

Freehold, N.J.: A ‘Sweet Spot’ in Monmouth County

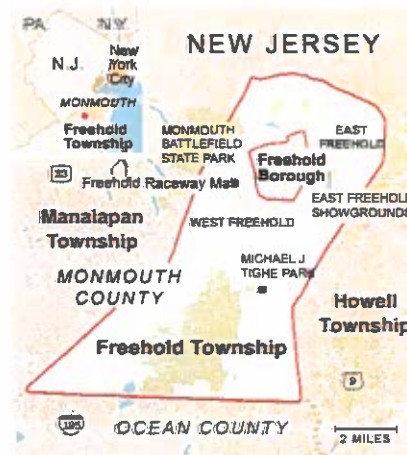
With major highways running through it, the 38-square-mile township offers easy access to schools, shopping and medical care: ‘There’s something for everyone.’

By Jill P. Capuzzo

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When Stephen Foglia and his fiancée, JoAnne Crimeni, decided it was time to leave Brooklyn and put down roots, they headed south to New Jersey. Traveling through a number of areas they couldn’t afford, they came upon Freehold Township, a place they knew only from having been to the mall there.

“Rent was getting expensive, and we wanted something that was ours, not somebody else’s,” said Mr. Foglia, 32, a carrier for the United States Postal Service. “We were still working in New York at that time, but the closer you got to the city, the more expensive it was. So we just kept heading down and decided that Freehold was where it was at.”



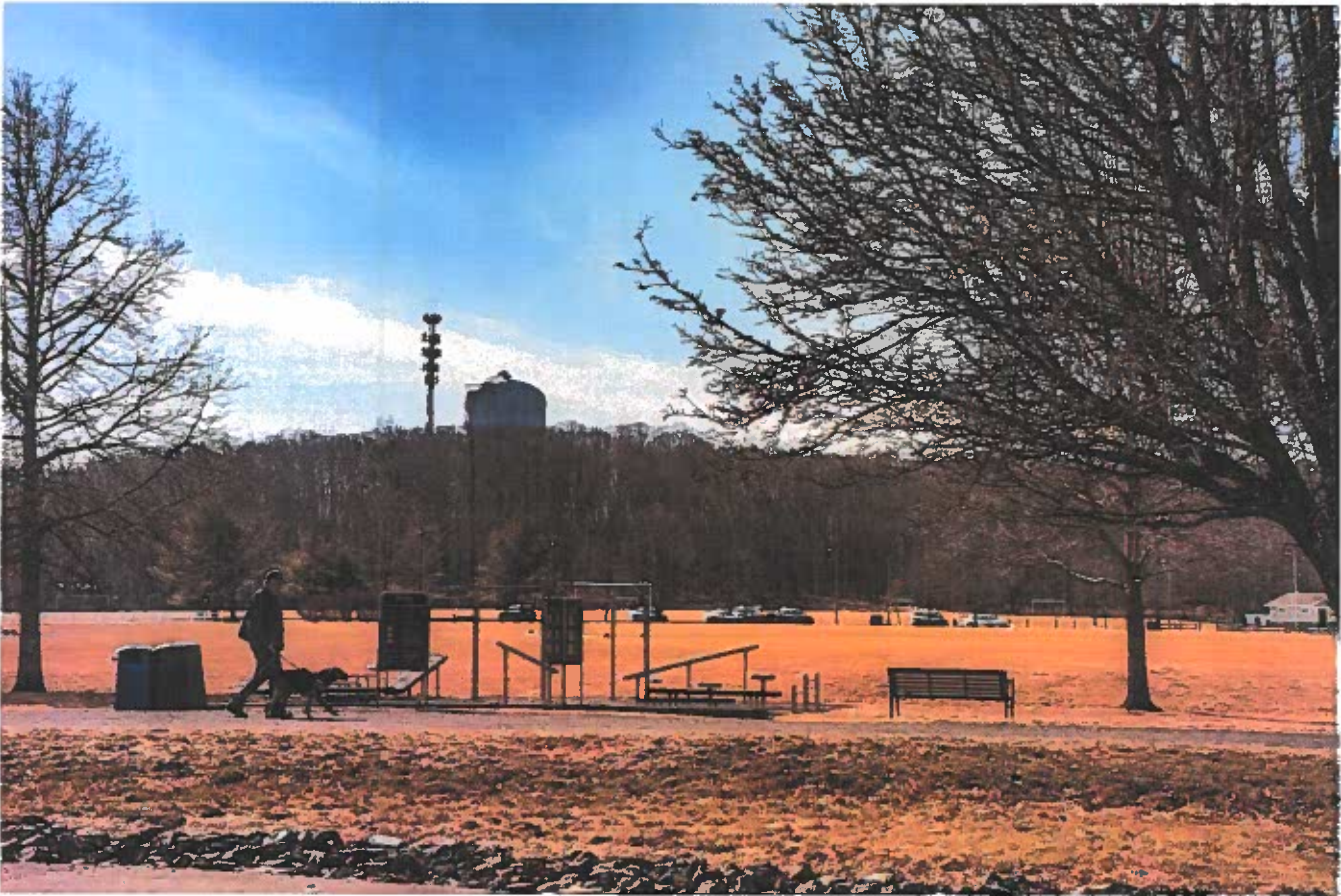
By The New York Times

In August 2018, the couple bought a two-bedroom condominium in the Raintree development for \$235,000, and two months later they married. Now they have a daughter who is nearly 2 and a second child on the way. And Mr. Foglia and Ms. Crimeni, the recreation director at the CentraState assisted living facility in Freehold, have no plans to move.

“We love it here. Everything feels like what we were used to,” Mr. Foglia said. “In Manalapan and Marlboro, the people are kind of flashy, but in Freehold, they’re very down-to-earth.”

Roslyn Sibilica, an agent with ERA Central Realty Group, said clients like the Foglias, who make their way to the township from New York, typically travel south along Route 9, discovering that “by the time you get to Freehold, everything seems to open up a lot more.”

“It’s a hub, and that’s what makes it desirable,” said Ms. Sibilica, 52, who moved to Freehold Township from Manalapan, N.J., in 2004. “We have great park programs for parents and kids, a lot of good school choices, the mall, a major medical center. There’s something for everyone.”



Michael J. Tighe Park is a sprawling municipal park with multiple ball fields, picnic grounds, walking trails and a splash park. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

When Chris and Amy MacDougall bought their home in Freehold in 2010, Mr. MacDougall was already familiar with the township, having moved there with his family in 2000, when he was 21. Ten years later, he and his wife bought a four-bedroom 1960 colonial in East Freehold for their own growing family, paying \$350,000. The MacDougalls are now very involved with their three daughters' school and sports activities: Ms. MacDougall helps with the high school yearbook, and Mr. MacDougall coaches the girls' soccer teams.

A senior claims superintendent with Admiral Insurance Group, Mr. MacDougall, 44, describes the 38-square-mile township with major highways running through it as a "sweet spot," both geographically and demographically: "Some towns are too snooty, but you don't get that facade here. In Freehold, it's real people with real jobs and real struggles. And we fit in perfectly with that."

For Elizabeth Robertson, landing in Freehold was serendipitous. After 32 years of living in North Jersey, she was looking to change her life and "just threw everything up in the air" in 2005. Knowing nothing about Freehold, but wanting to be near the beach — Freehold is about 18 miles west of the shore — Ms. Robertson moved first to a townhouse in East Freehold. Five years ago, she moved again, two miles south, paying \$365,000 for a four-bedroom, split-level house that she shares with her daughter and two grandchildren.

"When I came here, I had no idea what kind of town this was," said Ms. Robertson, who is now 71 and retired. "I'm thrilled that I'm here. I've made a lot of good friends, and my grandchildren are now doing the same thing."



6 NORTHFIELD COURT | A four bedroom, three-and-a-half-bathroom house, built in 2018 on 0.64 acres, listed for \$1,199,900. 732-462-4242 Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

What You'll Find

Freehold Township is the expansive doughnut surrounding the much smaller Freehold Borough, the historic seat of Monmouth County. With shared high schools and many shared services, the township (pop. 35,367) and the borough (pop. 12,525) are frequently seen as interchangeable, although the township is more suburban, with more spacious lots and houses mostly built in the mid to late 20th century.

Route 9, a major north-south highway dotted with shopping plazas and restaurants, is considered the dividing line between East Freehold, bordering Colts Neck and Marlboro, and West Freehold, bordering Howell and Jackson. East Freehold has some of the township's larger houses, most of which have access to public water and sewer systems, and is home to Poets Corner, a development with 376 townhouses and apartments. West Freehold is closer to the township's commercial activity and is home to Raintree, a gated community with more than 1,000 townhouses, condominiums and single-family houses.

Naturally, both sections have their fans. "People who live in West Freehold think it's the greatest, and those who live in East Freehold say they would never go to West," said Melissa DeSantis, 51, a broker associate with Real Broker LLC, who has made YouTube videos on both sections of the township, as well as Freehold Borough.

The township also has three 55-plus adult-living communities, a mobile-home park and a sizable stock of affordable housing, including 250 units that will remain permanently affordable, said Maureen Fasano, a member of the Township Committee and a former mayor. Freehold Raceway Mall, the state's third largest mall, sits between Routes 9 and 33. CentraState Medical Center, on West Main Street, includes a 284-bed hospital, long-term care and a wellness center.

The township has numerous parks as well, including a portion of the Monmouth Battlefield State Park and the Monmouth County Fairgrounds, which contribute to the more than 9,500 acres of open space. "We've made a big commitment to green space," Ms. Fasano said, noting that the township recently increased the added tax for open space acquisitions to \$0.04 per \$1,000 of a home's assessed value.



96 JACKSON MILLS ROAD | A three-bedroom, two-bathroom house, built in 1908 on 2.13 acres, listed for \$749,000. 732-972-1000 Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

What You'll Pay

Freehold is considered more affordable than many of the neighboring areas. In 2022, the average sale price of a house in the township was \$624,665, down slightly from 2021's average sale price of \$636,276, according to the Monmouth Ocean Regional Multiple Listing Service.

As of mid-February, there were 14 single-family houses on the market, along with six condominiums or townhouses and six homes in 55-plus communities. The lowest priced single-family house was a three-bedroom 1957 raised ranch house on 0.34 acres, listed for \$299,900; the highest priced was a four-bedroom 2004 house on an acre, listed for \$1.289 million. The lowest priced condominium or townhouse was a two-bedroom condo listed for \$319,900; the highest priced was a two-bedroom townhouse listed for \$427,500 (both were in the Raintree development). As for 55-plus homes, the least expensive was a two-bedroom bungalow listed for \$179,900; the most expensive was a three-bedroom house in Regent Oaks, a new Toll Brothers community near Route 9, listed for \$743,995.



71 YORKE DRIVE | A four-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bathroom house, built in 1975 on 0.58 acres, listed for \$694,900. 732-898-3400 Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The Vibe

Much of the family-oriented activity takes place in Michael J. Tighe Park, a sprawling municipal park with ball fields, picnic sites, trails, a splash park and a summer park program. The 81-acre East Freehold Showgrounds is the site of numerous horse and dog shows, as well as the annual Monmouth County Fair.

For indoor entertainment, residents head to the 175-acre Freehold Raceway Mall, which has an AMC movie theater and many chain stores and restaurants, or to iPlay America, a four-acre enclosed amusement park with games and rides. For evening entertainment, residents often head to Freehold Borough, with its Victorian-era Main Street lined with ethnic and upscale restaurants, or drive to nearby shoreline communities like Asbury Park or Belmar Beach.



The license for Moore's Tavern and Sports Bar, on West Main Street, can be traced back to the original owner, Moses Mount, an aide to George Washington during the Revolutionary War. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The Schools

Public school students start out at one of Freehold's five elementary schools, moving on to one of two middle schools and then, depending on where they live, to Freehold Township High School, which has almost 2,000 students, or Freehold High School in Freehold Borough, which has about 1,300.

As part of the Freehold Regional High School District, the township is linked to four other high schools in the area — in Manalapan, Howell, Colts Neck and Marlboro — each of which has subject-specific magnet programs to which Freehold students can apply. The Freehold Township High School's two magnet programs are in global studies and animal and botanical science; the high school in Freehold Borough has programs in culinary arts and hospitality, as well as medical sciences.

In 2021-22, average SAT scores at the high school in Freehold Borough were 583 in reading and writing and 598 in math; at Freehold Township High School, they were 568 in reading and writing and 567 in math. (State averages were 557 in reading and 560 in math.)

Private school options in the area include St. Rose of Lima, a Catholic school in Freehold Borough for students in prekindergarten through eighth grade, and the Peddie School, a day and boarding school in Hightstown for students in ninth through 12th grade.



The Oakley Farmstead was once part of a larger farm owned by Revolutionary War-era soldiers. The Oakley family bought it in 1911, building what would become the largest commercial farm in Monmouth County over the next 70 years. In 1994, the farmstead was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Now a museum, it holds tours and welcomes visitors to a community garden. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The Commute

Many commuters catch the New Jersey Transit No. 139 bus at the Freehold Center station in Freehold Borough; the trip to Port Authority Bus Terminal in Midtown Manhattan takes about 70 minutes and costs \$16 one way or \$377 for a monthly pass. Others catch the New Jersey Transit No. 67 bus at Freehold Raceway Mall and switch at Freehold Center; by that route, the trip to Port Authority takes about 90 minutes and costs \$17.60 one way or \$421 for a monthly pass.

The closest train station is Aberdeen-Matawan, about 12 miles north. From there, the trip to Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan on a direct New Jersey Transit train takes a little over an hour and costs \$14.75 one way or \$421 for a monthly pass.

The History

Freehold and neighboring Manalapan Township were the site of the Battle of Monmouth, one of the biggest and most important battles of the Revolutionary War. On June 28, 1778, the Continental Army, led by George Washington, intercepted British troops traveling to New York City from Philadelphia in a battle that involved 26,000 soldiers and most of the major military figures of the time, including the Marquis de Lafayette, Benedict Arnold, Anthony Wayne and Alexander Hamilton. With 600 Americans killed and 700 British casualties, both sides claimed victory.

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