

Brief Building History of 503 Middlesex Avenue, Metuchen
(Block 117, Lots 64 and 65)
Current Metuchen Fire Department building

The one-story building at 503 Middlesex Avenue in Metuchen, New Jersey was completed in 1914 by T.M. Barr for John C. Bowers' "Metuchen Automobile & Garage Company." It currently serves as the headquarters for the Metuchen Fire Department.

Mr. Bowers had an earlier location for his Metuchen business in a concrete garage nearby, which, according to editions of *Horseless Age*, he opened towards the end of 1909. The construction of the building at 503 Middlesex Avenue was to expansion his business from his smaller location on Highland Avenue near Main Street. A 1914 issue of *Horseless Age* and local news reports note that there were objections to the establishment of Mr. Bowers' garage in this new location, and that some property owners filed objections which had eventually been overruled by the court. This move to Middlesex Avenue may have also been linked to a desire to be located on newly designated Lincoln Highway (established 1913). Named in honor of President Lincoln, this was the first transcontinental automobile road and runs through Metuchen as Middlesex Avenue, Route 27, and the Lincoln Highway. It was designated as a route from Times Square in New York City to California, and was intended for pleasure touring. As a result, many roadside businesses were constructed along its route during these early years in support of its many anticipated travelers.

The original 50' by 100' building was constructed between September 1913 and March 1914, delayed due to the local opposition to a garage being located in a residential neighborhood. An addition that took place between 1914 and 1920 doubled the size of the structure and resulted in the twin gables of stepped parapets along the front façade.

The building at 503 Middlesex Avenue first appears on Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of Metuchen in 1920; the earlier edition in 1910 shows the property as undeveloped and adjacent to the Washington Hose Company Fire House (earlier historic maps of Metuchen also show the site as undeveloped). Details included on the 1920 map indicate that the building, which appears in its current configuration of two sections each with a front gable roof, was constructed of hollow tile with nine skylights/roof vents, steam heat, electric light, and had the capacity for 50 cars. Also noted are four 500 gallon gasoline tanks buried in the roadway along the front elevation.

City directories of Metuchen list Mr. Bowers as operating a garage in this location through at least 1940. By 1949, as shown on the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps for that year, the building was in use as a municipal garage. Within at least the next year or two, the building also began to be used by the Borough's two fire companies, the Eagle Hook and Ladder Company and the Washington Hose Company. Both of these volunteer fire companies had been established many years earlier, (1882 and 1897, respectively) and were housed in small firehouses they had constructed for their companies (in 1885 and 1905, also respectively).

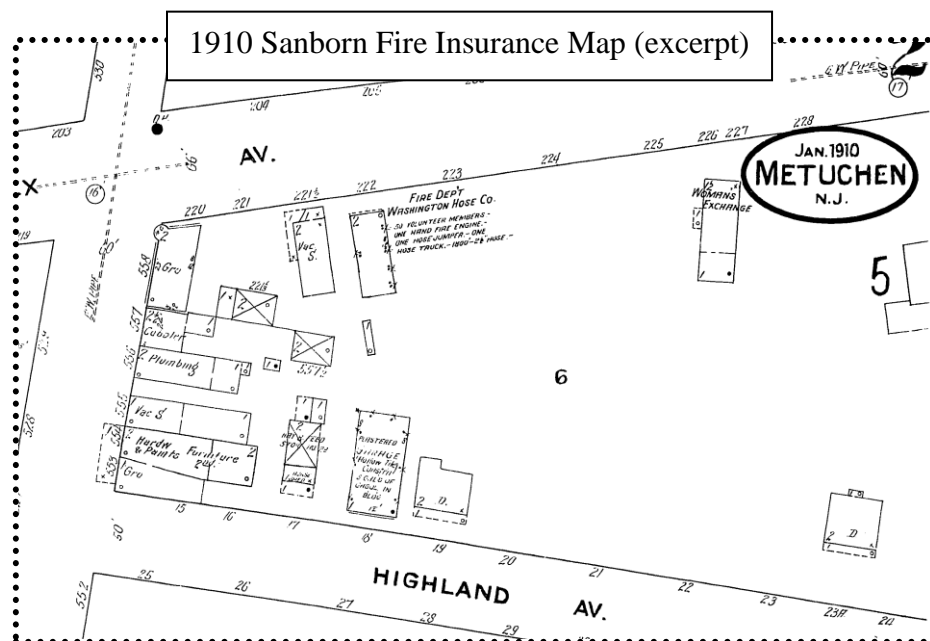
In 1953, the Metuchen Borough Council, under the leadership of Mayor Joseph Costa, voted to renovate the old garage for use by the two fire companies. The plan, drafted by Pierson and MacWilliams, Architects, included an entirely new front façade, additional floor space, a recreation room, showers, and refinished walls and ceiling.

The local newspaper, *the Metuchen Recorder*, documented a fair amount of opposition to the plan to renovate the old borough garage for this purpose. Opponents indicated that the estimates for the work continued to grow and that the condition of the existing structure was in very poor condition. During a Borough Council meeting in April 1953, one resident called the proposal “a little bit of icing on a stale cake.” Mayor Costa countered that the \$48,000 expenditure was cost-effective and the best thing for the department, and that remodeling of the building would also eliminate the “eyesore” that the old garage had become. Costa also stated that “when this work is done, we’ll have a building we can be proud of – and one that should last 40 to 50 years.” Opposition to the plan, based on the assertion that the existing building would only need additional costly repairs as time went on, continued to be voiced as well as the recommendation that an entirely new facility located elsewhere in the borough should be constructed.

However, the council did pass the measure and it seems like there were several factors leading into the decision at the time, including development pressures including major commercial changes along Main Street, Menlo Park mall being planned nearby, and very expensive school expansions. The local papers were also full of concerns about the volume of traffic and pedestrian conditions, and it seems that citizens and council were dealing with a great number of changes in and around the borough. Within the next couple of months, however, the council itself underwent a great change as several from the opposing political party were elected to office. One of the most vocal opponents of the renovation, Karl E. Metzger, was elected Mayor. By this time, however, the renovation had been completed.

While changes to the interior have clearly taken place, the exterior footprint of building is nearly the same as it was upon the completion of the renovation in 1953. However, its façade is heavily altered and very few, if any, original architectural features remain from its construction as an automobile garage along the Lincoln Highway. The original rusticated stone front façade, with its twin stepped parapets, was significantly altered as part of the 1953 renovation, and all the front bays were reworked to accommodate fire engines. A quick inspection of the interior shows that little or no original historic features remain inside.

The following pages maps, photos, and images come primarily from the archives of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society.



METUCHEN

NEWS AND NOTES

Metuchen Is Proud Of Its New Garage

METUCHEN, March 28.—Thanks to the united efforts of Thomas Barr, owner, and J. C. Bowers, manager, the Metuchen Automobile and Garage Co. is the proud possessor of a large, roomy, light and beautiful new modern garage on Middlesex avenue near Main street.

Owing to the cramped conditions in its old garage on Highland avenue the company last summer decided to erect a new building more suited to the needs of a growing business, with plenty of room for the storing and repairing and washing of the cars of many Metuchen owners and that of transient cars which bring visitors to the Borough.

As one enters the large rolling door on Middlesex avenue he sees two handsomely finished rooms, one on each side, used respectively for office and show rooms. There are thirty windows at regular intervals around the sides and three large skylights in the roof, which make a fine bright place by day, while countless hanging electric lights do the same by night.

The heating, which was installed by one of the local concerns, H. A. Rumler Co., is an overhead steam system. A large boiler is situated in the rear of the building which supplies steam to the radiators hanging from the trusses about the building.



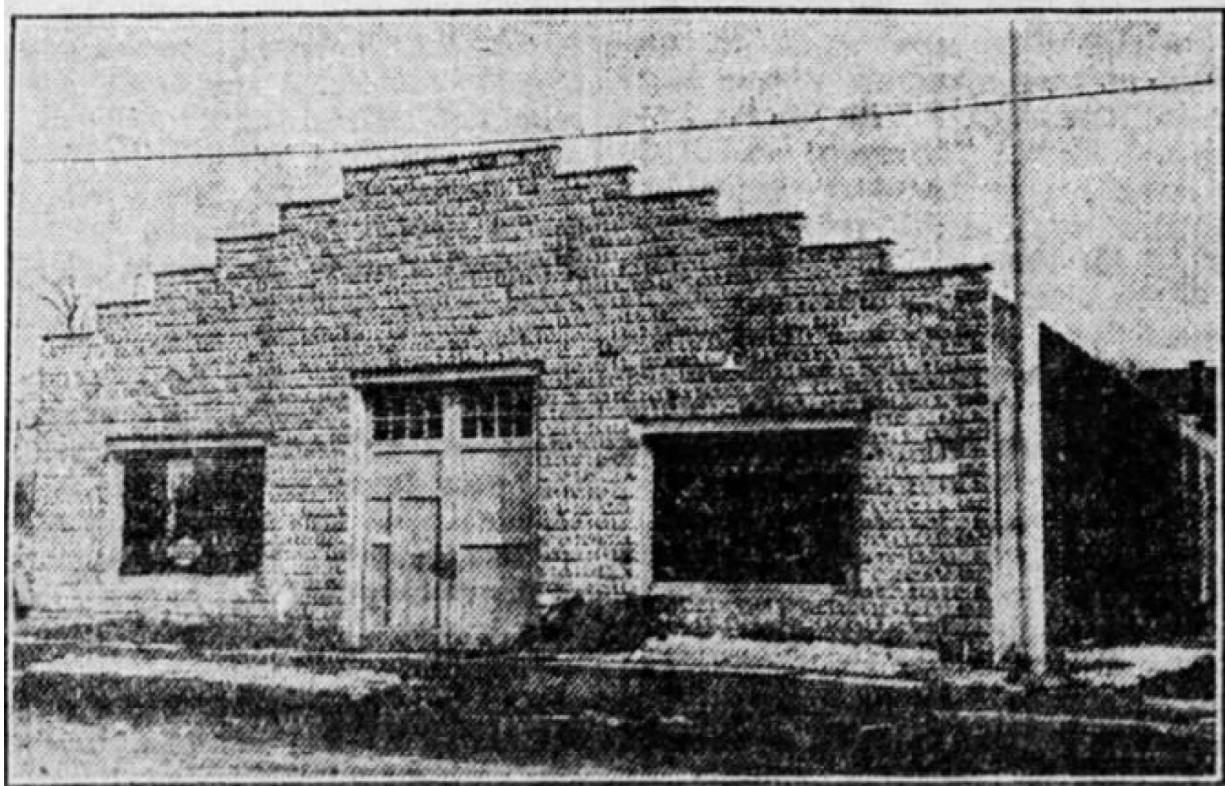
METUCHEN'S NEW GARAGE.

Chas. B. Carman, C. E., was given the contract to design and construct the new garage and work was begun late in September. Some of the property owners on Middlesex avenue, however, objected to having a garage so near their homes so they made a little trouble through the courts compelling work to be stopped. The objections were overcome and in December building operations were resumed and an extra force of men put to work to hasten through the building's completion, which was accomplished March 1st. The Metuchen Automobile and Garage Co. soon after moved in and it is now doing a much larger business than was even anticipated.

A visit to the fine new example of engineering and building skill of which Metuchen is justly proud to have within its limits reveals some interesting facts. Over 5 tons of radiators were installed in the system. Although the building is quite large (50 ft. by 100 ft.) there isn't one pillar or post to be in the way in the whole construction. Extra heavy joists and trusses were used in the building of the roof and Engineer Carman says that it is capable of holding four times as much snow as it will ever be possible to get on it. In the recent snow storm it was put to a severe test and came through without a tremor.

There is, in the new garage, space for storing over thirty cars, and what with the three repair pits, the shop in the rear, a modern car washing apparatus, a triple light, and countless other conveniences, there is every modern facility for the carrying of any kind of an automobile proposition.

Detail, March, 1914 article from a New Brunswick newspaper



1914 Edition of *American Machinist*

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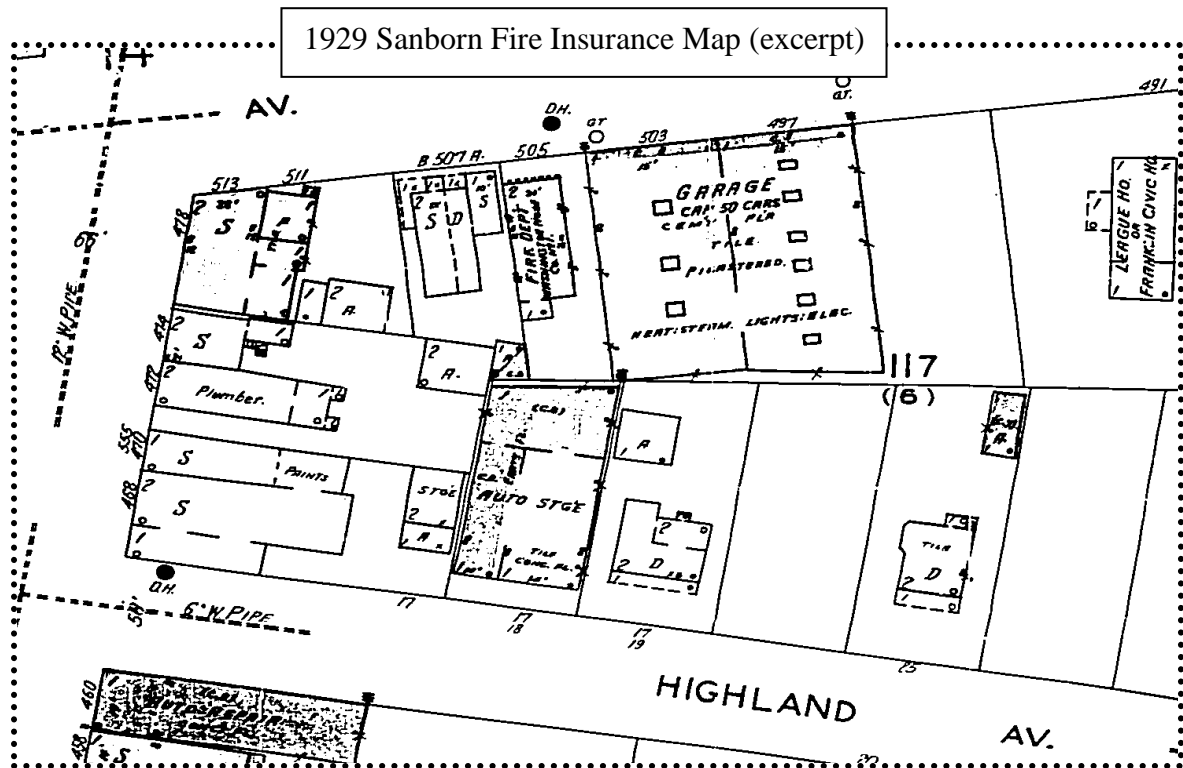
St. Louis, Mo.—William F. Barr has obtained a permit to establish a garage and repair shop at 5014-5016 Florissant avenue.

Metuchen, N. J.—Work on the Public Garage for Thomas M. Barr, which was stopped by the court after certain property owners had filed objections to its erection, has been resumed, the court having ruled in favor of Mr. Barr. When completed the building will occupy the Metuchen Automobile & Garage Co., of which John C. Bowers is proprietor.

Amsterdam, N. Y.—Walter J. Merriam,



Photograph on file in the archives of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society of the Washington Hose Company, dated 1921. Note the signage, façade, and sidewalls of the building in the left side of the image.

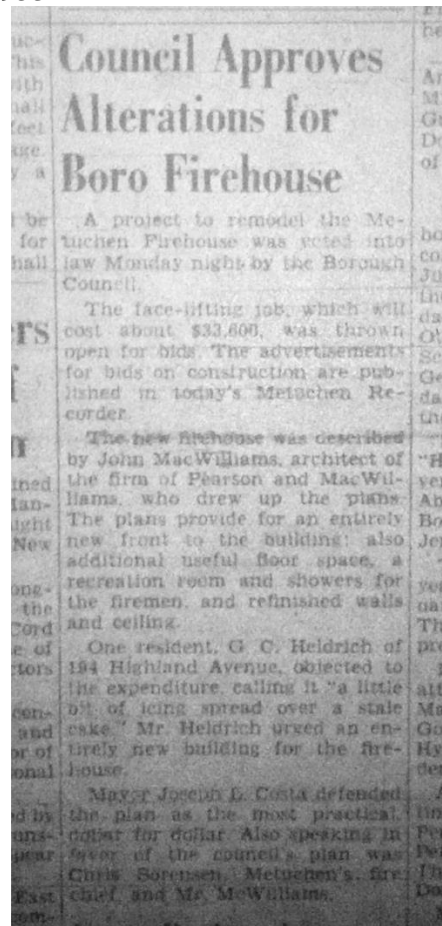


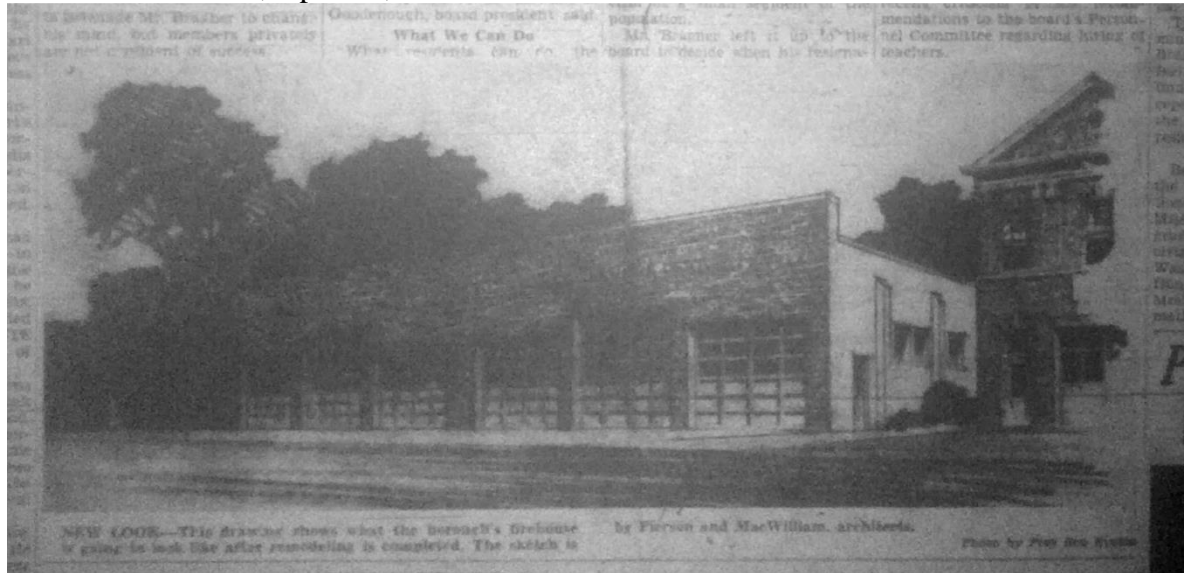
Undated photograph on file in the Metuchen Fire Department archives. The original façade of the building at 503 Middlesex Avenue is in the background behind the ladder truck.

1949 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map (excerpt)



Metuchen Recorder, April 9, 1953





Herb Paul Nicholson, Harry Bel-... renues and store inspections.

COUNCIL ADDS \$14,400 TO COST OF FIREHOUSE

The cost of reconstructing the Borough Garage into a firehouse shot ahead by 40 percent Monday night when the Borough Council voted another \$14,400 for the job.

Monday night's appropriation, added to the \$33,600 the council previously appropriated, adds up to a total cost of \$48,000 for work on the firehouse. A public hearing on the additional expenditure is scheduled for May 18 at 8 p.m. in Borough Hall.

If the ordinance becomes law on May 18, the borough will issue bonds for \$12,500 and appropriate an additional \$900 toward the firehouse work. When bids were received last week, the council found that the \$33,600 it appropriated would not be enough to cover the costs of the work.

Ignorance of the Law

Berg Agency will remove large signs advertising their establishment. The company complied readily. Mr. Romond said, after it was told the signs are illegal.

The only violators who will be prosecuted, Mr. Romond said, are chauffeurs. Many complaints have come in, he said, about people doing illegal door-to-door canvassing. One person even has tried to sell beer door-to-door, despite the fact it is illegal to sell any alcoholic beverage door-to-door anywhere.

But the police cannot be everywhere at once. Mr. Romond pointed out. If residents will phone the Police Department as soon as a solicitor comes to the house the solicitor will be picked up, he promised.

Awards Contract for

examination. Applications are available from the chief of police.

Cops Get Raises

The police and other borough employees will receive raises, the council decided in passing resolutions on final reading.

The ordinance grants all police and most other borough employees \$200 across-the-board salary increases.

Withdraws Low Bid

The council voted to allow Anthony Paul of 557 West Ambury Avenue to withdraw his low bid for electrical work on the remodeling of the Borough Garage.

Mr. Paul explained that he had bid \$1,541 he did not figure the cost of some of the work.

V. R. Tompkins Resigns

Metzger Urges Council Remap Its 'Ill Advised' Plans for Firehouse

The "Firehouse Fiasco" is going to get a complete airing during the next week, Metuchen Democrats have promised.

With Karl E. Metzger, Democratic candidate for mayor, speaking for opponents of a \$48,000 face-lifting for the Borough Garage, the opposition to the plan has been gaining strength all week.

Mr. Metzger's views are described later on in this article. He told The Recorder he and other Democratic candidates will offer more detailed suggestions at tonight's meeting in the American Legion Home on Lake Avenue at 8:30 p.m.

Besides the Democrats, several citizens of no strong party affiliation have voiced opposition to the Borough Council's firehouse plans.

BACKGROUND

Last month, the Borough Council voted \$33,600 toward remodeling the garage into a modern home for Metuchen's fire-fighting equipment. At that time, some opposition was voiced to the idea of spending the money on an old business. One resident called it "putting icing on a stale cake."

When the architect's specifications were put up for bids, the council found that somebody had underestimated how much the work would cost. Every single bid was far higher than the council's appropriation.

One contract was awarded anyway, so that the work could get started while the council prepared to raise some more money. At the last council meeting, an ordinance was introduced to raise an additional \$14,000 in bonds to pay for the firehouse.

MAYOR, ARCHITECT EXPLAIN

How come the 40 percent increase in the cost of the building?

The Recorder tried to find out, but could not get all parties concerned to agree on a definite answer.

The original plans were drawn up by the architecture firm of Pierson and MacWilliam. John MacWilliam told this newspaper last week:

"I don't know where the figure (of \$33,000) came from."

Borough officials told his firm, Mr. MacWilliam said, that they wanted as good a job as possible for a "reasonable" expenditure.

Mayor Joseph L. Costa said the architects were told that the council would not spend more than \$30,000 for work on the building. The rest of the original appropriation was to pay architects' fees and legal fees.

Even at the \$48,000 price, Mayor Costa said, remodeling the building is the best thing Metuchen can do for its firemen. He pointed out that the borough will be getting an entire new front on two buildings, beautifying an "eyesore" in the center of town. The proposed work also will provide heat for both buildings, as well as new floors, walls and ceilings.

Continued on next page

"When this work is done," the mayor said, "we'll have a building we can be proud of—and one that should last 40 to 50 years."

The mayor also pointed out that \$3,500 of the new appropriation is for contingencies and may not be spent. There was no contingency fund in the original appropriation, he said. The bonds will cost the borough a total of about \$4,500 a year for 10 years, Mr. Costa said.

METZGER KILLS HIS PLAN

But the council's plan for the firehouse met stiff opposition from Mr. Metzger.

The secretary to the president of Rutgers University and Democratic candidate for mayor said his party is in favor of improving firehouse facilities. But it considers the proposed \$48,000 expenditure wasteful.

Mr. Metzger said:

"It is perfectly clear that there is a need for improving the firehouse facilities, and the Democrats are glad to note that the Borough Council is trying to fill the need. But we cannot help thinking that the council has been ill advised in its decision to renovate the present structure at a cost of \$48,000—more than 40 percent greater than the originally estimated cost of \$33,600. And incidentally, this 40 percent increase of \$14,000 makes us wonder about the kind of advice which the council has been getting—and accepting. Something or somebody is wrong somewhere.

"Since the cost has risen to \$48,000, we of the Democratic Party believe that there must be a better answer to the problem than rejuvenation of the present structure. Perhaps an entirely new building, erected on borough-owned land in a suitable section of the borough, would cost no more, or at least little more, and in the long run real economy could be effected.

"A modern, up-to-date firehouse would surely be far more desirable than one which at best could only be repaired—and then repaired again after a few more years. If the problem is to be solved, it ought to be solved as permanently as anything of this nature can be.

"We suggest, therefore, that the council study the entire matter again, with a particular view toward learning whether a new and modern firehouse, located appropriately, can be built at the same relative cost as the project which is now being planned. It would even be a good idea to give real consideration to moving all equipment not related to the firehouse proper—such as the garbage trucks and street cleaning equipment—to a remote part of the town, keeping the fire equipment centrally located, of course."

Mr. Metzger said there will be some definite suggestions tonight about locating the proposed new building.

ANOTHER PROPOSAL

Related to Mr. Metzger's proposal is another that has gained favor during the past week.

Proponents of this plan point out that the present firehouse is one of the most valuable pieces of property in town, tax-wise. They point out also that it is not ideally located for a firehouse because the trucks from there have to go through the heaviest traffic on Main Street.

If the building were sold to a commercial firm, this group argues, the taxes from the property would pay a large amount of the money necessary to put up a new firehouse elsewhere. The new firehouse might be built on some property that the borough has taken over for back taxes—property that is yielding no tax income to the borough's treasury.

The arguments will be heard Monday night at 8 p.m. in Borough Hall at the public hearing for the bond issue.

FIREHOUSE 'FIASCO' FADES FROM POLITICAL SCENERY

The "Firehouse Fiasco" did a fast fade-out as a major political issue Monday night.

The all-Republican Borough Council voted to spend an additional \$14,400 for remodeling the firehouse. During the discussion, council members explained some municipal facts of life to Democratic questioners.

Last week the Metuchen Democratic Club took sharp issue with the council's plans to remodel the firehouse at a cost of \$48,000.

They described the job as "half-selling an old shoe," and "putting icing on a stale cake." They also charged that the way the all-Republican Borough Council handled affairs may be illegal, and hinted they might seek an injunction to halt further work on converting the Borough Garage into a new firehouse.

No Objections

Monday night there were no protests and no injunctions. A few members of the audience of 62 persons did ask questions. The councilmen and mayor were ready with answers, with the aid of Aylm Pierson, architect for the firehouse project.

Karl E. Metzger, Democratic candidate for mayor, asked what he called "the obvious question." He wanted to know the "real reason for the increase," from \$33,600 to \$48,000.

Mayor Joseph L. Costa explained that all bids were higher than the amount the council had appropriated. The mayor added that the council deliberately kept its first bond ordinance low in an attempt to get low bids from contractors.

Mr. Pierson added, "It is by no means unusual to have the cost of

the finished products higher than the anticipated cost."

Priscoe Put on Spot

Nicholas Priscoe, Democratic candidate for councilman, asked about the advisability of putting up a new structure instead of remodeling the old building.

Mayor Costa said the cost of a new building would be prohibitive. The mayor then asked Mr. Priscoe how much the last school in Metuchen cost per square foot. Mr. Priscoe, a member of the Board of Education, answered, "Between \$7 and \$10 a square foot."

The mayor informed the council candidate and the rest of the audience that the new school cost \$20.00 a square foot. He pointed out that a school building is comparable construction to a firehouse.

The mayor then lashed out at the questioners, saying:

"Not one of you who has criticized us has taken pains to ask the borough clerk for the plans and specifications."

Mr. Priscoe replied that he did not know he had the right to inspect the plans. Councilman Vincent Utz informed him that every citizen has the right to investigate any borough business.

After everybody in the audience who wanted to say anything had his chance, the council voted on the bond issue. The vote was unanimous.

Firehouse Queries Didn't Take Up All Council's Time; Other Action On 8 Topics Described

Although the firehouse question occupied the major part of Monday night's Borough Council meeting, the council did enact other business.

Here is a brief summary of other council action.

of 49 Carlton Road offered two

Expansion of School, Store Mark Boro's Continued Growth

MORRIS STORES DOUBLES ITS AREA WITH PURCHASE OF MARIO'S RESTAURANT

4 Teachers Hired By School Board

QUARTER-MILLION-DOLLAR SCHOOL WING QUESTION WILL GO TO VOTERS JULY 21



EXPANSION SITE—The new Morris Stores next door will include all the Main Street frontage shown above, from the present store, through the Jewel Shop, to the corner entrance to Mario's.

The owners of Morris Stores, who purchased the site last week, have purchased the site to the Jewel Shop, which is between Morris Stores and the site where Mario's Restaurant is located. The site is owned by the late Mrs. J. H. Zink, who is now in the hands of the estate.

The sale will give the department store a total of 41,000 square feet of space, including the Jewel Shop and the site where Mario's Restaurant is located. The new store will be a modern building, with a large display window, and will be a part of the Morris Stores chain.

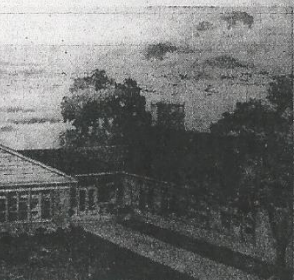
The new store will be a part of the Morris Stores chain, which is one of the largest retail chains in the country. The new store will be a modern building, with a large display window, and will be a part of the Morris Stores chain.



QUARTER-MILLION-DOLLAR SCHOOL WING QUESTION WILL GO TO VOTERS JULY 21

The school board has decided to ask the voters to approve a quarter-million-dollar addition to the school building. The addition will be a new wing, which will be used for classroom space. The school board has decided to ask the voters to approve the addition, which will be a new wing, which will be used for classroom space.

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PREVIEW—Here is an artist's conception of what the Campbell School will look like after the proposed new wing is added. The school will be a modern building, with a large display window, and will be a part of the Campbell School chain.

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Cars Should Go Over PRR, Plan Board Decides

Metuchen's office of the Pennsylvania Railroad, which is the only office of the railroad in the state, has decided to go over the trucks loaded with cars.

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RARITAN ARSENAL C. O. ENDS MILITARY CAREER

Col. Lloyd M. Clatter, commanding officer of the Raritan Arsenal, has ended his military career. He has been promoted to the rank of major general, and will be assigned to a new post.

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Captain Stilo Recalls July Fourth Of 1950—Early in Korean War

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DRAWING CONTEST WINNERS LISTED

The winners of the first weekly drawing of the Best-Driven contest have been announced. The winners are as follows:

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James Grasty Elected Chairman By Borough Red Cross Chapter

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Edgar Clay Sells Shares of Stock

Edgar Clay has sold his shares of stock in the company. The sale was completed, and the proceeds will be used for the company's operations.

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GIRL SCOUT CAMP HAS 80 MEMBERS

The Girl Scout camp at Bluebird Park opened on Monday, and it has 80 members. The camp is a very popular place for girls to go, and it has many activities for them to do.

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LIGHTNING HITS TOWNSHIP HALL

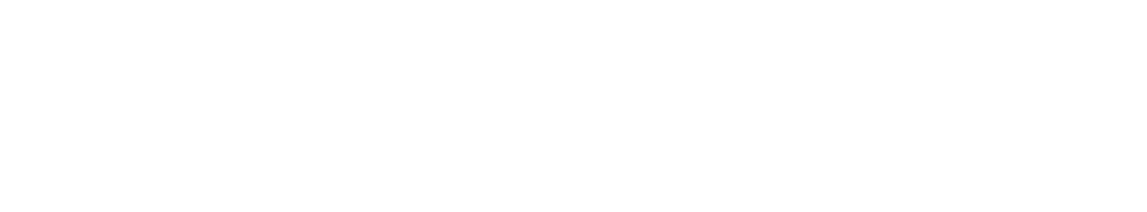
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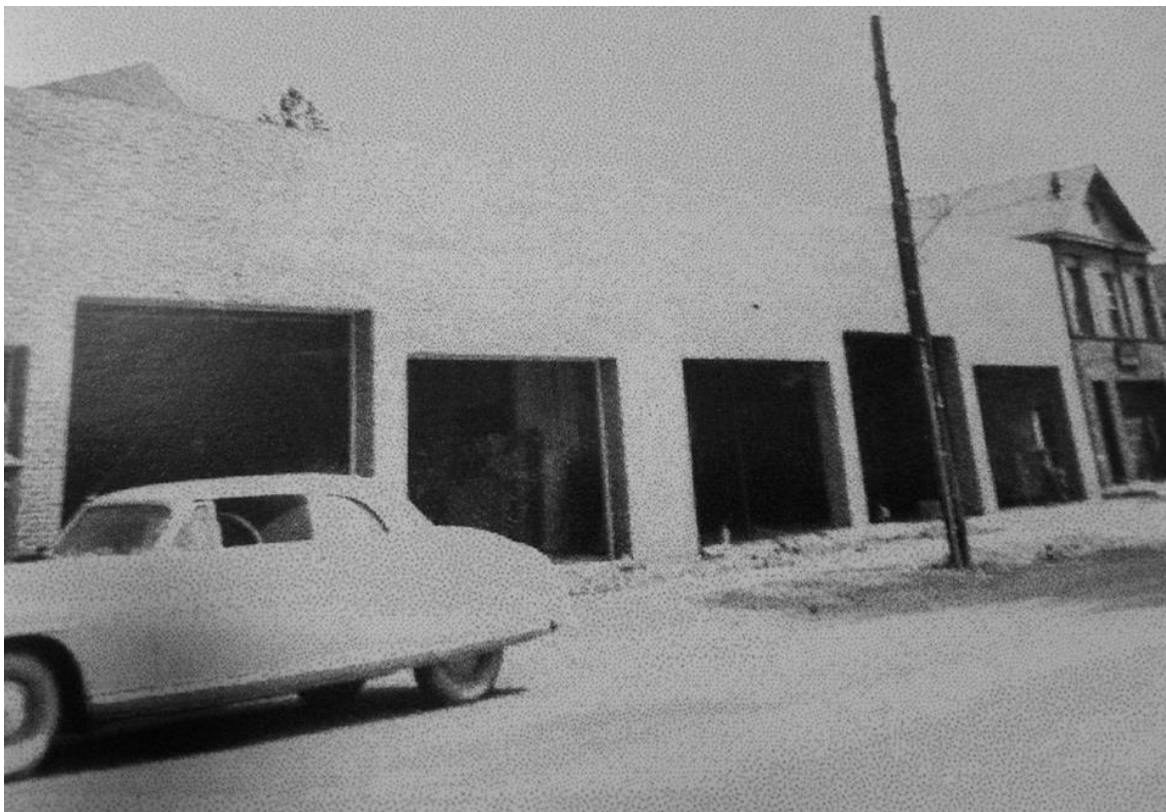
BUILDERS ASKED TO POST BONDS

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Photographs shared with the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society. Undated, but appear to show the municipal garage being renovated into the Metuchen Fire House, therefore ca. 1953



FIRST FIREMEN'S PARADE IN 20 YEARS HONOR METUCHEN'S NEW FIREHOUSE

Uniformed firemen and equipment from a dozen municipalities will take part in the parade Saturday celebrating the dedication of Metuchen's new firehouse.

The parade is scheduled to start down Main Street at 2 p.m. and firemen report it is the first firemen's day celebration in Metuchen in 20 years.

THE METUCHEN First Aid

Squad and its ambulance and firemen from the borough, with engines, will participate with delegations taking part from the following fire companies:

Raritan Engine Company 2 in the Clara Barton section of Raritan Township; Edison Volunteer Fire Company from Menlo Park, and Raritan Engine Company One from Piscataway town, which will be accompanied

by a band; Oak Tree; Iselin; Fords in Woodbridge Township; Garfield Company from Perth Amboy, which will be accompanied by the Perth Amboy Fire Department Drum and Bugle Corps; South Plainfield; North Stelton in Piscataway Township and Highland Park.

THE NEW firehouse was dedicated by borough officials on October 23. Open house was held all day Saturday with several hundred borough residents on hand to inspect the building.

"The firemen are proud of their new firehouse and want to show it off," Fire Chief Chris Sorensen explains. "Borough residents looked it over and gave their approval at Saturday's open house."

The parade will start on Main Street north of Durham Avenue. The paraders will march south on Main Street to New Brunswick Avenue, then west to Lake Avenue, north to Essex Avenue, into Middlesex Avenue and back to the firehouse.

The procession will start at 2 p.m.

Former Mayor Buried Four Days Before Vote

Metuchen this week elected a mayor and mourned the passing of a former chief executive.

Charles H. Erickson, who preceded Joseph L. Costa as mayor of Metuchen, was buried Saturday afternoon in Hillside Cemetery. He died last Wednesday (October 28, 1953).

The Rev. Thomas Bell of the First Baptist Church conducted funeral services Saturday in the Hilpert-Runyon Funeral Home.

Mr. Erickson served two terms as mayor. He left public life be-

In addition to his widow, Mrs. Carrie Erickson, he is survived by a son, Frank H. of Avenel, two brothers, Edward of New Egypt and Harvey of Hornerstown, also one grandson.

The Borough Council Monday night passed a resolution of sympathy at former Mayor Erickson's passing.

November 5, 1953 *Metuchen Recorder*



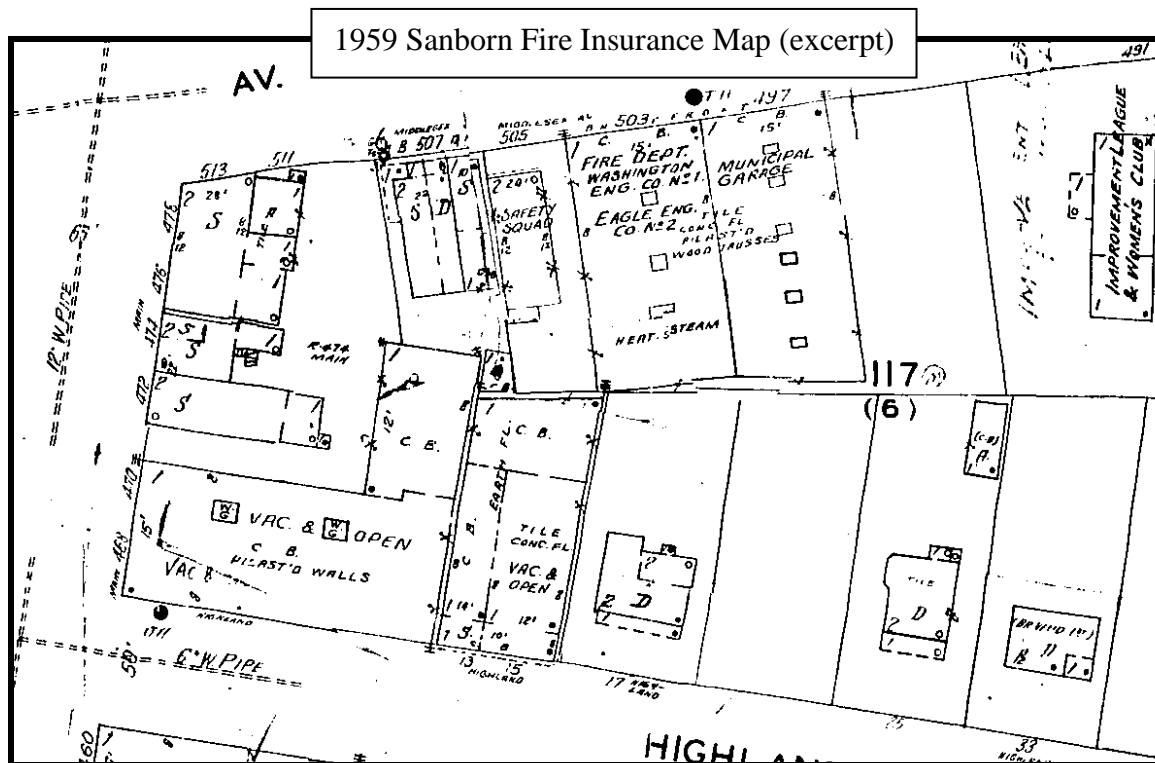
Photograph on file in the Metuchen Fire Department archives showing the November 7, 1953 festivities inside the newly renovated building.



Photograph on file in the Metuchen Fire Department archives showing the November 7, 1953 festivities inside the newly renovated building.



Ca. 1955 photograph on file in the archives of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society.



1972 photograph on file in the archives of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society.



1978 photograph on file in the archives of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society.



2014 Google Earth image of the Metuchen Volunteer Fire Department



Current Tax Map/Location

