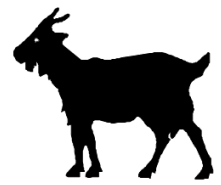




Nannygoats



Vol. 22, Issue 3

Newsletter of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society

Summer/Fall 2024

The Society held its first ever Piscatawaytown History Day this past June, as part of our 50th Anniversary Celebration year. The event featured displays and photographs at the Edison First Aid Squad #1 and a walking tour was planned. Unfortunately, extreme heat advisories were issued on the day of the event, so we decided to forego the walking tour portion of the event in favor of a date later this Fall. While we work on rescheduling, please enjoy the summary history (below) and self-guided tour (on Page 4), found in the Piscatawaytown neighborhood section of "A Guide to Edison Township; Its History & Community Resources." This 100-page book, available through the Society for only \$5, was a project of The Center for Community Renewal (2004), principally written by April Cormaci and Ian Durand. At the end you will also find a link and QR code to access an online version of the tour that you may use to take your own self-guided tour.

Piscatawaytown is the area around the intersection of Plainfield and Woodbridge Avenues, and dates from the 17th century. In Colonial times, it was the main settlement of Piscataway Township. Located on high ground above the Raritan River, it was safe from floods yet had access to the major "highway" of the time. In 1681, a group of settlers established a ferry across the river to New Brunswick near the present-day Albany Street bridge to facilitate travel south of the Raritan River. The ferry was replaced by a bridge in 1795. Well into the 19th century, there were many sizable farms in the area.

When Somerset County was created out of Middlesex County in 1683, Piscatawaytown became the seat of the court for both counties. In 1685, every inhabitant of Piscatawaytown agreed to pay nine pence in silver to buy nails to erect a Town House close to where St. James Episcopal Church now stands. In 1702, New Jersey became a united royal colony under the Governor of New York, with Perth Amboy as one of its capitals. King Georges Post Road, built to carry mail between Perth Amboy and New Brunswick, ran through the middle of Piscatawaytown. Now called Woodbridge Avenue, elsewhere it is called Old Post Road and King Georges Post Road. George Washington

traveled the road to New York for his inauguration in 1789.

In December 1776, Washington and the Continental Army retreated through this area on the way to Pennsylvania. The British used the Commons and Burial Ground behind St. James Church as a camp, and the 42nd Royal

Highland Regiment used St. James Church as a barracks and hospital during the winter and spring of 1776-1777. Two engagements were fought with American forces in February and March. On May 10, 1777, 1,500 Americans attacked. After British reinforcements were brought in, the Americans were pushed back to the Metuchen Meeting House, 4 miles away, losing 76 men.

A 1923 booklet about Raritan Township notes that: "Silver Lake, with the Raritan River at

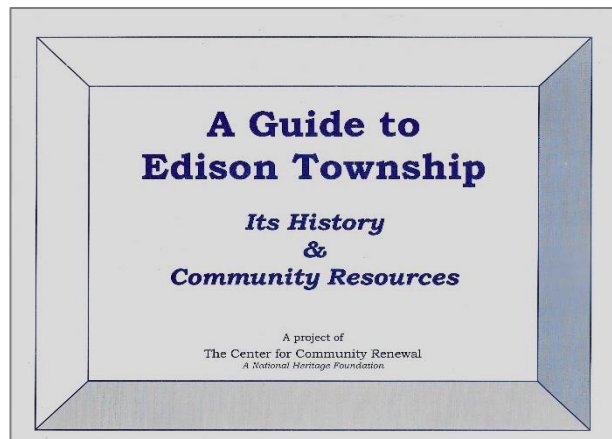
Piscatawaytown is one of

the picturesque streams well stocked with fish and a favorite point for campers in the summer, surrounded by a dense growth of trees, many of them fine ones of a century or more of growth."

The neighborhood behind St. James Church is called Old Germantown, reflecting one of the many ethnic groups that make up Edison.

Piscatawaytown served as the center of government for Raritan Township and, later, for Edison Township until the Edison Municipal Complex in Lincoln Park was dedicated in 1981.

Piscatawaytown History & Tour



Continued on Page 4

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.

50th Anniversary Year Celebration Continues!



A: One of the many displays at Piscatawaytown History Day on June 23. **B:** Battle of the Short Hills Commemoration on June 26. **C:** Historic Cemeteries program with Dr. Richard Veit at the Metuchen Elks on June 30. **D:** The *Mindehoyen*, or Viking Burial Mound-style mausoleum, was toured as part of the field trip to the Danish Home Museum & Cultural Center on August 11.

Nannygoats

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P.O. Box 61, Metuchen, NJ 08840

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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.
info@metuchen-edisonhistsoc.org

NannyKids Released

A new issue of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society's occasional newsletter for Kids, *NannyKids*, has been released. You can download the issue from our website. This issue, the 9th released to date, features Metuchen Schools, a coloring page, jokes, fun facts, and more.



Dr. Opal Lee Visits Edison

Dr. Opal Lee, known nationally as the "Grandmother of Juneteenth" for her efforts to make Juneteenth a federally recognized holiday, made her first visit to New Jersey in June. She is shown here (with the microphone) at the Metuchen-Edison-Piscataway Area Branch NAACP's Juneteenth Freedom Day, which took place at the Edison Job Corps, on June 8, 2024.



New in the Archives

Listed here are just *some* of our 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.

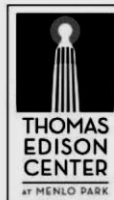
- Digital photograph of Bruno's Nursery located along Main Street, Metuchen taken by Brian Breen in the early 1990s (donated by Brian Breen via Facebook)
- Small carved wooden road map of Clara Barton created by Anthony White (donated by Ron Loffler)
- Edison political materials collected by Jim Metz including political buttons, brochures, flyers, bumper stickers, and annual programs for the Edison Democrats; commemorative plate for the Grace Reformed Church in Bonhamtown; 1969 program for the Edison Township Fire Fighters Association Dance and Buffet; etc. (donated by Pat Metz)
- Candle cup holders made by the Metuchen Chamber of Commerce to commemorate 100 Years of Metuchen & the Old Franklin Schoolhouse (donated by Dolores Hall)
- 1921 Middlesex County School certificate for Estelle Guest of Metuchen; 1929 Exempt Fireman certificate for Elias Guest of the Metuchen Fire Department; original copy of The Metuchen Recorder for January 13, 1900; 1948 photograph of workers of the J.S. Turner White Metal Company for their 50th Anniversary) in Highland Park; 1952 program for the Second Annual Variety Show and Dance at School No. 3 in Nixon presented by Panthers Athletic Association; and various scrapbook pages containing early 20th-century photographs of the Guest family in Metuchen (donated by Richard Governale)
- Digital photograph of a snow day at 30 Carson Avenue, Metuchen in the late 1940s (donated by Virginia Pape Crowley via Facebook)
- Digital scans of a panoramic photograph of the 7th Annual Clam Bake (Vic Pederson Ass'n) at the Pines, Metuchen, August 27, 1939 (donated by Richard Governale)
- Reports for the U.S. Army Requisition of the Raritan Arsenal Reservation, dated February 6, 1919 (donated by Jeff Kraeft from Fox & Foxx)
- Passbooks, receipts, and internal transfer form from the Metuchen Savings Bank, 1996-2012 (donated by Sondra Flite)
- 1998 New Jersey General Assembly Resolution, 2004 Metuchen Proclamation, and newspaper articles regarding former Metuchen librarian Barbara Jobin; color photograph of the Metuchen Public Library, ca. 2000s;

and color painting of Franklin School by Ed Wetzel (donated by Stephen Jobin)

- Postal Card with handwritten note by Metuchen resident Ezra M. Hunt, 4/29/1880 (donated by Byron Sondergard)

JOHN HAWKEN (1940-2024)

John C. Hawken was born in Bournemouth, England, and lived in Surrey for many years before moving his family to the United States in 1979. He was an accomplished musician, performing with the Nashville Teens, Renaissance, Third World War, Vinegar Joe, Illusion, and the Strawbs, the last of which garnered him a gold record for Hero & Heroine released in 1974. He toured internationally from 1962-1979 with various rock bands and was once quoted as saying "I don't feel the need to talk about it much because I was there, I lived it." He passed away peacefully at his home in Metuchen, where he'd lived since 1989, on May 15.



Public Hours
Thur., Fri., Sat.
10 am – 4 pm

37 Christie
Edison, NJ

The **Thomas Edison Center** museum offers guided tours to individuals, families, corporations, scout programs, schools, summer camps, and senior groups.

We book private tours for groups of 12 or more on other days in advance when available.

Visit our website for more information about other programs, volunteering, memberships, and much more.

www.menloparkmuseum.org
732-549-3299

THE BOROUGH IMPROVEMENT LEAGUE OF METUCHEN



**ALL-VOLUNTEER, 501(c)3 NON-PROFIT CHARITY
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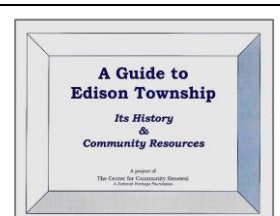
1. Col. John Dunham Estate
2. Site of Edison's Portland Cement Plant
3. E.G. Gough House
4. Forman Martin Home
5. Haven Village Neighborhood
6. Lindeneau
7. Site of Martin's Dock
8. Site of Meeting House
9. Morris Goodkind Legacy (not shown)
10. Old Municipal Building
11. Old Piscatawaytown School
12. Site of Old Raritan Township Library
13. Piscatawaytown Burial Ground
14. Player Avenue
15. Blossom Street Park
16. Edison Boat Basin
17. Ellmyer Park
18. Francis D'Aquila Memorial Field
19. Old Post Park
20. Raritan River Ravine
21. Silver Lake
22. Thomas Swales Park/Edison Commons
23. Rescue Squad Memorial
24. American Legion Father & Son Post 435
25. Edison Greenways Group (not shown)
26. Italian-American Club
27. Raritan River Boat Club
28. St. Theresa CYO
29. VFW Post 3117
30. Abundant Life Christian Academy
31. Lindeneau School
32. New Friends Child Care & Preschool
33. Rabbi Jacob Joseph School
34. Edison First Aid Squad No. 1
35. Edison-Nixon Post Office
36. Edison Police Auxiliary
37. Edison Township Recycle Center
38. John Basilone Memorial Bridge
39. Raritan Engine Co. No. 1
40. Abundant Life Christian Center
41. Church of the Nazarene



42. Guardian Angels Roman Catholic Church
43. St. James Episcopal Church
44. St. Theresa of the Infant Jesus Roman Catholic Church
45. Temple Beth-El



Scan the code to access a self-guided tour of Piscatawaytown, as keyed to "A Guide to Edison Township." Addresses, photos, and descriptions are all included online! Unable to scan? Access the link on the Walking Tours section of our website.



Want to learn more about the TEN neighborhoods featured in "A Guide to Edison Township"? Visit the Local History Store on our website to order this book (\$5) online or via check. Free local delivery!

Metuchen's Musical History: Condit "Connie" Atkinson

by Tyreen A. Reuter

Condit Sniffen Atkinson, Jr. (1902-1968) was Metuchen Schools' first Music and Band Director, and throughout his long career in music and musical education he was an untiring mentor to fellow musicians and students.

Known as "Connie," he was born in 1902 to Condit and Mary Jane Atkinson and grew up in Highland Park. He attended Rutgers University, New Jersey Law School, and graduated from the Juilliard School of Music in New York City. His father, Condit Atkinson, Sr. was editor and publisher of a New Brunswick newspaper in the late 1890s, worked as a Congressional Aide, managed the New Brunswick Chamber of Commerce, and served as the District Clerk for the Highland Park Board of Education, along with a slew of volunteer roles. His passion for music, which began with performing in his church choir in Spotswood and blossomed from there, was something he passed down to his son along with an ethic of hard work and service to the community.

As a young man during the 1920s and 1930s, Atkinson became a household name in New Jersey – and on the entire East Coast – as the leader of "Connie's Orchestra." He was renowned for his saxophone playing, amongst many other instruments, and for his ability to attract and lead talented musicians. For five years straight, he and his band were the featured act at Asbury Park's Berkeley Carteret Hotel, a major entertainment destination at the time. He was so extremely well-known, with literally thousands of news stories and advertisements appearing in the press, that the mention of his name was used as a major advertising draw for events, charity balls for 3000, etc. Often, in the ubiquitous bridal announcements of the day, if a groom had played with Atkinson during his musical career, this would be mentioned in the headline along with a photo of the bride.

He did several national tours with his orchestra and a smaller ensemble, notably in the southeastern United States, and enjoyed wide popular appeal in North Carolina and Louisiana. Internationally, he toured Europe and South America.

Atkinson initially served as the music director in Highland Park before coming to Metuchen in 1945 to lead a serious music program and create a marching band. American society was beginning to emerge from the difficult times of World War II, therefore various

programs for youth were resuming. Highland Park had a full music program under Atkinson and would bring them out at their football games against Metuchen. Nearby Scotch Plains began their own music program, with appearances at football games as well, leading to Metuchen's Booster

Clubs looking on with such envy that they began strongly advocating for their own Metuchen program. Wanting the best, Metuchen recruited and was able to attract Atkinson. At this time, the Franklin High School was on Middlesex Avenue, and he was known to be concerned with providing proper musical instruction space and growing the program. And, grow the program he did! By the Fall of 1945, there was a vigorous and energetic program and Marching Band.

When a terrible fire took place at the Franklin High School in 1957, Atkinson was reportedly on scene and working to save the collection of instruments in the school. During the construction of the new high school building on Grove Avenue, he is believed to have had major input into the creation of proper music instruction and performance facilities.

While Atkinson always lived in Highland Park, and even served on their Borough Council, his dedication to Metuchen students and their musical education was constant and unwavering, and extended beyond the band room.

Several students who went on to wider success after Metuchen High School – even those not in the field of music – have credited Atkinson with inspiring them. One young man who accepted a national position with the NAACP said in the local press that it was the hard work and dedication learned in his music classes with Atkinson that guided him to focus on and believe in his own future.

Although not a Metuchen student, Homer R. Mensch, who later collaborated and/or worked with Nina Simone, Isaac Stern, Frank Sinatra, Barbra Streisand, Leonard Bernstein, Gloria Estefan, and others, was also mentored and inspired by Atkinson.



Mensch, later a teacher at Juilliard and the Manhattan School of music, in turn became a mentor himself to several students who went on to their own notable careers in music.

Another young musician, with whom Atkinson became acquainted through his son, was the famous Bill Evans (1929-1980), who eventually became known as one of, if not the, best Jazz pianists of all time. Atkinson saw a great deal of talent in Evans, from North Plainfield, and secured a scholarship for him to Southeastern College in Louisiana. Evans went on to lead his own trio for many years and often played with luminaries such as Miles Davis. Davis described Evans as one of his favorite musicians and credited Evans, who played with him and John Coltrane on the best selling Jazz record of all time, *Kind of Blue*, with bringing him new musical influences.

Beyond supporting individual musical artists, Atkinson sought to broaden the access to music programs, encourage and foster young talent, and support the infrastructure around music education. While at Metuchen High School, he founded the Middlesex County Band School, which aimed to provide free or low-cost musical instruction to youth from around the county. Over the many years of its existence, hundreds of students and families participated, many for multiple successive years. His wife Marie and son – Condit Atkinson III (1928-2009), who was later a notable musician in his own right and director of the

Highland Park Schools music programs – also taught. He was also a leader in the National and NJ Music Educators associations and a member and officer of Local 204 Union of the American Federation of Musicians.

Atkinson retired from the Metuchen Schools in 1963/5, leaving a strong program to his successor. Despite retiring, he continued to volunteer his time – with his father and son – leading music workshops for students. He died in 1968 and was buried in Spotswood.

While not generally well-known now, in his time Atkinson was incredibly renowned for his musical talent, teaching ability, and unique aptitude for fostering students. He understood and practiced the power of music to inspire success and focused on broadening access to music education rather than shining the star of his own career. He had a profound impact on the thousands of students with whom he came into contact during his teaching career, instilling a sense of hard work and passion. He saw beyond the limitations of someone's background, which during his time included race, gender, class, and ethnicity – and by doing so not only led by example but created a wider openness to working together and, in turn, teaching others.

To honor Atkinson, I nominated him to the Metuchen High School Hall of Fame this past April as a "Distinguished Faculty." Unfortunately the nomination was not successful, but I will try again next time!

Metuchen High School Band and Twirlers Club



For the first time in Metuchen High School, an active program of music for children has been undertaken, under the direction of Connie Atkinson, new member of the faculty this year, and a high school band, twirlers' club and orchestra have already been formed. Pictured above are members of the band and twirlers club, which performed at the high school football games and has greatly aided in increasing interest in school activities. The group includes, from left to right:

Top row: Jean Carrolo, Fatsy Harhan, Bonnie Drysdale, Paul Nielsen, Jesse Devore, Ernest Pape, William Steo, Nicholas Tate, Jerry Whitman, Doris Riddle, Leroy Tate, Jennie Bunker, Michael Sawczyk, Doroyth Carrolo, Betty Runyon, Jean Schuster.

Middle row: Joyce Christoferson, Gene Terull, Barbara Brann, Arthur Bisogno, Beverly Drake, Connie Atkinson, band director, Louis Popovitch, Nancy Ayres, Carol Mook, Ann Nielsen, Eleanor Nelson.

Front row: Sue Letson, Lester Reggity, Betty Cartwright, Jerry Gibbs, Betty Simms, Betty Coffey, Mary Ann De Andrea, drum major, Franklin Bein, Florence Diering, Frances Fielding, May Farrington, Helen Christensen, Austin Lewis, Tom Dover, Jean Roxbury, Jean Thompson, Janice Misel, Dolores Kinder, Betty Ann Zyfers, Marilyn Sheridan.

THE SUNDAY TIMES, NEW BRUNSWICK, N. J., SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16, 1945.

Many Thanks to our Newsletter Supporters

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Nannygoats? Contact us at
metuchenedisonhistory@gmail.com**

Join Us!

If you haven't already, please consider joining the Society as a dues-paying Member... this income provides the primary support for everything we do and allows us to "Save the Past for the Future." Visit our website or scan the code below.



Facebook Group

Our active, informative, and carefully moderated Facebook group is loaded with images and historical miscellany. Search us on Facebook or scan below.



View Our YouTube Channel!

Check out our growing video collection on our dedicated YouTube channel. Search for us or our username [@metuchenedisonhistoricals1744](https://www.youtube.com/user/metuchenedisonhistoricals1744).

Upcoming Events

Our full roster of events for our 50th Anniversary Year continues with the following events. For more details, see our Facebook Group or Website, as some are Members Only and/or require registration.

Presbyterian Cemetery Tour – September 22

1st Presbyterian Church Cemetery, 11:00 a.m.

History of Middlesex County – October 13

Mt. Zion Masonic Lodge, 3:00 p.m.

Ayers-Allen House Open House – October 27

Ca. 1740 private residence, 2:00 p.m.

Colonial Cemetery Fall Cleanup – November 10

Service Hours Welcome! 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

50th Anniversary Gala Celebration – December 15

More details coming soon!

www.metuchen-edisonhistsoc.org

Missed an issue of our newsletter? All back issues of *Nannygoats* are available on our website at www.metuchen-edisonhistsoc.org