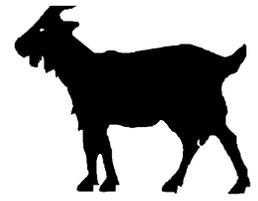


Nannygoats



Vol. 5 Issue 2

Newsletter of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society

Summer 2007

From the Archives...

The following history, found in a manuscript located in the Society's Grimstead Archives, was compiled by the Metuchen High School senior class of 1931. The manuscript's editor, Clement Fairweather, Jr., was the son of the noted architect of the same name and later a professor at Rutgers University. Until his death a few years ago, Mr. Fairweather resided in the home his father built at 23 Rector Street (since demolished) in Metuchen. Entitled simply "History of Metuchen," the manuscript is divided into numerous sections, including *Acknowledgements, In the Revolution, Real Estate, Prominent People, A Little Local Color, Social Life, The Trend Toward Modern Improvements, Sports, The Wars, Churches, Government and Zoning, Newspapers, Library, Schools, The Fire Department of Metuchen, and Police*. Only a small portion of the overall history is reproduced in this issue, but future editions of *Nannygoats* will contain successive chapters. Please note that there are some known factual and grammatical errors in the document, but it has been reproduced exactly as written, and the accompanying images - many of them from the Grimstead Collection - have been added by the *Nannygoats* editor.

IN THE REVOLUTION

During the Revolution, it is evident that Metuchen and its surroundings were subjected to much privations and danger. Washington's army, depleted by a long series of disasters, hastened in retreat through Bonhamtown and New Brunswick to Trenton. Obviously, they could not afford to give our people much protection.

The British holding New Brunswick had a large camp at Bonhamtown, which occupied the same site as the present Camp Raritan does. Throughout the war this remained as a base supply camp.

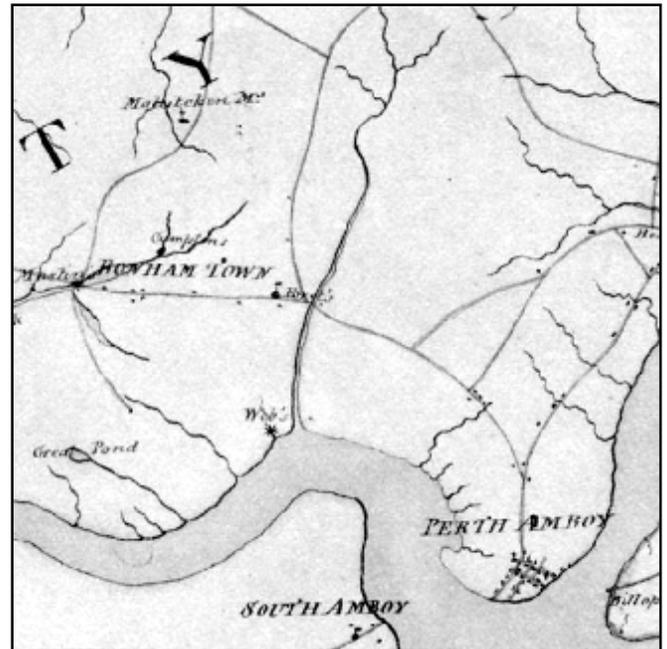
The Continentals, at one time, encamped on the ridge near the old Hansen place, under the command of Lieutenant Randolph, were routed by the British. Until a few years ago, a chimney with a cannon ball lodged in it could be seen there. Often Lieutenant Randolph lead night raids against the British. These were usually successful, for after being hidden all day, the colonist could manage to spring upon the unsuspecting Red-Coats.

One such skirmish took place on the hill near Phaff's where the British returning from some errand, were forced into a hasty retreat by the colonists. Neil Campbell (grandfather of a present resident of the town) was ill in bed and was consequently taken prisoner by the British and conveyed to their encampment at Bonhamtown. His neighbors immediately gathered at the old church cemetery to discuss ways and means of freeing him. This meeting was surprised by the British who pursued the participants down Main Street and into some marshes. At this point the British became mired, a situation which allowed Campbell's friends to escape out of rifle shot.

A few days after this episode the British were forced to withdraw. During their retreat to New Brunswick, Campbell, with the aid of his wife, escaped. However, he died later as a result of the exposure.

According to Dr. Hunt's History, in 1777 General Howe, quartered at the barracks in Perth Amboy, crossed over to Staten Island in an effort to draw Washington down from his winter quarters at Chimney Rock.

Continued on Page 2



This excerpt of the 1781 John Hills "Map of The Province of New Jersey" shows the "Matuchen" Meeting House and "Bonham Town." Also shown are "Compton's," "Martin's," and "Ford's."

Continued from History of Metuchen on Page 1

While a part of the Continental Army fired on the rear of the British, inflicting some considerable damage, Howe suddenly re-crossed and marched rapidly to gain through Short Hills. At the old church in Metuchen, General Sterling detained the enemy by skirmishing their entire line. Finally, with Lord Cornwallis checked near Dunellen and again on the Westfield Road, and with an attempt at Bonhamtown a failure, General Howe was forced to fall back to Amboy.

REAL ESTATE

Those fortunate individuals who have been in close contact with some of the older homes of Metuchen know what interest there is to be found in them. Tradition, background, culture, and occasionally mystery, are all to be found, lurking in obscure corners, in cupboards, in furniture, and in cellars and attics. Sometimes one finds a building with a faint air of Revolutionary War atmosphere, in another case, perhaps a home retains the quiet literary culture of a former age. In most cases, there is an interesting story attached.

For the purpose of simplifying the sections of this town, let us divide it into four parts: the North-East, that section including Woodwild Park; the South-East, that section south of the Pennsylvania Railroad, and east of Main Street; the South-West, west of Main Street; and the North-West, including the Franklin School ground. The dividing lines used, as you see, are Main Street and the Pennsylvania Railroad. There is a double reason for using these lines. Main Street was first an old Indian Trail from Short Hills (Plainfield) to Red Brick Creek (Bonhamtown), and the Railroad, although it was not in existence before 1835, is the oldest straight dividing line running through the other.

THE NORTH-EAST SECTION

There must be a starter, and we have chosen the North-East. According to all information, it really has the most to do with Metuchen, for as is mentioned in more detail elsewhere in this account, it was that

Grimstead Room Hours

The Society's Grimstead Room archives are located at the Metuchen Public Library and open access to the collections is available from 10 a.m. to 12 noon on the following upcoming Saturdays: September 8, October 13, November 3, December 1, and January 5 (2008). For more information, contact Tyreen Reuter at 732-452-1381 or ayersallenhouse@msn.com.

section that the Indians, under Chief Metuchen, occupied.

Woodwild Park was given to the citizens of Metuchen in the year 1902. Mr. Charles Corbin, whose property in 1874 included most of the land where Oak Avenue is now, and all the park section, back to Reading Railroad, was the donor. The park itself is a very pretty wild park, and the New Jersey State Foresters have pronounced the trees the best group of park trees in this section.



A turn-of-the-century postcard view of the Charles H. Corbin Estate at Woodwild Park, constructed in 1854 by T.W. Strong.

Woodwild Park has much to do, indirectly, with our beginning. Approximately the spot where the house of Mr. John Connor stands, was the site of the Indian Chief's own camp. Before the Reading was cut through, nearly all the low land in the park, and on the other side of the tracks, was a sluggish, swampy pond. When Mr. Connor's house was built in the early 1850s, it took nearly a week to cut through the underbrush to the spot where the house now stands. The property originally had a great many other buildings, some of which still remain.

A little further to the east of the park we find a road known as Grove Avenue. Years ago it was called Dark Lane, for it was practically covered by overhanging trees. There is a legend still existing (though with no proof,) of a phantom rider, headless or shot, who roamed the avenue. Nothing further has been heard from this gentleman in recent years.

There were three Robbins brothers in this town, whose father had come here in 1840. (From this date, in connection with other facts, we have set the date of the three Robbins houses as somewhere after 1850.) Nathan Robbins built a house on Main Street which had the reputation of being the best looking in town. It stood on the lot, now vacant, opposite Kramer's. In later years it was used as an inn. It was destroyed by fire in 1925.

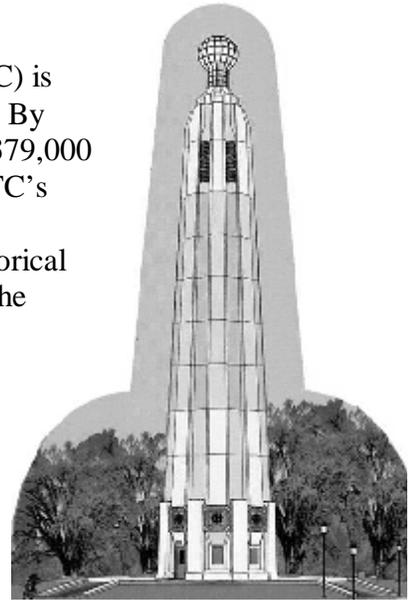
Continued on Page 4

Edison Memorial Tower Exceeds \$379,000 Fundraising Goal

by Nancy L. Zerbe, MEHS Board Member and EMTC Chair

Thanks to strong public support, the Edison Memorial Tower Corporation (EMTC) is pleased to announce that it has exceeded its recent fundraising goal of \$379,000. By raising a total of \$405,000 by June 30, 2007, the EMTC is eligible to receive a \$379,000 grant from the United States Mint. These funds will be utilized towards the EMTC's two major goals: repair of the Edison Tower and development of a new museum/educational facility. The EMTC thanks both the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society for its generous donation of \$1000 as well as the numerous members of the Historical Society who individually supported the campaign.

Although delighted to have reached its \$379,000 goal to receive matching funds, the EMTC's fundraising efforts are far from over. Much more will need to be done in order to complete the needed repairs to the Tower and fund the new museum. One small way individuals can help is by purchasing a collectible figure of the memorial tower (see image at right). Stop by the EMTC Country Fair booth on October 6th, or call 732-494-4194.



In related news, the Society is collaborating with the EMTC and Edison Township on a joint grant project to preserve and catalogue documents related to our local history, especially those pertaining to Thomas Alva Edison's Menlo Park historic site. The highest priority will be to catalogue and properly store in archival material the Historical Society's collection of Charles Carmen's personal papers. Charles Carmen, a Metuchen architect who worked in the early to mid 20th century, was instrumental in the local efforts to preserve Thomas Edison's Menlo Park site. Funding for this project has been provided by the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission / Board of Chosen Freeholders, and the New Jersey Historical Commission, a Division of the Department of State.

For on-line access to the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society's newsletters, membership information, program announcements, historic photographs, merchandise, and more, please visit our website at

www.metuchen-edisonhistsoc.org

From the Mailbox...

The following letter was received in response to the Winter 2007 issue of *Nannygoats*, which featured an oral history from Gregory Costa and photographs of the Costa Ice Cream business. Mrs. Strusz grew up in a house at 49 Home Street, and later moved into a house she built with her husband, Bob, at 37 Homer Place.

February 26, 2007

Thank you for sending me *Nannygoats*, the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society newspaper.

I have fond memories of just about everything in it.

I know all about Costa's. When I was married in 1947, they made our wedding forms in ice cream to be served with the cake. My reception was held at the BIL building (Old Franklin School).

Daniels Hill is mentioned - I went sleigh riding there, too.

You mention Marty Jessen and his Victorian Office Rentals - I can just picture all of those houses.

Metuchen's Greatest Party - my nephew Richard Strusz and his wife, former Sally Ewing, attended that reunion and I am sending this to them.

I still consider Metuchen my home town. I grew up on 49 Home Street and had a very happy life in Metuchen.

I don't think there are many people who would remember me, but Marty Jessen would, and so would Don Wernik and Carolee (Szajko).

Thanks again. I love getting all the news.

Sincerely,
Julia Orr Strusz
Republic, Missouri

Continued from History of Metuchen on Page 3

The second brother, Amos Robbins, built the large house now owned by the Vanderpoole's, on the north end of Main Street.

The house on Maple Avenue, which belonged to Dr. Ellis, was first owned by Colonel Robert Ross. It was built sometime before the Revolutionary War. During the latter part of the last century, it was used as the Old People's Home. It was run on the basis of a certain payment taking care of a person for life, but it was [a] failure financially, and was sold in 1906.

The old Parsonage, the house belonging now to the Catholic Sisters, was built sometime during, or immediately following, the Revolution.

The old Clarkson house, when on its original foundation, was on the North-West corner of the intersection of Main Street and Middlesex Avenue. A portion of the house was part of the original Presbyterian Church. It was built in 1835; moved in 1890 to its present location on Middlesex Avenue,

and is owned now by Mr. F. M. P. Pearse. The old Clarkson store, now just east of Main Street on the Highway, was first on the corner, now Danford's, and was operating in 1808.



The Ross Freeman House, also known as the Stagecoach House, was moved twice during its history. After many years in its final location at 231 East Chestnut, it was demolished in 2003.

The house at 231 Chestnut Avenue, owned by Mr. C.C. Mook, was built on the site of the Present Borough Hall, in 1730. It is known as the Ross Freeman house. (As to whether he was the first owner, we are uncertain.)

It was used as an inn to a certain extent. When on its first site, it had a bar room and tap room, and the second floor was the town meeting room. It first was moved to the corner of Middlesex and Linden Avenues; later it moved again, this time to its present location. Mrs. Upjohn, the

owner at the time of the second move, gave a tea party in the house while it was in the middle of Linden Avenue en route to its site.

The old house on the south side of the Highway about 100 yards or so from the Reading Railroad, dates back before the Civil War. It was owned by the Waites.

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New in the Collection...

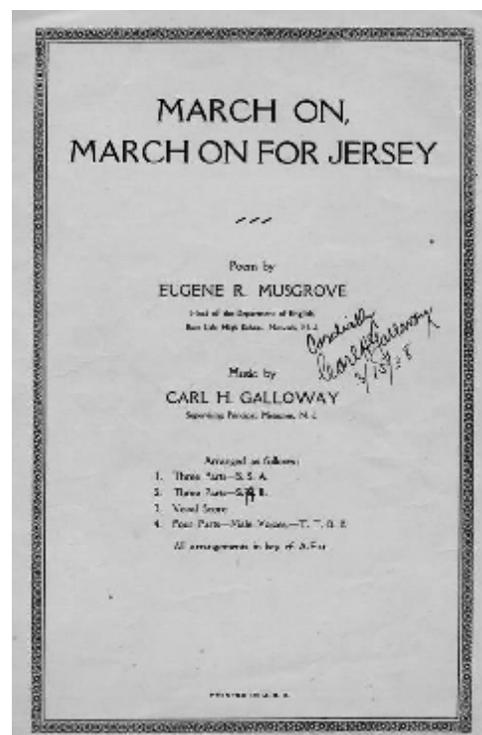
A number of donations have recently been received from the generous members and friends of the Society.

David Glasofer has donated nearly 1000 negatives and photographs of local parks, buildings, people, street scenes, and community events. The newly acquired collection will be featured in the next issue of *Nannygoats*, and will be the subject of the October 28, 2007 program, where we will be asking the public's help in identifying the subjects.

Richard Plechner has donated an original copy of the sheet music for "March On, March On for New Jersey." Written in 1932, this song is based on a poem by Eugene R. Musgrove, Head of the Department of English, East Side High School in Newark, and has music written by Carl H. Galloway, Supervising Principal, Metuchen. The front cover of the music (see image at right) is signed "Cordially, Carl H. Galloway, 3/15/38." Full of New Jersey pride, the song concludes:

*From Jersey comes our courage, From Jersey, faith to stand,
And we will live for Jersey With head and heart and hand.*

Many thanks also to Pat Flannery, Helen Bacsko, and the Trokovich Family for their kind donations of Raritan Arsenal photographs, a Woodbrook Farms Milk Can, and 1939-1941 memorabilia from Metuchen High School, respectively.



THE SOUTH-EAST SECTION

About the oldest house we are sure of is the old Daniels house at 28 Homer Place. It was built about 1750 and is much the same now except that the lean-to kitchen with its old Dutch oven has been torn down.

The house just north of the Dix house on Main Street is sometimes known as the Richard Ross house. The present house, we have been told, is but half of the whole, which the whole was built in two parts. The part has been moved to Woodbridge Avenue, and the later half is the one on Main Street. The only date we have is about 1800.

The Present Presbyterian Church was completed in 1835. The Church property included both the present graveyards and some on the ends. The parsonage at the east end of the graveyard was erected in 1846.

The Pennsylvania Railroad was put through about 1835. There is a very fine example of the increase in land values connected

with the Railroad and the Church. The Church sold the Railroad the property for the station for three hundred dollars. A few years ago the Railroad wished to lengthen the platform. They did, but first paid the Church three thousand dollars for the land.

May we be allowed to skip around the town for a moment to mention the moving of the railroad stations? At one time there were three stations in Metuchen, on the Pennsylvania. About 1856 there was a station on the site of the present one; one at



According to Society records, the ca. 1750 Ellis Daniels House at 28 Homer Place was moved to its current location in 1888 from Woodbridge Avenue.

Freeman's, which was just east of the High Bridge on the North side of the tracks; and the third was built by Mr. Wright Robbins, where Grove Avenue crosses the tracks, for his own use. It was called "Robinvale." The Post Office was housed in the old Main Street station.

For some reason this station, the old one at Main Street, was thought unsatisfactory, and a new station was built on Lake Street [Avenue] on the north side of the tracks. This proved even more unsatisfactory and the station went back to its present site.

Freemans' was abandoned, and a few years later Robinvale burned. So ended the uncertainty of our

stations.

The third Robbins Brother, Wright Robbins, built for his home the house now owned by Mr. Abel Hansen on lower Woodbridge Avenue. There is an interesting story of Mr. Robbins having quite a lot of trouble with the water supply for his pond, and finally ending up by putting in a rather fine water supply in for his whole place.

To return to the Presbyterian Church, another building used a Sunday School Room, was a much smaller building which stood near the Church building. A Boarding School, known as Hopkins Academy, is supposed to have been held there.

The present Weeks house is on the spot, designated by an old survey, as the location of some particular Indian's Wigwam.

The old store on Main Street and Amboy Avenue was first store of Freeman Edgar, about 1850.

Continued on Page 6

Interested in Being a *Nannygoats* Contributor?

Do you have an interesting story, fact, or image that you think would make a good addition to a future issue of *Nannygoats*? If so, please contact the Editor... If your submission is published, we'll send you a complimentary copy of the 1888 "Crumbs of Comfort" history and cookbook! The deadline for submissions to the Fall 2007 issue is September 7th.

Nannygoats Editor
Metuchen-Edison Historical Society
P.O. Box 61
Metuchen, NJ 08840

ayersallenhouse@msn.com
732-452-1381

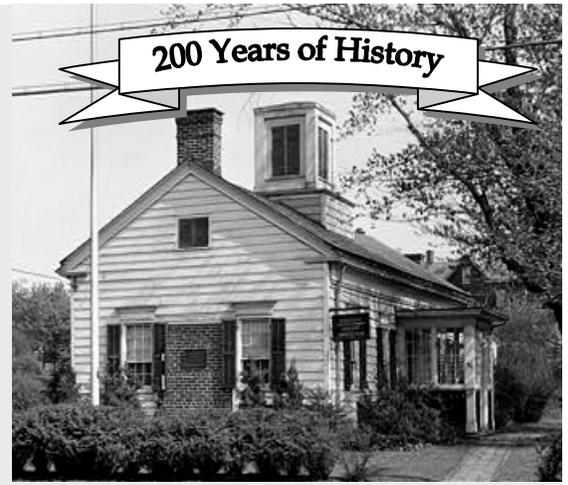
Happy 200th to the Old Franklin School

One of our area's most historic sites is celebrating its 200th birthday this year. The Old Franklin School, also known as the Borough Improvement League Clubhouse, is located on Middlesex Avenue in Metuchen, between the Masonic Lodge and firehouse. According to Mrs. Phoebe Martin in 1921,

Samuel Compton and other farmers decided to build a school house... All the farmers came in and worked three or four days as convenient to build it. It was finished in 1807. Benjamin Thornall, a carpenter, gave three days work on the building... His wages were 75 cents per day when he charged. His helpers were 35 cents per day. Jane Compton was one of the scholars who attended the opening and was six years old.

The building was Metuchen's only school until the 1870s then served as a cobbler's private residence for several years. In 1906, the newly formed Borough Improvement League (BIL) began the process of purchasing the building for use as a clubhouse and has owned and maintained it for the past century. Efforts are currently underway to list the building in the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places.

In celebration of this milestone, the BIL will hold an open house with historical displays and light refreshments on October 6, 2007 – the same day as the Metuchen Country Fair. All local history enthusiasts are welcome! Please call Janena Benjamin at 848-250-1258 for further information about the event.



The building as photographed by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in the 1940s

Continued from History of Metuchen on Page 5

THE NORTH-WEST SECTION

Prior to 1807 there was no school in what now is Metuchen. A group of citizens got together and decided to build one. The material was donated including the labor. The ground, the present Franklin School Ground, was given with the provision that it should always be a school ground. The school was called the Franklin School in honor of Benjamin Franklin. The old building is now the League House on Middlesex Avenue.

The old house of Deborah Ayres was erected in 1740. It stands on Durham Avenue, one of Metuchen's oldest streets. This house is now owned by Mr. Wale.

The building at the intersection of Amboy and Middlesex avenues, the one that caught fire last year, was built in 1810 by a Mr. Kester. It was used as a wayside Inn and tavern in stagecoach days, and also as a store.

Another Revolutionary building stands on the west side of Clive Street opposite the Pricketts. It was known as the Wm. Ross house. At one time the Presbyterian Minister used to teach private classes there.

Mr. McAdams bought Dismal Swamp, out towards New Durham, in 1870. He drained the swamp and turned it into a farm. On a knoll in the center of the swamp, he found traces of a camp. It

has been figured out that this was a hidden refuge camp from the British, during the Revolution.

Manning Freeman owned the hay press and scales, in 1875. They were located on the New Durham Road. On or near this farm were found two Indian Grain Mortars.

The seventeen mile stone used to be in front of the present Birdsall's Garage. A few years ago it disappeared, but we have word it is in safekeeping.

THE SOUTH-WEST SECTION

Samuel Compton, in the early part of the nineteenth century, owned all the property bounded by the Graveyard and Railroad, Lake Avenue, High Street, and Main Street. He sold his entire place to David G. Thomas in 1849. Mr. Thomas also bought more adjoining land.

Samuel Compton had his own sheep and raised his own flax. He used "Thomas' Pond" to wash the sheep and prepare the flax. He had a tremendous orchard and quite an extensive farm.

Speaking of Thomas' pond, it was once quite a nice little piece of water, supplied by three underground springs. When the Lehigh Valley Railroad was cut through in the late 60s, two of these springs were destroyed. The excavations for the Y.M.C.A. building finished the third, or at least greatly diminished its strength.

Continued on Page 7

The 18th century William Ross House was moved from Clive Street in 1941 to its current location on Hoefer Court..



Continued from History of Metuchen on Page 6

Mr. Thomas did some developing or beautifying his property, He laid out several of the present streets, and planted trees along them which are now standing. He laid out North and South Thomas Street, with the intention of connecting them, but when he was ready to put in the connection someone had an option on some of the property, and he was unable to finish.

The Reformed Church was completed in 1857. The land for both the church and Parsonage was given by Mr. Thomas. The Parsonage, now ex-Governor Silzer's home, was built in 1867.

After the Lehigh Valley cut was made, and before the Railroad was ready to put a bridge across it, Mr. Thomas had a bridge built at Graham Avenue, for his convenience. His house, which is the one on the east side of Graham Avenue just south of Spring Street, and the Silzer house were the only houses at that time on Graham Avenue.

The house of Mr. Black, on High Street, at the end of Graham Avenue, dates to some time very near the Civil War.

In this section there are two pieces of park ground. One of these has been known, to some degree, for quite a while, but at the present time there is quite a lot of landscaping work being done on it. This is the land given by the four heirs of D.G. Thomas. It is known as the Thomas Park, including Thomas' Pond, on Lake Avenue.

The other piece of property is a large wood-lot given by C.S. Edgar. It goes from Thomas Street to Lake Avenue, and from Brunswick Road to the end of the Woods. There are some beautiful trees on the property and more care should be taken to preserve them.

This is not a complete or letter-perfect account of Metuchen lands and houses, and we beg pardon for any important omissions.

A future issue of *Nannygoats* will continue the Class of 1931's *History of Metuchen* "Real Estate" chapter with *General Notes*, *Oak Tree Section*, and *Bonhamtown*. Other chapters from the manuscript will follow.

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The Metuchen-Edison Historical Society
P.O. Box 61, Metuchen, NJ 08840

Tyreen A. Reuter, Editor
732-452-1381

ayersallenhouse@msn.com

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The name of the newsletter, "Nannygoats," is taken from the title of a collection of anecdotes, articles, reminiscences, and letters compiled by photographer J. Lloyd Grimstead. He took more than 2,800 photographs of the Metuchen-Edison area, mostly during the 1930s, which make up 80 percent of the Historical Society's photographic collection. The Metuchen-Edison Historical Society dedicates this publication to Lloyd Grimstead, as a way of honoring him for collecting and recording so much of our local history.

The Metuchen-Edison Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

Boro Ace Home & Garden Center

655 Middlesex Ave.
Metuchen, N.J. 08840
Phone: (732) 548-3974
FAX: (732) 548-8024



Steve Epstein
President

Applied Research
CORPORATION

203 Main Street
Metuchen, NJ 08840
Phone: (732) 549-8891
Fax: (732) 549-9179
Email: jmargolis@arresearch.com
www.arresearch.com

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MELODY B. KOKOLA
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Metuchen Public Library
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If you are interested in becoming one of *Nannygoat's* supporters, please contact the Editor.

Upcoming Programs & Events

COUNTRY FAIR

Saturday, October 6, 2007
10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The Society will again be participating in the Country Fair on Main Street in Metuchen this October. Stop by our booth for interesting historical displays, merchandise for sale, and the next issue of *Nannygoats*, to be released that day. Any Society volunteers who would like to staff the booth and meet and greet our visitors, please call Phyllis at 732-548-1391.

GLASOFER PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

The Society will display the newly acquired Glasofer Photograph Collection on **Sunday, October 28, 2007 at 2:00 p.m.** at the Metuchen Public Library, 480 Middlesex Avenue, Metuchen. The collection, donated by David Glasofer of Image-up Frey Sen Studio earlier this year, contains nearly 1000 negatives and photographs of local parks, buildings, people, street scenes, and community events.

In addition to displaying the photographs, we will be asking the public's help in identifying the unknown subjects, dates, locations, and more.



Do you recognize any of these ladies?

Save the Date!

Continuing our efforts to discover the history of local organizations (as we did with St. Luke's Church and the Danish Home in Edison) the Society is planning a program on the American Legion and the Fugle-Hummer American Legion Post in Metuchen. The tentative date is Sunday November 4, 2007. More information to follow.



Metuchen-Edison Historical Society
P.O. Box 61
Metuchen, NJ 08840

Have you renewed your membership in the Society for 2007? It's never too late! Renew now and receive program notices, information about special events, and a continued subscription to this newsletter. Visit www.metuchen-edisonhistsoc.org or contact 732-906-0529 for more information.