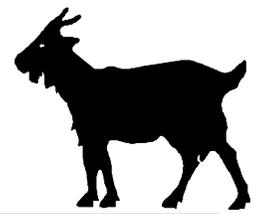


Nannygoats



Vol. 20, Issue 2

Newsletter of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society

Spring/Summer 2022

2022 marks the 100th anniversary of the construction of the Metuchen YMCA on High Street, so we're taking a look back on its creation and the person most responsible for its initial construction – Charles Smith Edgar (1848-1917). Fortunately, this anniversary also coincides with the 'reappearance' of the

Metuchen Recorder issues; nearly all issues from 1911 to 1921 are missing from the public record. From 1922 onward, however, they are virtually complete and available digitally via the Metuchen Public Library. It is a true delight to be able to once again look at issues from exactly one century ago, such as the headline shown here about the opening of the YMCA.

The YMCA movement began in Europe in the 1850s, initially aiming to provide healthy activities for men moving to urban centers during the Industrial Revolution. It has since grown in both scope and size, now serving nearly 65 million people in 125 countries around the globe. At the onset of World War I, the YMCA endeavored to provide invaluable support to both troops and civilians, and it was likely in reflection of that tremendous work that Charles developed a deep appreciation for the work of YMCA and determined to support the establishment of a branch in Metuchen.

Charles was the third generation great grandson of immigrant Thomas Edgar (1681-1759), who arrived on this continent about 1715 from the eastern coast of Scotland. Thomas acquired land in Rahway and began farming, and his descendants, including Edgar's father, Albert (1813-1877), operated farms in the



Metuchen area. Charles was born and grew up on that farm, but soon became interested in mining local deposits after finding a clay bed on his own property. His business grew, with help from his brother Milton, to include mines all along the eastern seaboard and into mainland Georgia and Florida; the town of Edgar,

Florida is named for him.

He even tapped a lucrative oil well on property he held in Texas. He always maintained a primary residence and business in Metuchen, where both he and his wife, Frances Martin Edgar, had deep family roots. When Metuchen

battled Glen Ridge for the right to claim the "Brainy Borough" title, Charles was one of the luminaries to whom they pointed. The Edgar home was on Graham Avenue and their corporate headquarters was first on



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The Metuchen-Edison Historical Society was founded in 1974 with the primary purpose of promoting an interest in and appreciation of the history of the Borough of Metuchen and the Township of Edison.

History In A Minute



Photograph of Eleanor Roosevelt on April 26, 1960 on display at Congregation Neve Shalom, Metuchen.

Local history fans likely already know about Eleanor Roosevelt's visit to Metuchen in 1960, but did you know she wrote about it in her diary? Roosevelt made the trip out from New York City to appear at an evening fundraiser at the Jewish Community Center (now known as Congregation Neve Shalom) at 250 Grove Avenue in Metuchen. Also appearing was Harry Hershfield, the cartoonist, humorist, and radio personality known as the "Jewish Will Rogers." The May 5, 1960 issue of the *Metuchen Recorder* reported on the event, indicating it raised more than \$26,000 for the United Jewish Appeal (that's approximately equivalent to \$250,000 today). Below is an excerpt from her diary on the day of her visit, April 26, 1960. Regular commuters can commiserate!

I could not help being sorry on Tuesday evening of this week for those who commute regularly by car between New Jersey and New York City via the Lincoln Tunnel. I haven't the remotest idea what happened, but the approaches to the tunnel, the tunnel itself and the highway several miles beyond were so jammed with traffic that our car, going to Metuchen, N.J., progressed at a snail's pace.

To cover that part of our route to Metuchen took, I believe, nearly an hour. I was very late, but Harry Hershfield was presiding at the United Jewish Appeal dinner in Metuchen, so I felt sure all would be well. I felt that even if left to carry the whole speech-making assignment alone, Mr. Hershfield would have made the dinner a complete success.

I did arrive in time for the program, however, and I enjoyed the evening and our rapid return trip which enabled Mr. Hershfield to make his midnight appointment on television without difficulty.

More "HISTORY IN A MINUTE" features like this are being contributed to the Metuchen Public Library's twice-monthly email newsletter... sign up to receive them via www.metuchenlibrary.org/newsletter/

Nannygoats

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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 in the Archives

Listed here are just some of the many recent archives 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.

- Cloth banner / flag for the Metuchen Centennial (1900-2000): 100 Years of Tradition and Progress (donated by Grace Shackney).
- Photographs for the 2011 Metuchen Historic Preservation Scavenger Hunt (donated by Becky Seely).
- Paper reprint of a postcard depicting Main Street, Metuchen, NJ, ca. 1915; reprinted in 1998 by W.T. Smith, Metuchen, NJ for Al and Warren Ryan (anonymous donation).
- Panoramic photograph of Nixon Nitration Works Annual Outing, August 16, 1942 (donated by Diane Tuchmatulin).
- Middlesex County Office of Culture and Heritage Oral History Guide, program and biographies for Metuchen High School Hall of Fame Class of 2020 Induction Ceremony, and obituaries for Myron Shevell and Stephen Szajko (donated by Walter Stochel Jr.).
- Boyhood Days in Old Metuchen (2nd ed.) by Dr. Trumbull Marshall, signed copy, 1931 (donated by Metuchen Public Library).
- Paper bag for the Metuchen Craft Shoppe, tablecloth from Bonhamtown School, and flyer and individual house cards for the Metuchen Bicentennial Committee Historic House Tour, 1975 (donated by Debbie Finley).
- Photographs of the Amtrak trains at the Metuchen Railroad Station and diagram of the Port Reading Railroad Yard (donated by David Hutchinson).
- 1930, 1931, 1932, 1937, 1940, and 1942 Metuchen High School Yearbooks and copy of Lincoln-Mercury News, Metuchen, NJ, vol. 4, no. 12, December 1951 (donated by Jim Halpin).
- Roll of "Autographed Copy" labels (donated by Byron Sondergard).
- The Metuchen School News, vol. 2, no. 3, published by the Board of Education of the Borough of Metuchen, November 22, 1946 (donated by Collene Bills-Burok).
- 2021-2022 Metuchen High School planner, 2021 Metuchen High School Marching Band program, business cards for various Metuchen businesses, CD of 2011-2012 Metuchen Scavenger Hunt photographs, brochure for Walk Metuchen, flyer for Re-Elect Democrats Tim Dacey & Pete Cammarano, 2000 Metuchen Centennial Gala Concert program, and 2016 photographs for Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park National Register nomination (donated by Tyreen Reuter).
- BG's 1947 Metuchen Guide to Better Business and Pleasure, Reprint of 1968 Postcard for the 5th Annual Metuchen Country Fair, and 1965 Souvenir Sheet for Metuchen Country Fair Day (donated by Janet Wojcik).



BG's 1947 Metuchen Guide to Better Business and Pleasure, excerpts of which are shown here, is now available on our website in its entirety under our Archives section.

Continued from Page 1

Franklyn Place and then later on Station Place. Surprisingly, all three of these structures still exist.

Charles died unexpectedly in 1917 following an accidental fall at one of his mining properties in Georgia, but was brought back home to be buried at Hillside Cemetery. He had already provided the land and much of the funding for the recently completed school on Brunswick Avenue (Edgar School), the park/wooded land behind the school (which eventually became the Municipal Pool), and provided in his will for supporting funds for the Reformed Church (of which he was an Elder) and the land and funds for a hoped-for YMCA building.

While war in Europe and an international pandemic delayed the onset of the YMCA's construction, when it was opened in 1922, Charles' widow was there at the ceremony to hand over the keys to the newly installed chairman of the board. In the years since, there have been expansions and additions to the original structure, but it still retains much of its iconic façade as designed by John Noble Pierson & Son, Architects (with son Aylin Pierson taking a prominent role in the project).

It can safely be said that for the last century the YMCA has served this community in a variety of forms and continues to be a supportive, vibrant asset. While this work has been done by innumerable volunteers, donors, and staff, the Edgar Family still deserves many thanks for bringing this resource to our community.

Images on Pages 1 and 4, from top to bottom and left to right (from the Grimstead Archives unless noted):

- The September 15, 1922 front page of the *Metuchen Recorder*.
- Portraits of Charles and Frances Edgar from *Americana Illustrated* (1922: Vol.1, No. 3).
- 31 Graham from *Americana Illustrated* (1922: Vol.1, No. 3).
- 24 Franklyn Place in 1932.
- The Edgar Clay Company Building at 10 Station Place.
- The Edgar School on Brunswick Avenue.
- The Edgars in Florida (edgarmineralsinc.com).
- The St. Louis Cardinals pose in front of the main façade in 1936.



Martin D. Jessen, 1926-2022

Dr. Donald T. Akey, a wise and “old fashioned” small town doctor, used to say pneumonia was a gift to the elderly as it allowed for a peaceful passing. At the age of 95, Martin D. Jessen was deserving of that and so much more.

Marty was born in 1926 to Martin Jessen and Hannah Hughes Jessen in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. He graduated from Metuchen High School in 1944 during World War II. All male graduates of that class entered military service.

Martin D. Jessen entered active service in the United States Naval Reserves on June 23, 1944, at the age of 17. He served in the Pacific during and post-World War II, as quartermaster aboard the destroyer escort USS Albert T. Harris from June 21, 1945 to June 5, 1946. Martin D. Jessen earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in civil engineering from Rutgers University in 1950.

In April 1951, he graduated from the U.S. Naval Salvage and Diving School, as a qualified diver to 150 feet and Salvage Officer. Following salvage school, during the Korean War, Lieutenant (j.g.) Jessen was the Diving and Salvage Officer, Morale Officer, Medical Officer, Gunnery Officer, and Navigator aboard the salvage ship USS Conserver. In 1952, he was the First Lieutenant and the Diving and Salvage Officer aboard the salvage ship USS Current serving in the Pacific.

Always a great raconteur, Martin D. Jessen is the author of *Marty's Musings: Tales of the Great Depression, World War II, the Korean War, and New Jersey*. Former Governor James Florio, both a neighbor and friend, wrote the foreword and described his stunning ability to “glean philosophical gems out of otherwise normal life experience.”

In civilian life, he owned and operated - for over 30 years - an excavating business, Arnolt Bros. Inc.; The Diligent Diggers of Dignified Dirt,

in addition to being president of Victorian Restoration Rentals, Inc. Marty was a Delaware and Raritan Canal Commissioner for over 35 years.

Metuchen Savings Bank celebrated his 60 years of service on the board of directors in 2018. Over the years, he has given his time, wisdom, and leadership skills to various government, charitable, and civic organizations. Marty was a past president and longtime member of the Rotary Club of Metuchen, served on the Metuchen Planning Board, and was a longtime member and deacon at the Metuchen Reformed Church.

In 1964, he was a founding member of the Metuchen Country Fair Committee and along with the Metuchen Area Chamber of Commerce, as chairman, ran it for decades. For his outstanding contributions to local and national YMCA's and the community, the YMCA of Metuchen, Edison, Woodbridge, and South Amboy honored him as the "Man of the Century."

He is survived by his wife of 71 years, Barbara Bruner Jessen, his daughter Nancy Jessen, and son Martin A. Jessen and his wife Linda; three grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Donations in his memory may be made to the YMCA of MEWSA at 483 Middlesex Avenue in Metuchen.



The Metuchen-Edison Historical Society is extremely grateful for Mr. Jessen's – and indeed his entire family's – support since our founding in 1974. His life is an example how much impact a person can have on the character of a community. The image at the right is from 1989 of Mr. Jessen with a portrait of Charles S. Edgar. The text here is from his obituary, reprinted with kind permission from the Jessen family.



Preservation Update: *Short Hills Battlefield*

In April 2022, it was announced that Middlesex County will receive a \$1,089,000 grant from the American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP) towards the purchase 7.49 acres of land in Edison to preserve a portion of the site of the Battle of the Short Hills (also known as Metuchen Meeting House Battle). The property is located on Woodland Avenue, next to the Plainfield Country Club, and is adjacent to a 13-acre parcel for which the County received a \$1,600,000 ABPP grant in 2020. With this latest acquisition, the preserved portion of the Battle of the Short Hills battlefield now totals 135 acres.

In 2010, the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society received a grant from the ABPP to do a study to determine the location of the Battle of the Short Hills, and then nominate the site for the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district. The study determined the main battle took place in the hills north of Oak Tree Road



along Woodland Avenue, and because of its significance to American history, the historic district was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2015.

Without the 2010 study and leadership from the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society (notably by Director Walter R. Stochel, Jr.), these later preservation grants (totaling \$2,689,000) would have not been available to Middlesex County. Thank you to Middlesex County for making the effort to apply for these funds, and recognizing this important historic site.

More information about the battle and site is available on the Society's website.

Above: Rare photograph of the June 26, 1777 battle. 😊

RECAP OF RECENT EVENTS

The Society's Annual Meeting was held at the Edison First Aid Squad on New Dover Road in mid-March. Following a short business meeting and election of officers, a program about the History of Radio in New Jersey was presented by NJ Antique Radio Club. The club is affiliated with InfoAge Science & History Museums of Wall, New Jersey. Many thanks to the presenters and Society Director Scott Zederbaum for arranging the program and hosting the meeting.

A Spring Cleanup of the Metuchen Colonial Cemetery on Main Street in Metuchen took place at the end of April, thanks again to the organization of volunteer Charlie Leckenby. The Borough of Metuchen, which owns the property, removed a dead tree prior to the cleanup and removed the gathered leaves, debris, and branches afterwards. About two dozen volunteers came and gave time during the course of the day, some learning how to properly clean the historic stones. Look for a cleanup scheduled for the Fall, and potentially some volunteer opportunities at the site during the Summer.

Middlesex County History Day was held at East Jersey Old Town in mid-May, and the Society was once again delighted to participate and host a table along with more than twenty fellow history organizations. The site-wide celebration was filled with demonstrations, displays, performances, and other family-friendly activities. East Jersey Old Town is operated by Middlesex County and is located 1050 River Road in Piscataway and can be visited year-round.



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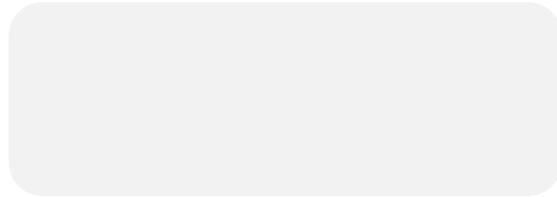
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Membership dues provide the primary support for the work of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society. You can help "Save the Past for the Future" by joining - or renewing – your annual membership. All members receive mailed copies of our newsletter, *Nannygoats*, and advance notice of special events and programs.

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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.



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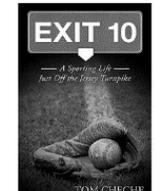
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