

In Chatham, N.J., a Strollable Downtown and Good Schools

Living In

By TAMMY LA GORCE APRIL 22, 2015



Nancy Wiegard for The New York Times

Julie and Thomas Blackstock moved to [Chatham Borough](#) from Union City, N.J., in 2013 for a reason Ms. Blackstock, a freelance photographer, called “really unoriginal.”

“It’s the same thing with almost anyone you’ll talk to in Chatham,” she said. “We had a small child, and we wanted green space and a back yard, and I couldn’t quite picture myself taking a stroller around the busy streets in the town where we were,” she said.

One other thing cemented the Blackstocks’ decision to buy their three-bedroom Craftsman-style house for a price in the \$550,000 range, she said: “The schools, of course.”

The quality of the school district, which serves both the borough and neighboring Chatham Township, both in Morris County, is frequently mentioned by residents and real estate agents as a motivation for house hunters there.



99 FAIRMOUNT AVENUE A five-bedroom four full- and two half-bath Victorian on 1.5 acres, listed at \$1,995,000. (973) 615-9607 CreditNancy Wegard for The New York Times

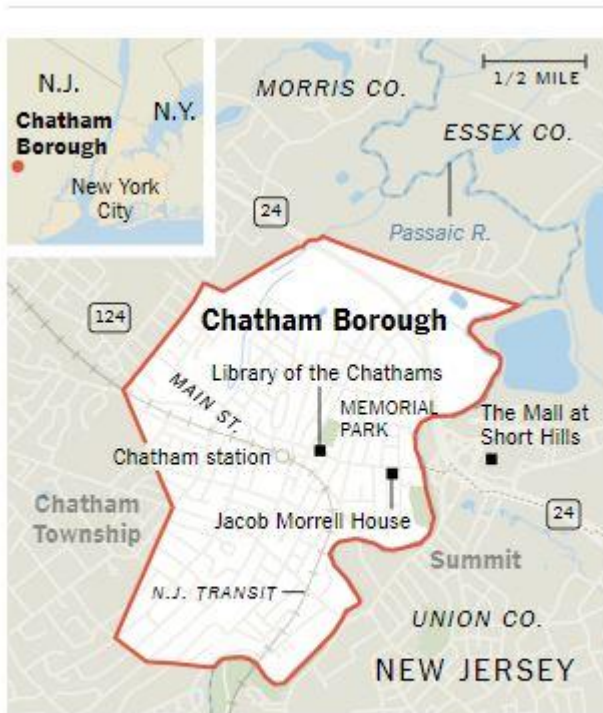
That explains the preponderance of young families like the Blackstocks, who have a 3-year-old son, as well as Taru and Manish Kumar, who moved from Nutley, N.J., to the borough in February with their two boys, ages 7 and 4.

“I already see a difference in my 7-year-old son,” Ms. Kumar said. “After two months in school here his language has matured so much.”

The downtown train station was another draw; Mr. Kumar, who works at Citibank in [Manhattan](#), can walk there.

For \$925,000, Ms. Kumar said, the family got a four-bedroom house “with all the bells and whistles.” And they felt lucky to get it. “One of the reasons we moved in the middle of the school year was because Chatham is such a hot town. From the research we did, we knew each house got more than one offer. We wanted to avoid a bidding war.”

At only 2.4 square miles, the borough, with an old-fashioned Main Street lined with mom-and-pop shops, is highly walkable. But those venturing downtown on foot may need to say “excuse me” a few times: In good weather, sidewalks are dotted with strollers, including the double-wide variety.



By The New York Times

“I don’t work outside the home, and in Chatham you’ll find a lot of the same,” said Jen Rein, a mother of 6-year-old twins who has lived there since 2011 and is on the executive board of [the Chatham Newcomers and Social Club](#). “A lot of people just moving in who join the Newcomers Club are from Hoboken or Manhattan, and they’ve either just had a baby or they’re planning to have one,” Ms. Rein said.

There are roughly 9,000 borough residents; Chatham Township, which shares a recreation program and a library with the borough as well as the schools, has roughly 10,500. Properties in the borough tend to be

smaller than in the township, said Kim Czachor, an agent at Coldwell Banker in Chatham.

A preference for the borough over the township can be a practical consideration. “People who are moving out from the city may have only one car or no car,” Ms. Czachor said. “They need to be able to walk to the train.” But the slight bustle of downtown can also be a

draw for young families, she said. “If you’re moving from Hoboken or the city you’re used to walking, and you may want the social aspect of that.”

What You’ll Find

Downtown Chatham’s tree-lined Main Street suggests an earlier, less frantic decade, even though busy Interstate 78 is just a few miles away. That is partly because of its small businesses, many of which have old-fashioned signs. One building that dates to the 18th century is the Jacob Morrell House, at 63 Main Street, now home to [Scalini Fedeli](#), a popular Italian restaurant. Liberty Drug and Surgical, a pharmacy, has an ice cream counter that recalls the 1950s. The sense of nostalgia continues just off Main Street, where front porch swings hang outside the wide front doors of gracious center-hall colonial-style homes, and American flags hang at the entryways of some houses.

What You’ll Pay

The median sales price for single-family homes for the year ending March 31 was \$680,000, compared with \$706,475 a year earlier, according to Town & Country Properties in Chatham.



75 HILLSIDE AVENUE A four-bedroom two-and-a-half bath 1907 house on 0.33 acres, listed at \$989,000. (973) 452-6318 CreditNancy Wegard for The New York Times

Multiple offers are common, said Debbie Woerner of Coldwell Banker, as are bids over the asking price.

“Houses do come on in the \$400,000 and \$500,000 range; sometimes they need a little work,” Ms. Woerner said, adding that buyers are not as eager to take on fixer-uppers as they were a decade ago.

As of April 14, there were 30 properties on the market. The asking price for a six-bedroom four-and-a-half-bath colonial built in 1911 and on 1.26 acres was \$2.45 million; a one-bedroom one-bathroom condominium was listed for \$259,000.

Single-family homes make up the bulk of sales, though the borough has a few small condominium complexes as well as a handful of garden-style apartments.

What to Do

Family recreation is a priority. Memorial Park Pool is open seasonally; borough residents pay \$475 a year for a family of four or more. Four fields, two with artificial turf, bustle with young lacrosse and field hockey players and cheering adults.



60 KINGS ROAD A four-bedroom three-bath 1970 house on 0.45 acres with a pool, listed at \$675,000 Credit Nancy Wegerd for The New York Times

Downtown is home to another well-known dining spot, [Restaurant Serenade](#), in addition to Scalini Fedeli. [The Mall at Short Hills](#), with several department stores and many high-end shops, is minutes away.

A weekly farmer's market is held Saturdays beginning in late June; residents who prefer to grow their own produce can join the Chatham Community Garden, where annual fees for plots cost \$10 to \$35.

The [Library of the Chathams](#) has a variety of programming for adults and children. The [Chatham Community Players](#), a nonprofit local theater

group, has been entertaining local audiences since 1922. Next month it presents “The Three Musketeers” by Ken Ludwig.

The Schools

[The School District of the Chathams](#) consists of six schools: three for prekindergarten through third grade, one for fourth and fifth grades, one middle school and one high school. [Chatham High School](#) was No. 1 in [New Jersey Monthly](#) magazine’s 2014 rankings in September of the state’s top public high schools. Last year, 93 percent of its roughly 1,200 students went on to four-year colleges; students taking the SAT scored an average of 571 in reading, compared with 496 statewide; 591 in math, compared with 521; and 583 in writing, compared with 497. Last year, voters approved an additional \$460,000 in spending to expand the district’s STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) programs.

The Commute

[New Jersey Transit](#) trains run from Chatham to New York Penn Station, a ride of around 45 to 60 minutes; trains that change in Newark can take longer. A one-way ticket costs \$10 for adults; a monthly pass is \$284. Trains also run to Hoboken, where some commuters pick up the PATH to Manhattan, but may require a transfer. Train station parking permits, for borough residents only and costing \$435 per year, are a hot commodity, and new residents can expect to remain on the waiting list for at least a year, said the borough administrator, Robert J. Falzarano. But metered parking spaces near the station are available for \$5.50 a day.

Chatham is about 25 miles northwest of Lower Manhattan, a drive of around 45 minutes, traffic permitting, via Interstate 78 and the Holland Tunnel.

The History

During the Revolutionary War, Chatham was one of a few strategically situated towns that impeded the westward advance of the British, according to Helen Ann Rosenfeld, a vice president of [the Chatham Historical Society](#). To keep the enemy off balance, Washington ordered the construction of baking ovens nearby to give the appearance of a permanent encampment. In August 1781, he stayed briefly at the Morrell House on Main Street, where he wrote at least 17 letters. Those letters are now held by [the Library of Congress](#).

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