

12 Days of Christmas in New Jersey



**Looking back on 2021 with appreciation for my home,
and the people and things that surround me**

By Bob Varettoni
December 2021-January 2022

Preface

In pre-COVID times, on Epiphany Sunday, I'd take Mom to Mass at St. Bonaventure's Church in Paterson, NJ, to listen to the Chopin Male Choir of Passaic sing Polish Christmas carols.

[I once wrote](#) that these trips were a reminder of New Jersey's quirky, and powerful, diversity. It's a state that defines itself in the beauty of ordinary things.



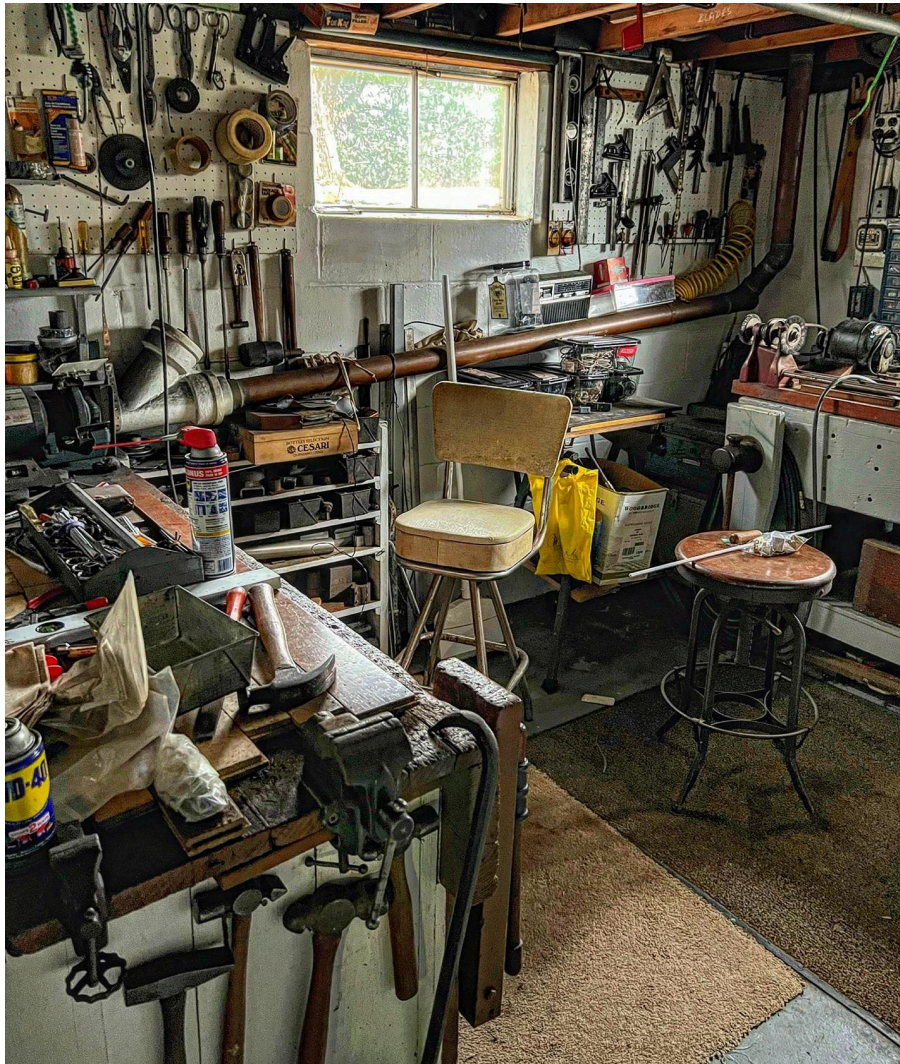
On this Epiphany Sunday 2022, the men's choir is no longer singing at St. Bonn's, where Masses are now live-streamed. Mom's safer at home anyway. She will turn 90 this month, on what would have been Betty White's 100th birthday.

I mention Mom (pictured here with me on Christmas Day 2021) a few times in the pages that follow, and I dedicate these posts to her: words and images about 12 days this holiday season in New Jersey in 2021. It's simply a reminder of all I have to be thankful for.

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Day 1 - Budd Lake



Nonno's basement workshop, frozen in time.

Recently, a daughter asked what time period I would like to visit if granted a wish.

The question surprised me, but when I looked at my wife, she answered without hesitation: "I'm sure you'd want to visit the future."

She was right. I told my daughter, "About 50 years from now" (after I'd surely otherwise be gone).

I don't fear the Ghost of Christmas Future. I mean, what did Ebenezer Scrooge think was going to happen to him?

I try to view the world with a little optimism, and I'd be interested in seeing the improvements in society and advances in technology.

More than that, visiting the future would help me make sense of my life (and my daughters' lives too).

Steve Jobs once famously noted, "You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something..."

I'm always looking backwards, trying to connect the dots, trying to gain perspective, and make sense of everything.



Nonna's untended garden.

Visiting my grandparents' old house in Budd Lake, NJ, last month, it felt as if I were walking beside them.

Perhaps I was their Ghost of Christmas Future. We toured Nonna's now-untended garden and Nonno's suspended-in-time basement workshop.

I took a selfie in the old mirror by the kitchen sink. When I was a boy, I used to watch Nonno shave while standing in his undershirt at that same mirror, stirring a whisk brush into a bowl, contorting his face as he applied lather, and giving me a wink when he saw me watching him from the breakfast table.

During the visit, I trust I showed my grandparents that, even though things had changed, their lives had left an indelible mark on their families.

I still love them.

50 years from now, my daughters can accompany me, and I want to look back on the impact of my own life.



Day 2 - New Bridge Landing



The barn at New Bridge Landing is a work of art.

Whenever I've felt the need this past year to escape into another era, I've wandered from my nearby home to Historic New Bridge Landing.

You can read about the park at this [Bergen County Historical Society site](#). It's a collection of historic buildings on a site that served as a battleground, fort, encampment, military headquarters, and intelligence-gathering post during the American Revolution.

The historical society lovingly preserves the park, and it sponsored a virtual event to mark the winter solstice: a balladeer presented prose by Charles Dickens, poetry by Robert Louis Stevenson, and other holiday readings. It wasn't your average Zoom, but it was in keeping with the unique character of the place.

I love New Bridge Landing because it's not like anything else around its Hackensack/River Edge location. Down a busy street from a strip mall off Route 4, and across the way from apartment buildings, a train stop, and a McDonald's, a distinctive red barn stands magnificently out-of-place, amid a field of cattails.

This is the Ghost of New Jersey Past.

Here are images from New Bridge Landing in 2021: a maypole dance in May, "[the bridge that saved a nation](#)" in July, and scarecrows in October.



Day 3 - Villa Milagro (and Bogota)



Vineyards in Phillipsburg.

Tonight, Thursday night, is date night. That usually means splitting a bottle of wine with my best friend (hi, Nancy).

Tonight was no exception, and the destination was a favorite Mexican restaurant, [Riviera Maya](#) in Bogota.

Why Mexican?

Because it's December 16th, the first night of Las Posadas (Spanish for "The Inns"). This nine-day religious festival commemorates the journey of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Why Riviera Maya?

Because the staff is friendly, and the food is terrific. It's festively decorated for holidays, including a Christmas tree lovingly constructed by the owner from all the left-behind BYOB wine corks, some of them undoubtedly mine.

Tonight's wine was from [Villa Milagro](#) (Spanish for "House of Miracles") in New Jersey (aka "The Land of Advent Wine Calendars"). Atop this page is an image from a visit there about a year ago.

It's at least a 150-mile roundtrip drive between the vineyard and winery in Phillipsburg in Warren County and the small Mexican restaurant in Bogota in Bergen County. Most of it would offer a scenic view of the New Jersey countryside.

You could always split the driving with your best friend.



The cork tree at Riviera Maya in Bogota.

Day 4 - Freehold



Waiting for a fire in Freehold.

Given the recent news that Bruce Springsteen sold his music and publishing rights to Sony for about a half billion dollars, I thought it timely to post a few images from his blue-collar hometown.

I had visited Freehold for the first time this past summer to catch the “Springsteen: His Hometown” exhibit at the Monmouth County Historical Association before it closed.



At the time, I [also posted here](#) that although I enjoyed the exhibit, I didn't buy \$650 a seat tickets to Springsteen's subsequent Broadway revival at a theater on streets surrounded by burgeoning, and since worsening, homelessness.

Something about all this money doesn't seem right. It seems at odds with the Freehold that inspired [this performance in 1999](#), posted on YouTube.

When I think back to my favorite Springsteen song, "Thunder Road," I think back to something my wife said when we visited the exhibit. "He could have only written that song when he was young," she said.

Her point? Passion changes form. You can't replicate an earlier time in your life. Operatic excess ages poorly.

Springsteen pulled out of Freehold to win.

He did, and here's what survives: the local firehouse and pizza parlor, and the remnants of faith, made manifest by its churches.



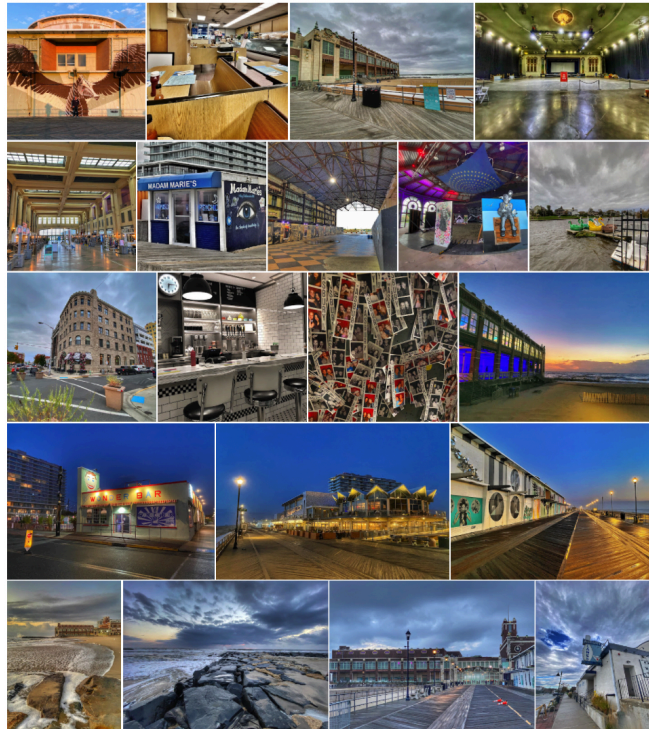
Overcoming Faith Temple, on Haley Street in Freehold.

Day 5 - Asbury Park



After posting yesterday about Bruce Springsteen's hometown, I'm posting today about a favorite place that's haunted by the famous former resident's ghost. In fact, it's haunted by many ghosts.

Here's an [album of Asbury Park images](#) from visits there for my birthday (in September) and again in late October.



I especially like to go there during the off-season.

As another famous former resident of Asbury Park once wrote:

“Of all the brightly attired city people who throng this place during the summer months not one seems to care a penny for the ghosts that line New Jersey’s famous stretch of seacoast...however, some parts of this coast are fairly jammed with hobgoblins—white ladies, grave-lights, phantom ships, prowling corpses.”

— from “Ghosts on the Jersey Shore,” by Stephen Crane



Day 6 - Middletown



Middletown Reformed Church

In early January, I need to return to the Middletown Arts Center to retrieve photos on display there through year-end 2021.

The exhibit was by members of the mighty [Black Glass Gallery](#), an online community loosely based in Asbury Park.

The arts center is located on Church Street, and indeed several churches are within walking distance.

Here are three I found there, adding to my collection of church images I post [every Sunday on Instagram](#).

I had dropped off my photos in Middletown before the leaves had fallen; things will look very different when I return.




foundinnj • Following

Christ Church (Middletown, New Jer...


foundinnj Christ Church, overlooking #middletownnj since 1745.

#njchurcheverysunday 🏛️
 #6wordcaption

PS - Down the road, at @middletown_arts_center, the @blackglassgallery photo exhibit has been extended until year-end. #blackglassgallery #photographers Stop by!

5w







 Liked by **ksulphoto** and **53 others**

NOVEMBER 21, 2021


 Add a comment...

Post




foundinnj • Following

Middletown, New Jersey


foundinnj This is Clinton Chapel AME Zion Church in #middletownnj 🏛️

#ipulloverforthis on the way to visit the @blackglassgallery photo exhibit on display thru 11/28 at the nearby @middletown_arts_center

The "I can do all things..." citation on the sign is also the motto of







 Liked by **othersideofdatenight** and **43 others**

NOVEMBER 14, 2021


 Add a comment...

Post

Day 7 - My Mother's Garden (Totowa)



Mom's garden in May.

I grew up in a black-and-white house in suburban Totowa, NJ. Our backyard was large enough to pass for either a baseball diamond or football field... at least when you're a 10-year-old boy.

It's been many years since then, and it was not long after I went away to college that Mom embarked on an ambitious project to transform much of the yard into a garden.

Mom was born with movie-star good looks, and she has always liked to surround herself with pretty things. She particularly loves seeing her colorful garden in full bloom.

Even though Mom is getting older, she insists on tending the garden herself. Beginning this year, I sometimes received text alerts from ADT whenever she was outside in the spring and summer. As she worked in the dirt, she would accidentally hit the button on her emergency-call pendant. Still, those false alarms have been a small price to pay for the joy her garden brings.

This year, like every other, when I would stop by for a visit, Mom would sometimes say, "Bobby, I want you to take photos of my garden."

Sometimes, too, she would ask me to post these images on Facebook, so homebound and far-away friends could admire her handiwork.

Tomorrow is the first day of winter, and Mom's 90th birthday is next month. She keeps talking, with anxious anticipation, about wanting to see my Dad again. Dad died 16 years ago, so this refrain is a constant reminder that Mom will soon be planting flowers she will not see bloom.

While this makes me sad, I admire my mother's desire to continue to tend her garden. I also envy her faith in a better life to come.

It relates to something a kindred spirit with movie-star good looks once said.

Like Audrey Hepburn, Mom understands that to plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.



Mom's garden in December.

Day 8 - American Dream Mall



American Dream's "Secret Garden."

There's nothing like an ironic visit to a mall in New Jersey to make you question your values.

When my sister visited recently from the Carolinas, I thought it would be a good sight-seeing excursion to schedule a first-time visit to the American Dream Mall. I figured that even if the visit was a disaster (which I secretly presumed it would be), it would be great fun and a story we could laugh about for years.

New Jersey is often known (and maligned) for its shopping malls. Other states took the basic mall concept to another level, on a larger scale with a focus on entertainment (hello, Mall of America). But now American Dream was promising to dial that amp up to 11.

On the site of the Meadowlands Sports Complex in East Rutherford, the sprawling retail and entertainment center was first proposed in 2003. For a while, it was dubbed "Xanadu."

Its first backer went into bankruptcy in 2007. Construction started and stopped over the years. There were other ownership changes, financing issues, construction delays, more bankruptcies, and various legal challenges.

Some theme-park attractions finally opened there in 2019, but COVID delayed further openings until just past fall, with many new stores and restaurants... and an indoor ski-slope and giant Ferris wheel to boot.

The current [American Dream website](#) lists a panoply of attractions.

I was unconvinced... until I visited with my sister and, unironically, I had fun. I even have photos to prove it.

The “mall” was clean and spacious. There was lots to see and do. It was tech-savvy and family-friendly, and people all around me were happy.

I didn’t see that coming, New Jersey.

This must be how Tony Soprano felt before everything went dark.



Me, having fun.

Day 9 - Weehawken via Zoom



It's the last Wednesday night before Christmas 2021.

Usually, during this past year, I'd be on a Zoom call on a Wednesday night. My friend Anna, who runs the adult programs at my local library, has been hosting a weekly "Photo Journaling Club."

We're on holiday break now, but the usual Wednesday night has been like this: A handful of us share photos, and then we follow a prompt from my friend Janet, who is a real writer, and write extemporaneously about our photos based on her prompt.

I have a great time, because I never know for sure what photos I'll show, and I don't know what I'll write until the time comes to share. It's magic that, in the end, it always seems to work out just fine.

Early this year, I shared the image on top of this page from New Year's morning 2021, when my wife Nancy and I watched the sunrise over New York City from Weehawken (right next to the Hamilton dueling grounds).

Janet had asked us to show a photo that suggested a metaphor. I wrote that the sunrise was a crown on the New York City skyline.

Janet said that, to her, the clouds looked like a chorus line of Rockettes.

Now, as 2021 limps to its finish line, with the real Rockettes having shut down for the remainder of the year, I wonder where Nancy and I might best watch the sun rise on New Year's morning 2022.

I long for some certainty next year in real life. But, I know, real life is not like writing, and everything doesn't always work out just fine.

Real life is a roulette wheel; each passing sunrise is another sucker's bet.

#BlockThatMetaphor 😊



Day 10 - Weehawken via NJ Transit



The view from Weehawken (from top) in May, July, October, and December.

On Thursday, 84 years ago today (just weeks before what would be my mother's 6th birthday), commuters took advantage of the first full day of driving through the newly dedicated Lincoln Tunnel to travel between New York and New Jersey. (Embed here is a NY Daily News photo of its December 1937 opening.)

Above is the 2021 view from the notorious Helix, a 4,000-foot sloping loop connecting traffic from Route 495 in Weehawken to the tunnel entrance on the Jersey side.



With apologies to F. Scott Fitzgerald and his Dutch sailors, this view of the Manhattan skyline is my daily reminder that something exists in the world that for a transitory, enchanted moment makes me hold my breath.

The skyline, magically, presents itself differently every working day. Ensconced in a seat of a New Jersey Transit bus, I often press my cell phone camera against one of the back windows to take just one more photo of the view as we pass. The images, captured at the same time (albeit on different days) of the same place, never look the same.

My office in New York reopened, tentatively, earlier this year. My bosses, generously, even paid for expenses if I chose to drive. But, by May, traffic had built up to pre-pandemic levels, and I began to prefer to take the bus.

There's now about half as many passengers on commuter buses as there were in 2019. We're all wearing masks, and most are staring intently into their cell phones.

Except when we pass through Weehawken on Route 495.

Then, from the back of the bus, I notice a few heads turn toward the skyline in appreciation of a sight still commensurate to our capacity for wonder.

Day 11 - Waterloo Village



This Christmas Eve I'm thankful for the people who inspire and encourage me.

One group, the virtual [Black Glass Gallery](#), is a supportive mix of amateur and professional photographers led by Suzanne Spitaletta. She loves arranging group meetups across New Jersey, and sometimes in New York City. We've had to cut back on in-person meetups during the pandemic, but in 2021 we did manage a few.

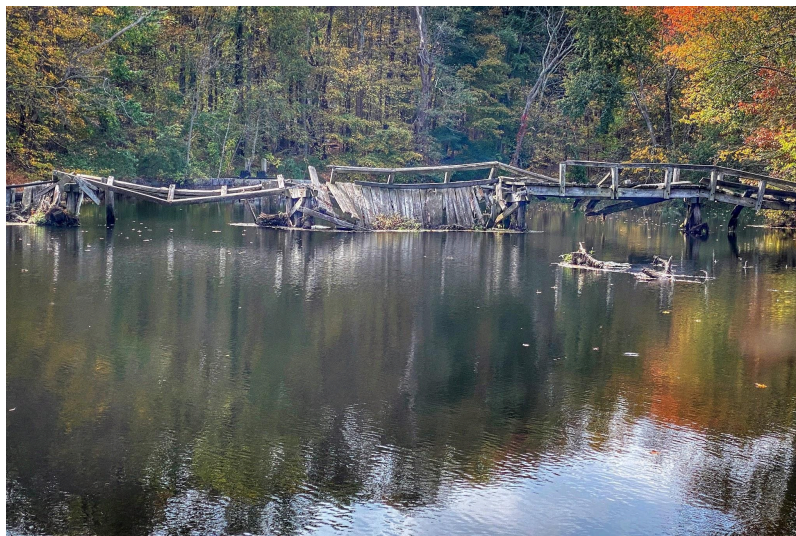
One favorite outing was in October at Waterloo Village. As described in Wikipedia, this is a restored 19th-century canal town in Sussex County, near Stanhope. It's at the half-way point in the 102-mile trip along the Morris Canal, from Jersey City to Phillipsburg.

At the present-day site are remnants of an inn, general store, blacksmith shop, and watermill. There's a still-active Methodist church, a small garden with some farm animals, and renovated spaces that accommodate weddings and other gatherings. Only traces remain of a restored Indian village up the road, a place I visited when I was a Cub Scout.

I didn't stick with the group as we took photos that day in October. I almost missed seeing my friend Beth entirely. I'm an odd bird: I most like the *idea* of being part of a group.

I'm grateful that the Black Glass Gallery crowd accepts me, tolerant of my quirks without reservation. These images remind me of the many good, talented, and creative people in the world.

Artists are curious souls. Sometimes, they just want to go outside and play.



Day 12 - Paterson



On the way home from visiting Mom, I often stop off along Route 80 to visit the Garret Mountain overlook of Paterson, NJ.

On Halloween this year, I stayed with Mom so she wouldn't have to get up and down to greet trick or treaters. It was an impressive bunch of kids this year, with an impressive bunch of costumes... everyone was in a celebratory mood, as if in pre-pandemic times.

At dusk, Mom decided to call it a day. Heading home, I stopped to spend time at a favorite place. It was raining lightly, and then more heavily as I slowly drove up the winding road at Garret Mountain Reservation.

It was worth it. I was greeted by the sight of a double rainbow over New Jersey.

It's my favorite image of 2021. Here's to an even better 2022!