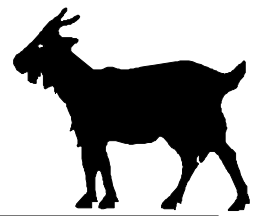


Nannygoats



Vol. 20, Issue 3

Newsletter of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society

Summer/Fall 2022

Perhaps the most prominent and iconic commercial corner in Metuchen is the building commonly referred to as “Danford’s” on the southeast corner of Main Street and Middlesex Avenue. Many who grew up in the area fondly recall after-school sodas with friends, browsing magazines, dining at the luncheonette, or visiting the typewriter supplies and repair shop.

The First Corner Store

It was around 1808 that a general store, run by the Clarkson family, was first established at this corner. It was ideally located at the intersection of newly laid Essex Middlesex Turnpike and the long-established Main Street.

During the 19th century, the simple wood frame building was adapted and expanded at various times over the following years. It remained a general store and eventually came under the ownership of the Compton, Craig, and then Freeman families.

Around the turn of the century, the building was moved off its original location (as commonly happened at that time) to a spot just slightly west of its original location. It appears that the building at 507 Middlesex, currently housing a photography studio, is what remains of the original wood frame structure.

This slight move was likely due to the impending sale of the property to James Danford in 1904, and Danford’s intention to build a new commercial building at the corner. Danford had been managing a grocery from the site since at least 1900, and must have been doing well enough to purchase the property outright.

The Danford Family

At the turn of the century, the Danford family had recently come to the Metuchen area from Philadelphia by way of Phillipsburg, New Jersey and Topeka,

Kansas. John Danford (1824-1887) emigrated from Ireland in June of 1852, first living in Philadelphia and working as a salesman and peddler. The following year he married Elizabeth Glenn (1829-1910), also recently emigrated from Ireland, and together they had

at least three children; William, James, and Elizabeth.

John Danford enlisted and served with the 186th Regiment, Pennsylvania Infantry under Captain Reen during the Civil War. His service records indicate he was wounded in Weldon, Virginia, leaving him paralyzed on the right side.

After his discharge, the Danfords moved to Phillipsburg, but between 1880 and 1885, they moved west to Topeka, Kansas. John took work

in a furniture business and their son James was employed as a grocery driver.

Unfortunately – and perhaps due to his paralysis – John was admitted to a home for disabled soldiers in Leavenworth, Kansas and died in 1887 (while there is a grave marker for him in Metuchen, he is buried in a military cemetery in Topeka). The following year the Danford’s eldest son, William, died at age 33, leaving behind a wife, Amanda Copeland Danford and one son, William Copeland “W.C.” Danford.

Despite these losses, it appears that John’s wife and her remaining family stayed in Topeka until the late 1890s. Her son, James, never married, but in 1897, her daughter Lizzie married William Augustus Morris of Oak Tree (now Edison, New Jersey). How Lizzie and Mr. Morris met is not known, but perhaps their connection came from the family’s previous time in New Jersey, or through her brother’s grocery business; the Morris & Campbell families from this area were long-time residents and notable grocers.

Meet Me at Danford’s



Continued on Page 4

Mid-Century Metuchen in 1:32 Scale



“The Great Train Set, a model railroad that has been called “one of the most elaborate and detailed model railroads ever built,” has recently been installed at Liberty Science Center at Liberty State Park in Jersey City.

This amazing display, donated by John and Regina Scully, “captures the wonder of the Lackawanna Railroad in the era when trains chugged from the grand Hoboken Terminal through scenic small-town New Jersey to coal country in eastern Pennsylvania.” Interviews with the Scullys indicate that John’s obsession

with model railroads began at “four years old, when his mother took him one Christmas season from their Metuchen, New Jersey, garden apartment (also meticulously recreated in the model) to Macy’s in Newark. This obsession led to the creation of this model depicting life in New Jersey seventy years ago.

Some sleuthing revealed that John’s family lived in Jefferson Park when he was that age. He is shown above in front of a model the family home later built on Moraine Road in Edison (image from the 2018 documentary “Still Plays with Trains.”) We look forward to visiting Liberty Science Center in the near future to take a tour back in time with this 1,700-square-foot wonder.

Nannygoats

Published by

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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, and make up 80 percent of the Society’s photographic collection. The Metuchen-Edison Historical Society dedicates this publication to Lloyd Grimstead, as a way of honoring him for preserving so much of our local history.

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



New on the Bookshelf

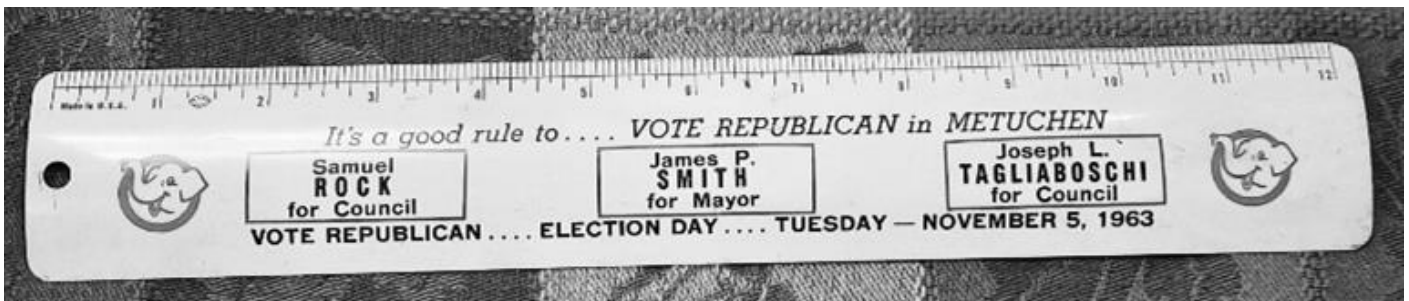
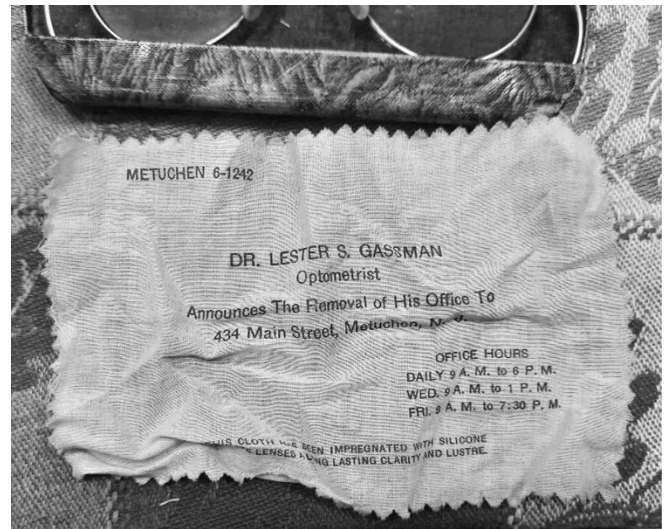
- *Abandoned New Jersey: Forgotten Spaces of the Garden State* by Joel Nadler.
- *Haunted Jersey Shore Beaches, Boardwalks and Lighthouses* by Patricia Heyer.
- *Images of America: East Brunswick Through the Years* by Mark Nonestied and Ethan Reiss.



New in the Archives

Listed here are just *some* of the many recent acquisitions. While we cannot accept historic items that are unrelated to our local history, we are always interested in acquiring originals and/or copies of photographs, ephemera, books, etc. relevant to our collective past. If you don't want to part with an original item, we'd be delighted to either photograph or scan it. Contact us at info@metuchen-edisonhistsoc.org with any questions.

- Photographs of the 1929 Raritan Township Police Force and the 1955 Edison Police Department, and photographs and description of the original Raritan Township World War II Honor Roll Monument near the Raritan Township Municipal Building (donated by Neil Hendrickson).
- Photographs of 1967 Metuchen Troop 70 and 1961-1962 Metuchen Memorial Day Parade; Handkerchief for Metuchen Troop 70; Pennant flag for Franklin Junior High School Bulldogs; Metuchen High School varsity letter; Postcard of Washington School; Franklin Middle School Student Handbook; Newspaper clippings of Metuchen High School alumni Robert Hegyes and Middlesex County College graduates (donated by Gerry Rice).
- Panoramic photographs of the September 11, 1937 Nixon Nitration Works Annual Outing (donated by Sondra Flite).
- Matchbook cover for the Swiss AAA Motel on U.S. Route 1, Metuchen (donated by Byron Sondergard).
- Photographs of buildings along Metuchen's Main Street from Plainfield Road to Route 1 (taken and donated by Sena Gesteland).
- Box containing newspaper clippings, publications, guides, minutes, photographs, postcards, research material, etc. primarily related to Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman (donated by Becky Seely).
- Briefcase of glass plate negatives, large format negatives, and miscellaneous photographs taken by J. Lloyd Grimstead (donated by Lois Cataldo via Chris Crane). There will be more about this donation in future editions of *Nannygoats*.
- Aerial photographs of Nixon Nitration Works and panoramic photographs of the August 1, 1942 Nixon Nitration Works Annual Outing (donated by Renee Vincent).
- Photographs of the recently and soon-to-be demolished Metuchen Savings Bank Building and Charlie Browns Restaurant (taken and donated by Dan Granato).
- Prescription eyeglasses from Metuchen Optometrist Dr. Lester S. Gassman, scan of original 1920 photograph of Ninth Year Class of Metuchen High School, photograph of 1963 ruler titled "It's a good rule to ... VOTE REPUBLICAN in METUCHEN" (donated by Amanda Brown).



Continued from Page 1

Regardless, this marriage must account for the Danfords' move to Metuchen.

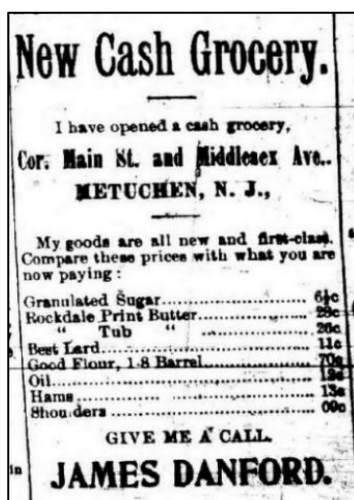
Family connections, the need to support his mother, and previous experience undoubtedly led to James Danford opening a grocery in that old building at the corner of Main Street and Middlesex Avenue in 1900 (see advertisement at right). Clearly, he worked hard and thrived, as only a few years later he was able to purchase the property outright, move the old structure away, and construct the building now on the site.

Danford's Corner Constructed

News reports and historic maps indicate that the current building at 476 Main Street was constructed in late 1905 and was hailed as "modern and attractive, as befitting such a prominent intersection." At first it had a smaller footprint, but after James sold the business to his nephew (his deceased brother's son), W.C. Danford in 1911, it was expanded on the east side. Soon after that it converted to a confectionary, selling homemade ice cream and sweets.

W.C. Danford (1884-1940) had married Anne Belle "Daisy" Hutchinson in 1905 and had been employed at times as a cigar maker and salesman. In 1910, the federal census shows he was still living in Oklahoma and had two small children. Local Metuchen papers reported on W.C. visiting his uncle James "from the West" in early 1910, and the opportunity to purchase his uncle's business must have brought him permanently back east with his family.

W.C. and Anne Danford lived over the store with their children (Jack, born 1906, and Denasi, born 1907). Both children went through the Metuchen schools and were noted athletes, particularly in basketball. Although Denasi died at 26, shortly after her marriage to Milton Nichols in



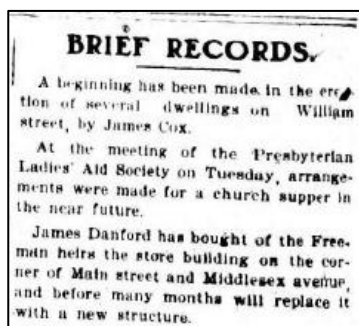
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GIVE ME A CALL.
JAMES DANFORD.

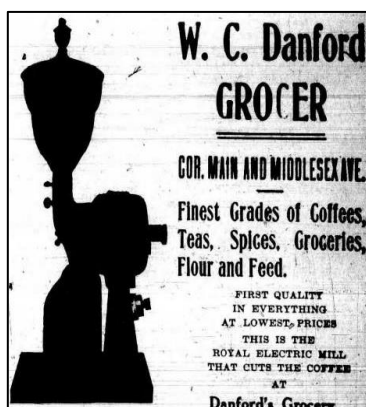


BRIEF RECORDS.

A beginning has been made in the erection of several dwellings on William street, by James Cox.

At the meeting of the Presbyterian Ladies' Aid Society on Tuesday, arrangements were made for a church supper in the near future.

James Danford has bought of the Freeman heirs the store building on the corner of Main street and Middlesex avenue, and before many months will replace it with a new structure.



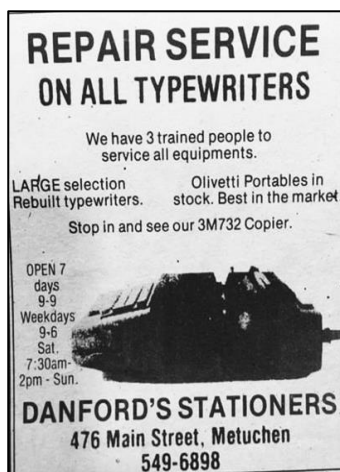
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1930, Jack worked with his father at the store for many years, eventually starting a family of his own and living on Carson Avenue and then later Newman Street.

Business Sold

In September of 1947, the Danfords sold the business to brothers Al and Warren Ryan, World War II veterans from Roselle. The Ryan brothers kept the iconic name and façade, but remodeled the interior with new flooring and the addition of a luncheonette and soda fountain. In taking over the "sweet shop," they had promised to continue serving the famous homemade ice cream offered at Danford's, but advertisements show they soon after were offering Costa's French Ice Cream, an even more locally famous frozen confection with a long local history. The Ryans also specialized in cigars, and for a time called the business the "Ryan United Cigar Store."

In 1954, Sid Marcus and Saul Kaufman purchased the business. They returned to the name to "Danford's Corner" and initially continued the luncheonette and confectionery. In 1960, Daisy Danford, W.C.'s widow, who was still living in an apartment above the store, sold the building to Marcus & Kaufman. Between 1970 and 1972, the residential space above the store was split up into smaller apartments, and the business changed to that of a stationer and typewriter repair shop under Saul Kaufman's ownership. That business operated as such until its closure in 2007. The space remained vacant for several years and then briefly opened in 2014 it as a bakery and coffee shop. Later plans to create a bridal studio in the space fell through, but it then served as dance studio for a handful of years.

This iconic corner has recently reopened as a high-end salon, and a large-scale reproduction of a 1956 Danford's Corner photograph is proudly displayed on the interior.

Images on Page 1: 1956 Frey-Sen Photograph. Images on Page 4, Top to Bottom, all from the *Metuchen Recorder*: 1900 advertisement, 1904 news item, 1911 advertisement, 1979 advertisement.

First Women Elected in Metuchen

By Tyreen A. Reuter

In our first issue of *Nannygoats* this year, we included an article by Walter R. Stochel, Jr. about the first woman elected in Edison (then Raritan) Township one hundred years ago. In 1922, just two years after the 19th amendment, Millicent Telfer was elected to the Raritan Township Board of Education.

Likewise, Metuchen's first elected woman was to the local Board of Education. Ruth Raeder Mook was elected in 1924, two years after Telfer, in a hotly contested election – but one where she received the second-most number of votes, only 32 less than the most popular candidate, Ramsey Crowell.

According to Mook's oral history, she served on the Board of Education for six years, and served as President of the Board for the last two.

It took several more decades, however, for a woman to be elected to the Metuchen Borough Council. At a Friends of the Metuchen Library

meeting earlier this year, I asked fellow volunteer Pamela Brown if she was in the fact the first; I knew she had served in the late 1970s. Pam shared that although she was the first woman to serve as Council President, she was not the first on the council – but the fourth.

Catherine Stumpfl (at center) who had been serving on the Planning Board was the first woman elected, winning her seat in November 1974.

The second woman elected was Diane Forney in 1975. A full-time student in Rutgers Medical School and mother of two, Forney resigned in 1977 to focus on her studies, whereupon

another woman, Patricia Lagay, was appointed to her seat. Lagay was later elected outright to her seat in 1978 and Pam joined Pat on the council a year later.

Many thanks to these brilliant women for their service to the community



Fisher's Many Firsts

Some know that the famous actor Gail Fisher is connected to Metuchen by having worked at Seldow's store on Main Street, but the local connection is much deeper.

Born in Orange, she moved to the Potter's Crossing section of what is now Edison when she was two years old. Her mother, recently widowed, ran a beauty salon to support the family, leading to Gail being involved with modelling and beauty pageants.

Gail attended Metuchen High School, where she was the first Black cheerleader – perhaps her first "first." It was also at Metuchen High that she landed the lead role in the school play, which she later credited with sparking her interest in a career in the theatre. Her senior yearbook entry, shown here, proclaims "Broadway, here she comes!"

She was the first Black person hired to work as a sales clerk for Seldow's, the first Black semifinalist in the New Jersey State Fair beauty contest, and then the first Black student admitted to New York's American Academy of Arts (where she was also awarded a full scholarship).

Fisher starred in frequent notable productions of "Raisin in the Sun" both on and off Broadway. In 1961, she was the first Black person to have a speaking role in a television commercial, for "All" laundry detergent. In 1968 she began her role as Peggy Fair on *Mannix*, for which she won an Emmy Award for Best Actress in a Television Drama Series – the first Black actor to win that award. With *Mannix*, she was the *second* Black woman (after Nichelle Nichols of *Star Trek*) to show prominently on weekly television.



Love on the Tracks?

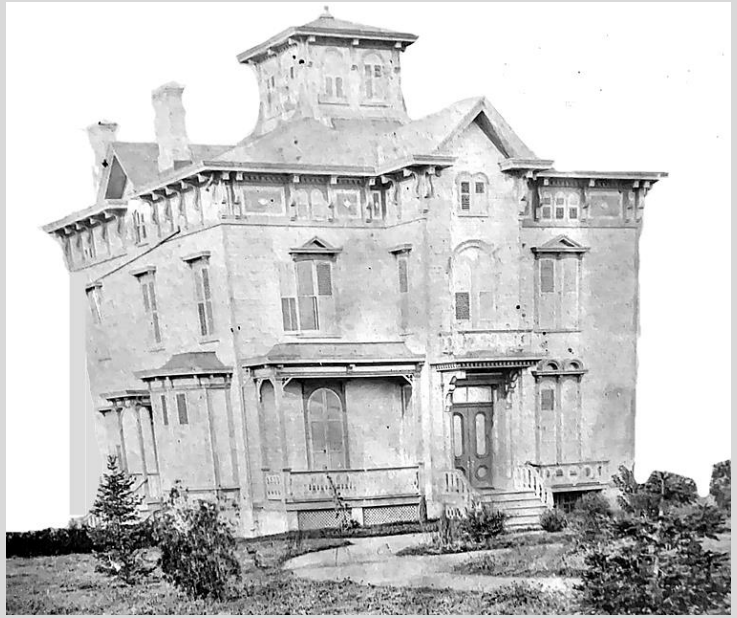
Since “Metuchen” as a place name is the only one in the world, as far as we know, any mention of it in popular culture grabs our interest. Recently a member alerted us to the inclusion of “Metuchen” in the lyrics of a Blue Öyster Cult song released in 2020. The song, entitled “Train True (Lenny’s Song)” includes the line “I whooped and called ‘Metuchen’ as I stepped through the door.”

Our Local History Mystery Detective Squad leapt into action to determine the BÖC’s connection to the Brainy Borough.

Fortunately, the group’s leader, Don Roeser (stage name Buck Dharma) responded to our inquiry, letting us know that song was written primarily by his son, Zeke Roeser, about an imagined train trip originating in Trenton and heading northeast. About the time the train reaches Metuchen, the narrator, a conductor, is reunited with his lost love. Roeser noted that “Metuchen was picked for the musical sound of the word, and also as an excuse to crack the vocal pitch as emotional punctuation to the story.”

We surmise that Roesers are familiar with the Metuchen stop from their time living Red Bank several years ago.

Next mission for the Local History Mystery Detective Squad? Convince Blue Öyster Cult to come play this song at the Forum Theater 😊



House of Mystery

A member of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society Facebook group recently posted the photograph shown here, asking if anyone recognizes the two-story Italianate residence. The poster stated the photo had been found in her barn in Metuchen, but couldn’t recall what her grandmother had said about the house’s location. Markings on the image indicated that it was made by the photographer James Stacy of Rahway between 1866 and 1894. So far Society Sleuths haven’t been able to match it to any known or former buildings in our area. Please contact us if you have any information to share about this image.

Speaking of Metuchen and Musicians...

Shown here is Irish guitarist, singer, songwriter, and producer Rory Gallagher sporting a Metuchen Cross Country shirt in 1983. Our understanding is that Coach Alan Cummings, a fan of the legendary blues rock guitarist, gave Gallagher the shirt as a gift.



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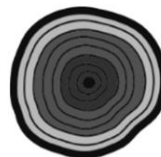
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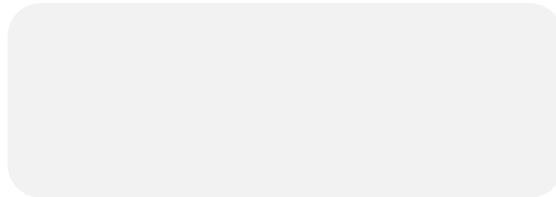
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In addition to reprinting historic photographs from our archives, the Society has created a number of original items for sale. We offer books, postcards, magnets, research guides, coloring books, reproduction maps, and prints. New items are always being created, and are available for sale through our website and at all our events.

WWW.METUCHEN-EDISONHISTSOC.ORG

WHERE'S THE PARSONAGE?

Whether you call it a rectory, clergy house, vicarage, or parsonage, you won't find one on Parsonage Road in Edison. So why is it called that? No, it's not for the long-gone diner that sat on the corner with Route 27, even though we hear their grilled cheese sandwiches were worthy of such an honor.

Although it's now home to a shopping mall, a series of chain restaurants & stores, and modern multi-story office buildings, the area around Parsonage Road was once open fields allotted to the First Presbyterian Church of Woodbridge. It was designated for use by their minister, or parson, and was thus "Parsonage Land."

Perhaps plans to build a parsonage house in that location fell through, or were never intended, but there's no evidence of a church residence ever having been constructed there. Yet, centuries later, it is still known as Parsonage Road.

