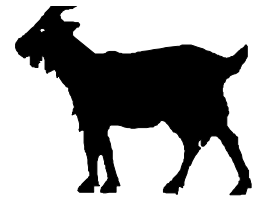


# Nannygoats



Vol. 3 Issue 2

Newsletter of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society

Spring 2005

## St. Luke's Episcopal Church

by Tyreen A. Reuter

*The following is dedicated to the memory of David Reece Gaskill, a long-time member and trustee of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society, who passed away suddenly on February 25, 2005. Dave was also well-known for his commitment to St. Luke's, and the Society has made a donation in his honor to the church's preservation fund.*

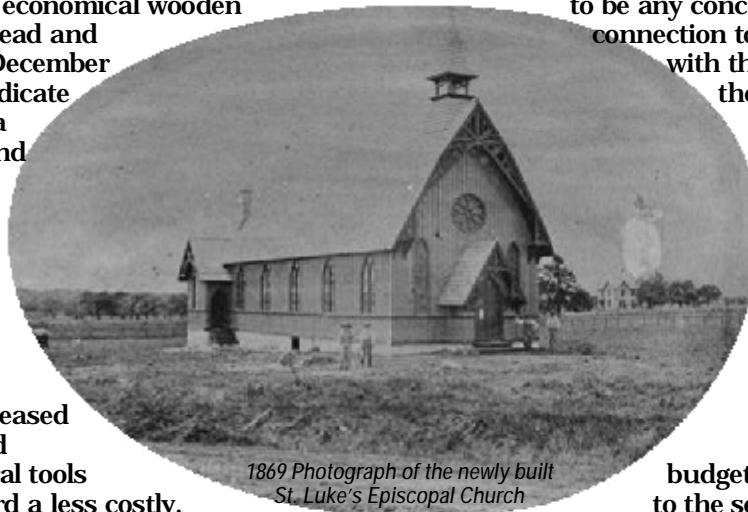
### Origins of St. Luke's

Until the mid-nineteenth century, local Episcopal residents attended St. Paul's Church in Rahway, nearly seven miles away, as the only permanent religious building in the village of Metuchen was the First Presbyterian Church on Woodbridge Avenue. But in the mid-1860s, Rahway's Reverend Dr. Abercrombie organized local meetings in Metuchen residents' homes and soon after the group began planning the construction of their own church. They selected the site on Middlesex Avenue and raised \$4000 with the hopes of building a brownstone structure with flying buttresses. However, a more economical wooden construction was chosen instead and the cornerstone was laid on December 12, 1868. Church records indicate that the head carpenter was a "Mr. Wright" and that Reverend Alfred Goldsborough served as the first rector. Completed in the summer of 1869, St. Luke's Episcopal Church was built in the Carpenter Gothic (or Rural Gothic) style which became popular in the 1860s, in part due to the increased affordability of steam powered woodworking and architectural tools that made jig sawn bargeboard a less costly, yet still attractive, alternative to stone. A combination of Gothic and Italianate, the Carpenter Gothic style is found in both rural and residential areas of the northeast.

### Associations with Upjohn

Based on its architectural style and date of construction, St. Luke's has often been attributed to the architect Richard Upjohn (1802-1878). At 27 years of age, Upjohn emigrated from England to America with his family, initially settling in New Bedford, Massachusetts but later moving to Boston, where he worked for a leading architect of the time, Alexander Parris. In 1839, he relocated to New York City and obtained the commission for the now famous Trinity Church at the corner of Broadway and Wall Street in lower Manhattan. He reportedly based his designs for this brownstone Gothic Revival masterpiece on a combination of 14th-century prototypes and 1830s Gothic architecture publications. In part due to the success of Trinity Church, Upjohn became the most prominent ecclesiastical architect of his time, and as a devout Episcopalian, it is not strange to find that the vast majority of his work was for Episcopalian

churches, chapels, parsonages, and schools. According to Everard Upjohn, the architect's great-grandson and an Assistant Professor of Fine Arts at Columbia University, this work led him to publish a book of plans and specifications, entitled *Upjohn's Rural Architecture*, in 1852 "to satisfy parishes who were too poor to afford even the most modest architect's fee or too distant to permit personal attention." In 1853, after receiving further requests for his services from small churches, Richard Upjohn published additional designs in *A Book of Plans for Churches and Parsonages*. Although there doesn't appear to be any concrete evidence to provide a direct connection to Upjohn himself being involved with the construction of St. Luke's, at the very least its design originated from his publications or the builder's exposure to them. St. Luke's Carpenter Gothic architectural style – its materials, ornamentation, layout and proportions, and use of varnished wood – immediately call to mind Upjohn's work, as does the fact that it was built for the Episcopalian denomination. The Metuchen congregation's



1869 Photograph of the newly built St. Luke's Episcopal Church

budgetary concerns may have also led to the selection of an Upjohn design, as according to his 1852 book, only \$3000 was needed to build one of his "cheap but still substantial buildings." Therefore, the \$4000 raised by the building committee would have been sufficient for one of these designs, but probably wouldn't have covered the originally hoped for stone edifice with flying buttresses.

### A Who's Who of Early Parishioners

After 1876, when Thomas A. Edison moved to nearby Menlo Park, many of St. Luke's members became associated with the inventor in some form or another. In fact, the first house ever to be wired for electricity belonged to a St. Luke's parishioner, C.B. Elliott. At the turn of the century, Metuchen acquired the title of "Brainy Borough" due to the numerous resident literary and intellectual figures, many of whom were members: Henry Mills Alden, the managing editor of *Harper's Weekly* for 50 years and often referred to as the "Dean of American Magazine Writers," was a founding member and fifty-year Vestryman. Through his professional associations he acquired a number of famous friends, such as Mark Twain

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 of Edison Township.

and William Dean Howells, both of whom were known to have visited St. Luke's - celebrated visitors also included Helen Keller, Ogden Nash, and Joseph Pulitzer. Other notable members of the church included the poet Joyce Kilmer, *New York World* Business Manager E. Holden Spear, and George Silzer, who became Governor of New Jersey in 1923. Many of the weddings that took place in St. Luke's were regarded as newsworthy enough to be written about in the New York City papers. Governor Silzer (also a St. Luke's Vestryman) was married there, as was Joyce Kilmer - to Henry Mills Alden's stepdaughter. Church records indicate that some of Metuchen's most influential local families were members of St. Luke's and its various committees. It is not coincidental, then, that many of the church's members were also associated with organizations such as the Metuchen Club and upper-class leisure activities often seemed to have dominated the congregation's social life. The Metuchen Club provided teas, tennis, and a host of social events, and was located south of the church on Middlesex Avenue, in the building now owned by the Masonic Lodge. St. Luke's itself was adjacent to a golf course. According to a 1968 church history,

"Parishioners with a view to both God and golf were not adverse to parking their clubs, attending the early service, and then proceeding to drive on to the third hole."

Some of the more prominent members were also highly involved in improvement projects at St. Luke's: Governor Silzer is known to have led well-funded efforts, and another well-known parishioner, Mary Stanahan Hart Pattison, was in charge of the restoration of the stained-glass windows after a 1906 hail storm. A distinguished domestic engineer, she was also extremely active in the women's suffrage movement and instrumental in saving the Old Franklin School, also on Middlesex Avenue.



Sketch from *Upjohn's Rural Architecture*, 1852.



Ca. 1930 Grimstead photograph of the 1893 Parish House (at left) and St. Luke's Episcopal Church

### St. Luke's Today

The leadership of St. Luke's Episcopal Church deeply appreciates and values the building's historic and architectural significance, as evidenced by the careful maintenance of the interior and the extensive recent exterior restoration. According to the church's history chairman the church is currently looking into period-appropriate exterior illumination that will complement the church's architectural features, and through the efforts of Mrs. Delphine Gaskill, is also investigating historically appropriate landscaping. In addition, they are in the process of identifying and properly preserving all of the historical documentation in the church's archives, and ensuring that its collection of liturgical materials are also being properly conserved.

### Marion Stone Passes Away

Marion Crouse Stone, 82, a past president and Honorary Member of the Society, passed away on March 28, 2005. Formerly of Perth Amboy, Marion lived in Edison since 1963. A registered nurse, she was a 1942 graduate of the New Jersey College For Women and received her nursing degree from Yale University in 1944. In addition to her involvement with the Society, she was a member of the Metuchen Garden Club, the Quiet Hour Club, the Reformed Church of Metuchen, the Kearny Cottage Association, and the Proprietary House Association. Marion was highly involved with local history research and historic preservation, and will be well remembered and missed by all who knew her.

Direct on-line access to Historical Society information, newsletters, and historic photos:  
[www.metuchen-edisonhistsoc.org](http://www.metuchen-edisonhistsoc.org)

### Oral History News

by Nancy Zerbe

The Metuchen-Edison Historical Society is in its second year of transcribing our oral history collection. The transcriptions allow more of the public to "listen" to the 1970s interviews of Metuchen area residents. Funding in part has been provided by the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission/Board of Chosen Freeholders, and the New Jersey Historical Commission, a Division of the Department of State.

Last year, eighteen interviews were transcribed. This year so far, transcriptions have been prepared for the following interviewees: Elsie Potter, Alberta Ross, Morris Zuts, Joe Fater, Chief Joseph Perrino, Captain Charles Reeder, and Marty Jessen.

The value of oral histories is that they provide an insight into the everyday, human aspect of living and working in a community. Local residents will find the stories told both interesting and informative. In addition, the transcriptions will be of interest beyond our community. For example, the Society recently received a questionnaire from the Jewish Historical Society of New Jersey. They are looking to document the "history and interesting stories of various Jewish communities, people, and organizations of Central New Jersey." The Society will therefore be forwarding to them a copy of any relevant transcriptions.

When completed, the transcriptions will be available in both the Metuchen and Edison libraries, as well as for sale at a nominal fee.

## Origins of St. James' Historic Bell Explored

by James Halsey

St. James Episcopal Church, at 2136 Woodbridge Avenue in Edison, may have one of the oldest, if not the oldest, British-cast church bells in the United States. When the Eastern coast was settled in the 17th and 18th centuries, there were no foundries in North America capable of casting bells suitable for the churches being established, therefore bells needed to be imported.

St. James Episcopal Church was established in 1704 and chartered as a Parish of the Church of England by Queen Anne in 1705. The first structure on the site was built in 1720, and legend has it that its steeple bell was cast in Leeds, England and had been brought over in 1702. A church bell historian in Great Britain who has been in contact with the church, Geoff Pick, says that his research has indicated that the first church bell exported from Great Britain to the United States in 1734. If St. James' bell was actually imported earlier, this would be of great interest to Mr. Pick and his fellow bell historians, therefore he contacted Metuchen-Edison Historical Society trustee Jim Halpin, who maintains the Society's website, to see if any inscriptions or markings on the bell could be found to confirm its origin and age. This request then was passed on to Jim Halsey, also an Society trustee and a member of St. James.

Access to the bell's location high up in the steeple is challenging and not for the faint of heart, but on May 4, 2005, Tim Halpin, with the help of brother Jim, made the ascent. Although he was unable to directly access the bell due to obstructions, he took some excellent photos of the interior of the steeple.



As luck would have it, the following Monday, May 9, an electrician unexpectedly came to the church to troubleshoot a problem with the steeple's electronic chimes. Unable to resolve the problem at ground level, he too climbed up into the steeple. He found that there was no problem with the wiring but with the aid of information and Tim Halpin's photographs, he was able to access the bell. He was then able to measure the bell and take several pictures of it and the inscriptions on it.

Although the inscriptions are not very clear, one appears to be a shield; while another may contain the Roman numerals MDCC (1700). Jim Halpin has since passed all of this information on to Geoff Pick for evaluation, and hopefully in the next *Nannygoats*, we will have the final story. In the meantime, many thanks to the Halpin brothers, Jim & Tim, for all their efforts.

## The Jersey Devil Visits Metuchen

by Tyreen Reuter

On Saturday, May 21, 2005, the legendary Jersey Devil made an appearance in Metuchen... at least in the form of a presentation by Dr. Angus Kress Gillespie, a folklorist and Professor of American Studies at Rutgers University. The program, sponsored by the New Jersey Council on the Humanities, was given to a capacity crowd at the Metuchen Public Library.



As background, Dr. Gillespie clarified the differences between stories, legends, and myths, and outlined the various elements of folklore: formulaic, genre-oriented, traditional and oral in nature, passed down within families and communities, and anonymous in origin. Dr. Gillespie then explained how these elements apply to the 250-year-old legend of the Jersey Devil, a crypto-zoological creature who purportedly inhabits the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. Beyond providing stomping grounds for the Devil, the audience learned that the Pine Barrens region is a wilderness inhabited at a rate of 3 persons per square mile, as opposed to the more populous areas of New Jersey which are inhabited at 30,000 persons per square mile. Dr. Gillespie also discussed how regulations were enacted during the late twentieth century to protect the 13 trillion gallons of fresh water in the region's Cohansey Aquifer and preserve the multifarious life forms that thrive there.

Then, setting the stage for the tale of the Jersey Devil, the lights were lowered and Dr. Gillespie shared the tale of the thirteenth child of Jane and Daniel Leeds, born on a blustery February night in 1735, and how it turned from an infant to a monster in the space of twenty minutes - with a horse's head, man's torso, bat-like wings, goat's feet, serpentine tail, claw-like hands, and hairy hide. The audience was shown sketches of the beast, the house on Leeds Point where it was supposedly born (in Galloway Township, about 6 miles north of Atlantic City), and photographs of the "Pineys" who Dr. Gillespie interviewed during his research.

## The Wizard Revealed

by Robert Takash

On April 24, 2005, Jack Stanley of the Edison Museum presented an enlightening program given by to a filled room at the Old Franklin School in Metuchen. Thomas Alva Edison was highlighted as an inventor and as a unique individual working with his diverse research team. Our delightful speaker detailed Edison's personal attributes and historical significance. We learned of the light bulb's evolution and the incredible invention of the phonograph that propelled Edison to national prominence at age 30. All the local historical connections were linked to the global impact of Edison's accomplishments in our 20th Century. The audience had time to ask questions and learn more interesting facts and myths of Thomas Alva Edison, and we were encouraged to visit the site's Museum and Light Tower on Christie Street (off Route # 27) in the Menlo Park area of Edison Township.



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Metuchen-Edison Historical Society  
P.O. Box 61, Metuchen, NJ 08840  
Tyreen A. Reuter, Editor

Board of Trustees  
Nancy Zerbe, President  
Robert Takash, Vice President  
James Halsey, Treasurer  
Rebecca Seely, Recording Secretary  
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Marie Vajo, Curator

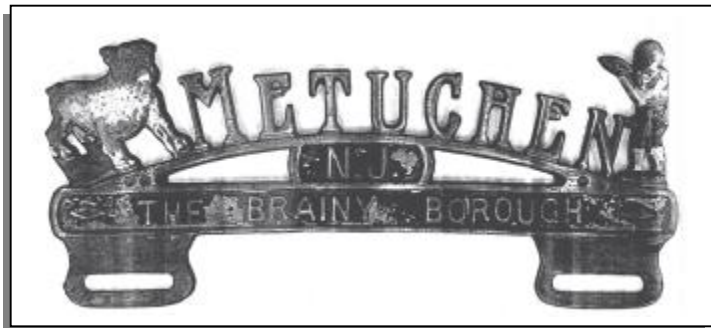
Phyllis Boeddinghaus James Halpin  
Anna Eosso Steve Reuter  
Kevin Hale Marge Viquerat

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The name of the newsletter, "Nannygoats," is taken from the title of a collection of anecdotes, reminiscences, articles, and letters compiled by photographer J. Lloyd Grimstead. He took more than 2,800 photographs of the Metuchen-Edison area, mostly during the 1930s, which make up 80 percent of the Historical Society's photographic collection. The Metuchen-Edison Historical Society dedicates this publication to Lloyd Grimstead, as a way of honoring him for collecting and recording so much of our local history.

## *New Items in the Collections...*

Thanks to the generosity of Metuchen resident Marybeth Thompson, the cast iron "Brainy Borough" sign shown below is now in the collections of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society.



Another recent donation to the Society is a set of Thornall Family bibles, donated by Connie Hope of Blue Bell, Pennsylvania.

Metuchen-Edison Historical Society  
P.O. Box 61  
Metuchen, NJ 08840

## June 12, 2005 Open House

Stop by the historic Old Franklin School, the 200-year old one-room school house owned and maintained by the Borough Improvement League, for the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society's Spring Open House.



The Spring Street Fair in Metuchen will be underway on nearby Main Street, Society merchandise will be available, and complimentary refreshments will be served. The Old Franklin School is located at 491 Middlesex Avenue in Metuchen, between the firehouse and Masonic Lodge. Hope to see you there!

# Metuchen-Edison Historical Society

**P.O. Box 61 Metuchen, New Jersey 08840**

May, 2005

Dear Members,

On Saturday, May 21, 2005, our Society honored Curator Marie Vajo's 16 years of volunteer service at a special reception in her honor. Marie is not retiring, but is looking to reduce the number of hours required of her. Filling Marie's shoes - even partially - is a large job. Board members are individually taking on more responsibilities. In addition, we are developing a core of volunteers who will assist the Society.

On the back of this letter is a list of the Society's volunteer needs. Please review this list and give serious consideration to helping us out. Our extensive collection in the Grimstead Room is a treasure trove – one that needs better public visibility. We are taking several steps to meet that goal, including transcribing the 1970s oral histories (using grant funds from the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission), preparing displays to be exhibited in a Main Street storefront, and cataloguing / indexing our collections. However, there is a tremendous amount of work to be done, and we need your help.

So, if you want to learn more about our local history or explore the Society's growing collection of historic documents, maps, family histories, and photographs, please join us. Spending a small amount of time in the Grimstead Room is a great chance to learn – while helping out a worthwhile goal. The only skill or experience you need is your interest; the Board will work with you to make sure that you are comfortable with the necessary tasks.

In addition to sending this letter to our own membership, the Board collaborated with the Board of the Friends of the Metuchen Library to send a volunteer appeal letter to all of their members. Once we receive back the sign-up forms, we will be conducting a kick-off meeting and an initial training session. We hope you will join us!

I would be glad to answer any questions you may have; you can reach me evenings or weekends at 732-549-6798.

Sincerely,

Nancy L. Zerbe  
President

**If you can help, please check off below and return this form to:**

**Metuchen-Edison Historical Society  
P.O. Box 61  
Metuchen, NJ 08840**

**I am interested in assisting with the following:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Volunteering two hours per week on a weekday in the Grimstead Room.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Volunteering two hours per week on a Saturday morning (once a month) in the Grimstead Room. Tasks I would be willing to do at the Grimstead Room (under the guidance of a Society Board member) are:
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Putting together bulletin boards for Society exhibits.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Filing historic documents.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Placing old documents on a copier and scanning them into the computer.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Reading old handwritten documents (such as wills and deeds) and typing the transcription into the computer.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Indexing documents by reading them and taking notes on references to specific people, places, and events.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Staffing the Historical Society table at special events in order to sell merchandise (e.g., books, maps, postcards, etc.).
- \_\_\_\_\_ Baking for Historical Society events.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Addressing envelopes and putting on stamps for Historical Society mailings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Interviewing older residents of Metuchen and Edison and taping the interviews to add to the Society's oral history collection. This task would involve training by a Society Board member.

**Contact Information:**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_