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Summit has a history steep in independence and its story of becoming a township provides a lesson in the strong will and keen foresight of a few select people. Springfield, Summit, and New Providence were a part of a larger area, consisting of one-half a million acres, purchased from the Lenape Indians in 1644 and named Elizabethtown, after England's queen Elizabeth. In 1793, Springfield Township, which included New Providence at that time known as Turkey and Summit known as Turkey Hill, separated from Elizabethtown. In 1809, New Providence and Turkey Hill separated from Springfield Township, but Turkey Hill operated politically under New Providence Township. By the late 1860s, Summit Township was growing increasingly irritated at New Providence Township's lack of care for Summit.

One of the reasons for Summit's increase in demand for independence was its growing economy due to the railroad coming to Summit in 1837, thanks to a local sawmill owner, Jonathan Crane Bonnel, who had offered land, at no charge to the Morris and Essex Railroad to build the rails through Summit. Because of the railroad, Summit began its shift from a largely farming economy to a capitalist resort for wealthy.

Another notable person in Summit history is G.J. Thebaud, a NY lawyer and resident of Summit who not only rallied residents to seek independence from New Providence, but secured the introduction of the bill to NJ House and Senate. As the bill was being passed through the House and Senate, he found a clause that had been slipped into the bill requiring a vote of people in each township which surely meant defeat for the people of Summit. Thebaud alerted the governor to this and the governor demanded the bill be returned in its original form which was easily passed as The Act to form Summit Township was approved March 23, 1869.