold Wachtel to develop the property." "Schloesser said the council wants to see a hotel on the site. Larison's Turkey Farm restaurant was successful because it drew customers from outside the borders of Chester. A hotel also would draw more outside visitors to the downtown Chester area, he said. Verbaro said the downtown business community is "hurting" and needs something to attract more visitors. Lapper and O'Connell wanted to build an upscale food store on the site, called, "Whole Foods," and also claimed that an upscale hotel was not economically viable. Lapper said Wachtel had a marketing study done that showed an upscale hotel would not be successful in Chester."</p>
24	2005-08-25 Phil Garber	<b>Landmark Chester restaurant shuts down</b>	<p>"In the end, Larison's Turkey Farm's own historic reputation caused its own demise. The last dinner was served on Sunday, Aug. 21, at the landmark restaurant on Route 206. Owner Lou Mont said he is selling the facility and that the new owners plan to totally refurbish the restaurant and change its name. "Larison's had a heck of a run but time marches on," said Mont. "The town in general has lost a lot of luster to tourists." Mont said it is "very difficult" for retailers to thrive in Chester and he said one reason is that the downtown shopping district is too oriented to tourism and not enough to service stores. "I believe the downtown community needs more diversity in the types of stores and products," Mont said. Focusing on tourism is difficult because it largely draws visitors only during the warmer months, he said."</p>
25	2005-11-17	<b>\$2.5 M in</b>	"Larison's Preservation

	Maria Vogel-Short	<b>grants to save local lands</b>	In Chester, an \$875,000 grant was approved to (help) preserve 44 acres known as Larison's Woods off Route 24 and behind the former Larison's Turkey Farm Restaurant."
26	2006-02-16 Kate Brex	<b>Full plate of plans for Chester in 2006</b>	"In June, representatives of the Bocina Company of Basking Ridge outlined plans for an upscale hotel, stores and townhouses on the Larison's property on Route 206, but officials were concerned over a proposed sewer proposal because the site is in the Highlands planning area. The issue remains unresolved. "In addition, the borough has a letter of agreement with Harold Wachtel to acquire 44 acres of the Larison property. "If is the borough's intention to enter the Larison property and continue the walking paths and public right-of-way through Mill Ridge, which sits a short distance from the library," said Verbaro. Verbaro said the walking paths would then wind through 45 acres of the Chubb property, which was donated to the borough, and connect with the Black River Wildlife Preserve."
27	2006-11-02 Belisa Silva	<b>Larison's land targeted for open space</b>	Officials hope to close by January on a \$3.75 million purchase of 44 wooded acres behind the former Larison's Turkey Farm on Route 206 to be used as public passive recreation. Officials also may build a sewer plant on part of the adjacent 27 acres, owned by developer, Harold Wachtel. The county has awarded close to \$3 million to the borough to preserve the land, also owned by Wachtel. "Plans for retail stores and a bank had been proposed for part of the property, but nothing has been finalized. Wachtel had filed a lawsuit challenging the rezoning of the property, but the case was dismissed. Councilman Iverson said the borough is seeking to preserve as much land as possible, 'The plan is to turn the open space to passive recreation, hiking, walking trails, etc.,' The point is to preserve open space. "The land is really not developable, the councilman said. Iverson also said the borough has tentative plans to build a sewage plant on five to 10 acres to service the "remaining sewage needs in the borough." Borough Administrator Valerie Egan said the plans for the sewage plant are undetermined. The statement from the borough said the sewer issue relates to an undetermined five to 10 acre parcel of

			the Larison tract, which is being researched. "There are drill rigs and soil testing going on to determine how well the land perks to see if it can handle a sewage treatment plant that will serve the remaining sewage capacity needs of the borough and any future development oh the property," the borough's statement said."
28	2007-03-22 Bob Thomas	<b>Landmark reoccupied; popular eatery staying</b>	"Larison's Turkey Farm to reopen as British pub and restaurant. In April, The Puddingstone Inn and Toppings Pub is scheduled to open at the former site of Larison's Turkey Farm. Willis Larison began serving traditional turkey dinners at this location around the time of World War II. The pub is named for Mike Topping, who settled here after making the original Mayflower's 23rd crossing."
29	2007-05-10 Bob Thomas	<b>\$3.74M saves Larison's as open space</b>	<p>"Borough officials have their first large open space prize after the official closing on a \$3.74 million purchase of 44 acres of wooded land at the rear of the former Larison's Turkey Farm on Tuesday, April 17. The state Green Acres Trust Fund provided \$865,000 toward the purchase. Another \$875,000 of the purchase price was provided through a 2005 grant from the Morris County Preservation Trust. The trust had previously set aside \$2 million toward the deal in 2004. Verbaro said the borough's open space funds provided what he called the "soft costs" of the acquisition, including title insurance, professional fees, surveying and property cleanup.</p> <p>Sewer Plans</p> <p>Verbaro said the borough is still negotiating for the purchase of another 10 acres of the remaining 27-acre former farm. If soil percolation tests show that parcel could be used for a sewage treatment plant, the borough would build a new plant to service the public sewer line in the downtown business area, Verbaro said.</p> <p>In colonial times, the property was the site of three iron ore mines, long since covered over. It began use as a farm in the 1800s. The original restaurant opened in the 1940s and operated until 2001. Wachtel purchased the property from Arthur McGreevy in 2002."</p>
30	2008-02-14	<b>Park repairs lead 2008 plans</b>	"The borough will continue to seek a location for a sewer treatment plant to allow, extension of the existing system to additional users. Although the open space acquisition of Larison's Farm property;

			was expected to provide a suitable location for a treatment plant, officials said environmental constraints on the land may require waivers from the Highlands Council that could delay the search."
31	2009-07-23 Bob Thomas	<b>Chester objects to Highlands' numbers</b>	"A new municipal build-out report from the New Jersey Highlands Council caps additional residences in the borough at either nine or 10 units, but even that is more than local officials are buying. Nine residences with septic systems are feasible in the borough's planning area, the study said. "From a local point of view, according to the consensus of our planning officials, we have come to different conclusions," said Mayor Dennis Verbaro. One of those properties is the former Larison's Turkey Farm, The borough has preserved 44 acres of the property north of the landmark restaurant at the corner of Route 206 and Main Street. "There's no way that could be developed," Verbaro, said."

## Larison's Turkey Farm Timeline

1800 Isaac Corwin builds a farmhouse on the site he bought from Benjamin Luse.

1829 James Topping buys the farm from Isaac Corwin.

1873 Sunnyside House is built by James Topping for his widowed daughter in law.

1929 New Route 206 is built and cuts through the eastern part of the property.

1939 Historic American Buildings Survey shows Leila (Eliza L.) Topping as owner. See photos, plans, and notes at <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/hh/item/nj0643/>.

1945 Willis Larison buys the Topping Farm and converts the house to an inn/restaurant.

1974 Arthur McGreevy buys Larison's Turkey Farm from Willis Larison.

2000 Arthur McGreevy contracts to sell the Turkey Farm to Site Development Inc. of Cherry Hill who plans to move or raze the Inn and build a CVS pharmacy and bank.

2000 Public outcry ensues over plans. Planning Board holds informal hearings.

2001 Larison's Turkey Farm Inn closes.

2001 Borough Council rezones site to Office Professional and extends Historic District to cover the site. Wachtel and neighboring landowners sue, but the suit is set aside in Morris Superior Court. Possible plans to convert the Inn to a town hall and build a bank and pharmacy on another part of the site were discussed with Wachtel.

2002 Arthur McGreevy sells the property to Harold Wachtel.

2002 Lou Mont reopens Larison's Turkey Farm Inn.

2005 Bocina Co. of Basking Ridge, a developer selected by Wachtel, presented plans for an upscale hotel, stores, and townhouses. A new sewer plant would be required.

2005 Larison's Turkey Farm Inn closes again.

2007 Puddingstone Inn is opened by Theresa Gaffney (Sally Lunn's Tea Room owner).

2007 44 acres in the rear of Larison's tract is purchased from Harold Wachtel for \$3.74M for open space, creating Larison Woods.

2008 Larison's Steakhouse is opened by Joseph Lobrano (Publick House owner).

2009 Larison's Steakhouse closes.