

Interviewee: William Franklin Buchanan
Interviewer: David Heinlein and George Terwilliger
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Transcriber: Janena Benjamin

William Franklin Buchanan was formerly the Borough Engineer of Metuchen.

Mr. Buchanan: My name is William Franklin Buchanan. I have been known as W. Franklin Buchanan by my own choice. I was born in Newark, New Jersey on September 25, 1897. At about three years of age I moved to Perth Amboy and went through my early education in Perth Amboy, graduated from the Perth Amboy High School in 1914. At the time that I was in my senior year in high school I took competitive examinations for a scholarship for Rutgers College, as it was know at that time, and successfully passed the examinations and received the scholarship. I entered Rutgers in 1914 with the idea of specializing in electrical engineering since I had been interested in wireless telegraphy for many years. In order to finance my other expenses when going to college, I secured a position with Larson and Fox, civil engineers and land surveyors in Perth Amboy and worked for them Saturdays, some Sundays and holidays and some nights. And brought in enough money to put myself through college. After my third year of following the electrical engineering course, I decided based on my experience in civil engineering and surveying, to change my course to civil engineering. I was successful in having the scholarship extended for another year and graduated from Rutgers in 1919.

Frank, if we could talk about your summer employment with Larson & Fox in those 1915, 1916, 1917 years. If there was a job outside of Perth Amboy, how did you get to the job?

Mr. Buchanan: By automobile.

What type of automobiles were they?

Mr. Buchanan: Fords.

Fords.

Mr. Buchanan: I can remember going to the Ford agency, which was owned by Dorsey in Perth Amboy and buying two Ford touring cars for \$450 a piece.

Hardly the price we'd pay for them now. When did you first meet Mrs. Buchanan?

Mr. Buchanan: **I first met Mrs. Buchanan in 1925 shortly after I was appointed Borough Engineer. I was appointed in February, I think it was February 6 or 8, 1925. I moved to Metuchen in September of 1924.**

Now in 1925 at the time you were appointed Borough Engineer in Metuchen, you had previously been appointed Middlesex County Engineer.

Mr. Buchanan: **I was County Engineer in Middlesex County and also Borough Engineer in Metuchen.**

When did you first become the County Engineer Middlesex County?

Mr. Buchanan: **1924.**

And that ran concurrently with your Borough Engineer's position in Metuchen?

Mr. Buchanan: **Yes.**

Now you've met Mrs. Buchanan and perhaps you can tell us when the big event took place.

Mr. Buchanan: **Well we became engaged in March 1926 and we married in October of 1926.**

And you lived after you were married where in Metuchen?

Mr. Buchanan: **Well we lived with the Prickett family in the large house on Clive Street.**

Which still stands.

Mr. Buchanan: **Which still stands. And in 1929 we built the house next to their house, which is 56 Clive Street.**

That is the house that is on the corner of Norris and Clive present time?

Mr. Buchanan: **That's correct, the northeast corner.**

Now perhaps if you would, in those middle 20's years, Metuchen was quite rural. And is there is anything in particular that you think is interesting about the character of the town, we could get it on the tape at this time. I am sure you have a lot you can say but

there must be a few things that you think are particularly interesting.

Mr. Buchanan: Well do you mean changes that took place?

Yes.

Mr. Buchanan: In 1926 and 1927 they paved Main Street, the business part of Main Street between Middlesex Avenue and Amboy Avenue and that took out the trolley track which was in the middle of the street and eliminated what used to be called the Toonerville Trolley in Metuchen. That was the biggest change in the middle of the town. That also widened the distance between curbs in the business section of Main Street from 40 feet to 44.6 feet. But just before that was paved the sanitary sewer system was put in in Metuchen. I had nothing to do with the construction of that. That was done entirely by a consulting engineer whose name was W.W. Young who was brought in I guess from New York. And so after the sewer was put in Main Street, of course, the pavement was constructed.

Now you mentioned the trolley line. And before we started the tape we were discussing the extent of that early trolley line. Perhaps you could tell us from Perth Amboy how that original trolley line ran throughout this area.

Mr. Buchanan: The trolley started really in Perth Amboy when it had a large cargo and it went through Fords to Metuchen and when it got to Metuchen, that is to Main Street Metuchen, it turned to the south and went to Bonhamton and then to Highland Park and then to New Brunswick.

Now it went to Woodbridge Avenue, Bonhamtown and via Woodbridge Avenue into Highland Park or what is now known as Woodbridge Avenue?

Mr. Buchanan: That's right. There was another line which was started from New Brunswick and went up along the Raritan River along the River Road to Bound Brook and that had a connecting line that went to Plainfield and then to Rahway. There was also a connection from Rahway to Perth Amboy.

How often did the trolleys run?

Mr. Buchanan: Approximately every hour during the day.

What were they powered with; what was the prime mover on the track?

Mr. Buchanan: They were all electrically operated with overhead wires.

#: At any point were they ever horse drawn trolleys?

Mr. Buchanan: Not to my knowledge.

#2 How many people could the trolley accommodate?

Mr. Buchanan: Well the trolleys on the main line I believe could take of possibly 40 people, 35 to 40. But of course we had the short line as I mentioned before, the Toonerville Trolley. That was a smaller car. That ran from Main Street and Amboy Avenue through the business part of Main Street and continued up to Christol Street or the southern end of Clive Street. That was used for people using the railroad and also for people doing shopping in the business section.

Frank, at the time in 1925 when you became the Borough Engineer in Metuchen initially, do you recall who the Mayor was?

Mr. Buchanan: Frederick L. Clarkson

And Mr. Burroughs was the Borough Clerk at that time?

Mr. Buchanan: He was Borough Clerk.

Where were the meetings held prior to the new borough hall being built?

Mr. Buchanan: They were held in a room at the back of Robins Hall, which is now Metuchen Hardware. That was also police headquarters.

That's the Metuchen Hardware that was on Main Street in Metuchen, the three story brick building?

Mr. Buchanan: At that time it was very full, in that building was a dance hall.

And were there theatrical performances up there as well?

Mr. Buchanan: I don't know whether they were actually theatrical performances but it was a large meeting room and they had local dances there.

So that's the 20's. Let's move on to the next decade if we can and try and cover that in a few minutes.

Mr. Buchanan: In 1932, when my term expired as County Engineer I was also resident engineer for the Port Raritan District Commission which was a state commission for the improvement of Raritan Bay. But I was appointed to a full time position with the borough as Borough Engineer, Superintendent of Public

Works, Superintendent of the Sewer System and the Disposal Plant, Superintendent of Public Buildings, Building Inspector and Zoning Inspector. They were all combined into the one position.

What year was that, Frank?

Mr. Buchanan: 1932.

So that would have been the original of our zoning ordinance, around 1932?

Mr. Buchanan: No, the first zoning ordinance was passed by the borough of Metuchen in 1924. I believe that the first map was made by 1925. That was shortly after I went in office. The next revision of the zoning was in 1935.

Let me digress for a moment. You are I'm sure familiar with the Edgar family who formerly resided in Metuchen. They lived in a large house on Middlesex Avenue with the large white columns on it.

Mr. Buchanan: That was one of the Edgar brothers.

That was one of them? How many others were there?

Mr. Buchanan: There was Raymond Edgar who lived at that time at the corner of next to the corner I should say Park Avenue and Plainfield Road. There was another one that lived on Graham Avenue near Franklin Place.

Were they all in the family business together?

Mr. Buchanan: I believe they all were.

It particularly intrigues me and I wonder if you could describe a little bit about their clay mining operation and where it was?

Mr. Buchanan: Well basically their clay mining was done in the southern part of Metuchen going into what was then Raritan township, which is now Edison township. But they have expanded quite a bit and they have plenty of sources all the way down to Georgia, as far as that's concerned.

Was there a plant in Metuchen where it was processed, the clay?

Mr. Buchanan: I don't think so. I think that the clay was sold to other companies to be processed.

And the building which stands at the end of Station Place, Pennsylvania Avenue Station Place, that was their original operating office?

Mr. Buchanan: **Well that was the first office that I can recall in Metuchen, I don't know whether that was the original office.**

How long did that mining operation go on for?

Mr. Buchanan: **I wouldn't want to say when it stopped –as far as I know the father died and the mines were sold from time to time but just when it stopped I don't know.**

Now Metuchen has been described by a lot of people as having been a town of professionals, business people. Just in your own opinion how did you see life styles change much when the depression hit in 1932 and '33 and '34 here in Metuchen? Did it effect this borough greatly?

Mr. Buchanan: **Yes, yes it did. Of course it didn't have as an abrupt a change or effect as it would on a town that was basically relying on industry for income for families. Because Metuchen was more of a - I don't know how you describe but - they were technical people and educators so because they were not hit as hard as people living in a town relying on one or two or three large industries.**

I see. Did it effect the municipal government very much as you recall; a tightening of the budget and holding the line such as we're faced with now? The borough government of course had improvement programs underway and how did it effect that type of thing?

Mr. Buchanan: **Of course, during the depression we had a lot of projects that the federal government paid for the delivery costs you might say so all that the borough had to furnish was the equipment to do work and a part of the cost of supervision. At that time I remember we bought some forms to build concrete curb and gutter. We would put concrete curb and gutter in for anybody who would pay 50 cents a foot because that was the estimated cost of the material that the borough had to buy. There were many, many homes where concrete curb and gutter were constructed and all it cost was the 50 cents a foot. Now today the same thing would cost possibly \$5.50 a foot.**

That's true.

Mr. Buchanan: **I will say one other thing, that first year that I was in charge I was told by the Finance committee the streets and roads appropriation was \$2500 and they expected to get back**

\$1000. Of course you have to keep in mind that 90 percent of labor was actually furnished to us by the government under the CWA and WPA program.

That was a tight budget.

Let's see, Roosevelt was in office *—pause—*

I just remembered one thing and this is very small but maybe it should go on the tape. You mentioned at one point that you sat next to Thomas Edison at a ceremony. Did you and he exchange words at all?

Mr. Buchanan: A few words, not too many. That was when I received my civil engineering degree. Because at that time when you graduated from college you got a bachelor of science degree and then you had to have three years of experience and a project that you had been working on in order to qualify for your C.E. or even your E. E. degree. And of course it was C.E. degree that I was trying to get. And at that time Thomas Edison sat next to me on the platform and we did exchange a few words.

How old would Mr. Edison have been at that time, very old?

Mr. Buchanan: Well that was 1922.

Was he still working in Menlo Park at that time or up in the Oranges?

Mr. Buchanan: He was up in the Oranges. He hadn't been in Menlo Park for many years.

As the Thirties progressed and we started to get closer and closer into World War II, were there any changes that were taking place in and around Metuchen in connection with the onset of World War II such as military facilities being built, Camp Kilmer, that sort of thing that are worthy of taking note of.

Mr. Buchanan: I was not involved in that. I was not involved in the war effort of World War II, I think because in World War I was in the SATC, which is a part of the Army. But of course I was at Rutgers at that time. Until about 1940, '39 or '40, the only military picture around Metuchen was Camp Raritan, the Raritan Arsenal. That of course was a carry over from World War I. It was expanded of course in the pre World War II period. And then of course Nixon Nitration expanded and they were also in the war effort and the New Jersey [redacted] Company, which was Sam Wiley's plant expanded greatly.

Let's talk about the New Jersey [redacted] Company because I know you were involved with the New Jersey [redacted] Company. You mentioned Sam Wiley. This is the Sam Wiley who was the grandfather of our present councilman John Wiley. The Wiley family were neighbors of yours on Clive Street. Tell us a little bit about what the New Jersey [redacted] Company did and where they were located.

Mr. Buchanan: The New Jersey [redacted] Company was originally in New Brunswick on a comparatively small scale and it was really the work of Samuel Wiley. But for many of the patents or the basic patents were the work of his father who at that time was also connected with the Government. So Samuel Wiley went into manufacturing of emergency landing flares and practically every airline in the world with the exception of Pan American Airline used the Wiley emergency landing flare. Well of course when World War II actually developed they went into the manufacture of bombardment flares, which were huge, 4-foot long candles you might say.

Magnesium.

Mr. Buchanan: It was a mixture of magnesium, barium nitrate and sulfur and four or five other items ignited by a black powder fuse and they were principally manufactured in this country by the New Jersey [redacted] Company.

And the location of the [redacted] Company was at this time when they were manufacturing was no longer in New Brunswick but over in the southern part of Metuchen.

Mr. Buchanan: On the southern side of Woodman Avenue at the Bonhamtown bridge and the Pennsylvania Railroad.

At the present time this is where Woodman Avenue crosses Route 287?

Mr. Buchanan: Old machinery is located on a part of the property.

In 1941 at the request of Mr. Wiley the owner of the New Jersey [redacted] Company I went with that company as plant manager and resigned all of my positions with the borough of Metuchen except that of Borough Engineer.

And you remained plant manager for how long?

Mr. Buchanan: Until the war ended, I believe it was '45.

And that would have been about the time you began your private practice of engineering and surveying?

Mr. Buchanan: I had conducted my private practice ever since Larson and Fox broke up in 1932.

Where did you have your office and where were you practicing from in 1945?

Mr. Buchanan: For a period from 1932 until approximately 1940 my office was on the second floor in the Commonwealth Bank building. And then in 1941, as I remember, I moved to the entire second floor of the Schenk building which was next to the Commonwealth Bank building on the south side.

And you stayed there until the early 50's, wasn't it?

Mr. Buchanan: I stayed there until the 495 Main Street building was constructed in 1958 and moved in there as one of the first tenants.

That's where your office is at the present time?

Mr. Buchanan: That's correct.

Mr. Buchanan, could you tell us a little bit about the development of the Metuchen Rotary Club?

Mr. Buchanan: The Metuchen Rotary Club was organized in 1928 and I was a charter member of the club and am still a member although now I am considered an honorary member.

Where did they hold their meetings, Frank, in the early years?

Mr. Buchanan: In the early years we held our meetings at The Metuchen Inn which is on the corner of Linden Avenue and Middlesex Avenue. That was when Harry Holstein owned it.

Some years ago I saw a film, and early motion picture film, that was made to encourage settlement in Metuchen. Have you ever seen that film?

Mr. Buchanan: I have heard of it but I can't remember seeing it.

I believe a Mrs. Salacki has the film right now.

Mr. Buchanan: Yes, I understand she does.

And it was made back in the, I guess it was made back in the twenties, late twenties perhaps or early 30's?

I think it was made in 1928 or '29.

At that time I thought that the film said that some borough group was meeting at the Metuchen Inn. Have you ever seen that film?

Now I haven't. I want to see the film.

Mr. Buchanan: **Prior to the Metuchen Rotary Club organizing there was a club known as the Businessmen's Luncheon Club. They used to meet at the Metuchen Inn I think it was once a week.**

Frank, I'm sure your recollection of politics is very clear Was there anything interesting that happened in politics from 1925 particularly significant that you can think of?

Mr. Buchanan: **In Metuchen?**

In Metuchen, yes.

Mr. Buchanan: **Well Metuchen has or had for a number of years the idea that after one party had been in charge for a few years, another party should have a chance. It was switched back and forth although it has followed to one side now for a number of years.**

In 1925 when you were appointed as Borough Engineer which party was in power in Metuchen at the time?

Mr. Buchanan: **The Republicans took over the 1st of January of 1925 and when I was appointed two of the newly new elected Republicans rather than vote got up and left the room. That meant of course it was not a tie vote so the mayor could not vote. So I was not appointed actually until February the 8th because one month had to expire before the Mayor could make the appointment. So that was interesting.**

Are you saying that these two gentlemen who left the room did not want to vote for you to be appointed as Borough Engineer at that time?

Mr. Buchanan: **Well, they were Republicans but thought that I had too many Democratic friends too. I think I had been appointed as often by Republican councils as I have by Democratic councils.**

I think it's interesting and that we should put on this tape that Mr. Buchanan was the Borough Engineer for 51 consecutive years. To my knowledge that's the longest tenure of appointed engineers I think in the state of New Jersey ever and I doubt if it will ever be equaled or exceeded.

Mr. Buchanan: **According to the State Municipality's representative, who was at the meeting, that is true.**

Mr. Buchanan has seen much happen over his tenure. When the Democrats took control of the country under Roosevelt did that effect our local political scene at all? Did the Democrats take over Metuchen?

Mr. Buchanan: **Yes. In 1929-1930 the Democrats took over so in 1932 it was not unanimously Democratic but close to it.**

At that time, Frank, 1930 -1932, were there many dirt streets in Metuchen that had not been paved yet?

Mr. Buchanan: **Very few streets had been paved. Amboy Avenue was paved by the county when I was County Engineer in 1928 and Main Street was paved in '26 and '27 and of course Middlesex Avenue was paved originally in about 1911 or 1912 as a state highway and using convict labor. And at the time Alvin Fox, who was a partner of Larson and Fox in Perth Amboy, was county engineer and it was a procedure then due to the fact that the State Highway Department did not have their own engineering departments that the county engineer would do the engineering work for the state on any job within their county. So this road was improved, a divisional concrete road, but the work was handled from an engineering standpoint, by the county engineer.**

Speaking of roads, there wasn't always a Route 1. Can you tell us a little bit about when that was constructed?

Mr. Buchanan: **Well Route 1, the route of Route 1, a good part of that was originally acquired by public service, electric. And they wanted to have that for the main electric transmission lines. Incidentally Larson and Fox did the work for public service electric on the branch of that all the way from Route 1 and Amboy Avenue all the way up to Mount St. Mary's. They did all the surveying work – that's just incidental.**

That's the line which crosses Middlesex Avenue near the Edison line?

Mr. Buchanan: **Right. And then the state decided that they had to have a cross-state route connecting up Trenton and well, actually it went to New York. And so they chose that because public service only wanted the right to have their towers along that line and so the state could use the ground surface for roadwork.**

Now I've see drawings which refer to something called the "fast line". What was the fast line?

Mr. Buchanan: **That was the line that ran from Newark to Trenton.**

A railroad?

Mr. Buchanan: A trolley. And they also had a branch that went from Newark to Perth Amboy.

And this ran along or very close to where Route 1 runs now?

Mr. Buchanan: Their right of way is a part of what is now Route 1.

I see.

Mr. Buchanan at one time Metuchen had its own sewage treatment plant. I wonder if you could describe to us when it was built and where and what is on that site now.

Mr. Buchanan: Well in about 1922 there was a movement started to have standard sewer lines and a treatment plant constructed in Metuchen. And it was put up for referendum and it was beaten. After about a year's time it was put up again and it was went through and the first work started on the sewer lines and the plants which were two different contracts, in 1925. And that covered the installation of sewers and possibly 30 to 40 percent of the streets that were fairly well built-up. It included the construction of a primary treatment plant at the end of what is now Jersey Avenue very close to where the Department of Public Works main buildings are and very close to where the present sewage pumping station is. And the second treatment plant on the west side of the Lehigh Valley railroad, a continuation of Forest Street. In addition to that, to take care of the southerly part of the borough because there is a ridge that separates the borough into two sections – the northerly section and the southerly section – it was necessary to build a pumping station on Orchard Avenue. From there the sewage was pumped from that pumping station up to Main Street and High Street where it could be discharged into the gravity mine and actually run over to the treatment plant on Jersey Avenue.

How long was that treatment plant in use?

Mr. Buchanan: The treatment plant was in use until 1958 at which time - in 1956 and 1957 they were building a pumping station on Jersey Avenue to handle the existing flow plus the estimated flow of 25 years from that date. And also a force main from there over to Tommy's Road where it discharged into a sewer that was being built by Edison Township to convey it from there over to the new system soon to be built at the Raritan River.

And the old treatment plant was used until the switches were thrown in 1958 and the new pumping station was started up.

Now until the sewage treatment plant was built and the initial collector system installed all of Metuchen then operated on private sewage individual disposal systems such as septic tanks.

Mr. Buchanan: **Cesspools.**

Did that create problems as far as health problems in much of Metuchen do you recall?

Mr. Buchanan: **It was creating problems. Of course originally it didn't create problems because there was enough vacant land, houses were farther apart and there was enough area that the ground would handle the sewage from the house. But of course with the increase in the number of buildings and the decrease in the amount of vacant land, for subsoil disposal, it was becoming a problem.**

When you were the superintendent of public works in the 20s, how many men were in the department at that time?

Mr. Buchanan: **That was in the 30's.**

The 30's, yes I'm sorry.

Mr. Buchanan: **Well there was one general foreman and we had about 6 men to start in with and when of course CWA and WPA came in we had other men that could do other jobs for the department.**

Who was you general foreman at that time?

Mr. Buchanan: **His name was Mick Adams.**

There was I recall an old gentleman Sam Reid who worked for many years for the Borough. About when did he start working for the Borough of Metuchen?

Mr. Buchanan: **He started working for the Borough shortly after the original treatment plant was built. He took his examinations and he got the state plant operator's license. And he continued to be in charge of the operation of the treatment plant up until they put that job on me in the combination of offices in 1932. And so for a few years Mr. Reid was working under me but he finally retired.**

I understand he just died a few years ago.

Mr. Buchanan: **That's right.**

If one were to ask you, in all your years in Metuchen now, I know it's a difficult question, I don't know what you're going to say. Two

things. If you could name a person that you remember most significantly about something, not necessarily to do with politics or engineering, but the one person that comes to mind if you think back about one individual and one event, what would you say? Any one person in all your years in Metuchen that stands out in your mind, be it for notorious reasons or reasons of merit.

Mr. Buchanan: **Well I think that would have to be possibly influenced by the fact that Lewis Compton was an old friend of mine from Perth Amboy. And we were very close and our families were very close.**

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