

The Development of the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District Metuchen NJ

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Metuchen, New Jersey developed in the second half of the 19th century as a desirable suburban commuter community with easy access to such cities as New York and Jersey City by the railroads that crossed through the village. The construction of spacious houses amid a bucolic setting solidified it as an affluent suburban community by the end of the 19th century. The Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District is emblematic of the rise of Metuchen. Developed ca. 1890-1940, this area was Metuchen's foremost neighborhood with large stylish houses centered on large lots. It attracted professional, artistic and literary residents who were the community leaders of Metuchen's turn-of-the-century life. The district also housed the institutions that were and remain the heart of the cultural and intellectual life of Metuchen.

Short History of the Borough of Metuchen

The Borough of Metuchen, established in 1900, was first settled in the late 1600s. While some of the 18th century infrastructure remains—including Main Street, laid out by 1705 the Middlesex and Essex Turnpike (now Middlesex Avenue) and the Perth Amboy and Bound Brook Turnpike both established by 1810—Metuchen in general and the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District in particular reflect the turn-of-the-century suburban development that resulted from the development of the railroad and the advent of the automobile.

The earliest map of Metuchen, dated 1799, shows a small village of ten buildings lining Main Street. According to the Borough of Metuchen's website, by 1834 a Presbyterian Church, a store, two taverns and about a dozen dwellings could be found in the small village.¹ The creation of the Middlesex and Essex Turnpike in 1806 and the Perth Amboy and Bound Brook Turnpike in 1808 created a small crossroads community of taverns and residences at the intersection of present-day Middlesex Avenue and New Durham Road. A second crossroads was established at the intersection of Main Street and Middlesex Avenue. With the completion of the New Jersey Railroad through Metuchen to New Brunswick in 1836 and the subsequent construction of a station at Main Street, the center of town was solidified along Main Street between the railroad and Middlesex Avenue. In 1870, Raritan Township was incorporated, withdrawing from the larger Woodbridge and Piscataway Townships; Metuchen was its largest village.

The railroad era marked the beginning of Metuchen's growth as a suburban community. The railroad brought significant commercial development followed by residential growth. An 1876 Plan of Metuchen," drawn by C. L. Felton, C.E., shows a burgeoning community crossed by two railroad lines—the Lehigh Valley Railroad arrived in 1873—along with the major 18th century turnpikes, making it the commercial center of the rural Raritan Township. Main Street, with the densest development including several hotels, was predominately surrounded by large estates with some sub-divided land ready for development especially to the south along Main Street. The railroad brought commercial and residential development to Metuchen while enabling others to commute to jobs in

¹ http://www.metuchennj.org/about_history.html

other towns. At the end of the 19th century, there were 26 passenger trains to New York daily: 18 on the Pennsylvania Railroad and 8 on the Lehigh Valley.² Almost ¼ of Metuchen's residents commuted on the morning train.³

The borough's accessibility, fine homes and bucolic setting made it attractive to New York bankers and engineers, newspapermen, authors, editors, illustrators and artists. By ca. 1890, several of the large estates to the south of Middlesex Avenue and east of Main Street had been subdivided and development begun; suburban Metuchen was arising. An 1898 brochure called "Why Metuchen is a Desirable Home" stated that Metuchen was attractive "...to those desiring a home, a dwelling place, among worthy and cultivated people...Display is ridiculed; equality is the rule; and the exclusiveness is directed against bad manners and bad morals."⁴ This brochure included letters from several notable people to give Metuchen prestige, including feminist writer Mrs. Hester M. Pool, lawyer Charles Corbin who worked in Jersey City and *Harper's Magazine* editor and writer Henry Alden who worked in New York.

The 20th century Sanborn maps show the continued residential development of Metuchen as the remaining large estates were subdivided and new houses constructed. Unlike the largely vernacular development of Metuchen in the 18th and 19th century, the 20th century development featured larger lot sizes framing larger homes in up-to-date architectural styles. This reflected the above-average means of the turn-of-the-century Metuchen community. Commuting professionals and business owners were now the typical Metuchen resident; Metuchen was known as the "brainy borough" ca. 1890-1930. A 1916 brochure which promoted Metuchen described, "growth has been very rapid, which is not surprising considering what Nature has contributed to its resources. Metuchen is strictly a residential Borough, free from factories, and contains about 2,000 people, and is an ideal place for a home for business men in New York, Brooklyn, Jersey City...and it is considered the most attractive place for its beautiful homes its rolling lands with trees and shrubs that grow in unusual luxuriance."⁵ Among other amenities, the pamphlet stated, "Character and Culture are at a premium; only bad manners and bad morals are excluded."⁶

In 1890, Metuchen's population was less than 2,000, but by 1930 it was 5,748 and by 1940 it was 6,557. While post-World War II development doubled its population, contemporary Metuchen retains the historic and architectural integrity of an affluent turn-of-the-century suburban community.

The Development of the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District

² "Why Metuchen is a Desirable Home" (New York, New York: Rothaker and Schweizer, ca. 1898).

³ Stacy E. Spies, *Images of America: Metuchen* (Arcadia Publishing, Charleston SC, Chicago IL, Portsmouth NH, San Francisco CA, 2000), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ C.C. Campbell, "Why Metuchen is a Desirable Residence" (1916), 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*

The Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park Area District like much of suburban Metuchen developed ca. 1890-1940. Centered on Middlesex Avenue between Main Street and Grove Avenue, including the areas north and south of that stretch of Middlesex, the district is dominated by substantial homes that reflect the status of its affluent residents as civic and cultural leaders of Metuchen.

The 1876 map of Metuchen shows the area that is now the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park Area District as a series of large tracts of land and estates. The northern section, north of Middlesex Avenue, was largely owned by Thomas W. Strong, an engraver and publisher. Beginning in the 1850s, Strong acquired all the undeveloped land from Main Street to Grove Avenue and from Middlesex Avenue to the Port Reading Railroad. This included today's Woodwild Park which Strong purchased from Robert R. Freeman in 1855.⁷ In 1868, Strong had the land surveyed. He dubbed the wooded area in the eastern third of the land "Wood Wild Park" and built his house. The western two-thirds he subdivided for development, including the area between Oak and Linden that today is a part of the proposed district. This section was anchored by St. Luke's Episcopal Church at the corner of Middlesex and Oak Avenue which was built in the 1860s.⁸ By ca. 1890, 30 years after the land had been subdivided, only a few houses had been built in the northern part of the district. They were in the immediate vicinity of St. Luke's Church.⁹

By 1895 and the death of Thomas Strong, of the roughly 25 lots he owned within the district, only a handful had been sold. Following Strong's death, Charles Corbin acquired Strong's land and partnered with others to create the Metuchen Building and Loan Association, chartered in September 1897. It was established to develop this section of Metuchen. The land was surveyed and mapped in October 1897, 3 ½ acres were retained for "Wood Wild Park."¹⁰ In 1902, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Corbin donated Woodwild Park to the Woodwild Park Association for public use. Development of the surrounding area began in earnest following 1897. This can be seen in the 1910 Sanborn which shows this area of the district largely developed.¹¹

The southern section of the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park Area District, bounded on the north by Middlesex Avenue, was equally undeveloped in 1876. There were a few houses including the house of Nathan Robins which later became the Metuchen Inn and the house and five-acres of S.P. Mockridge. Neither building stands today. Robins owned additional land in the area while E.F. Ayres and Reverend Hunt also owned substantial tracts.¹² By 1890, Highland Avenue had been established along the 1876 southern property lines of Reverend Hunt, Robins and Mockridge. The Metuchen Club had been established on Middlesex Avenue within what had been Mockridge's five acres. The

⁷ 1855-04-05 Freeman to Strong. From DeVries Research file provided by the Metuchen Historic Preservation Committee.

⁸ TW Strong, "Wood Wild Middlesex County New Jersey on New Jersey Railroad (May 1868) Map 0257 Filed 1895-06-17; Erick de Vries, "Thomas W. Strong, Creator of 'Wood Wild'" *Nannygoats*, Volume 8, Issue 3 (Fall 2010), 1.

⁹ Ca. 1890 Eggert Map. From file provided by Metuchen Historic Preservation Committee.

¹⁰ de Vries, 4-5; <http://www.metuchensavingsbank.com/about-profile.htm>

¹¹ Sanborn Map Company, "Map of Metuchen, Middlesex County, New Jersey, 1910." (partial).

¹² W.C. Dripps, "Map of Metuchen, Middlesex County, New Jersey" (New York: W.C. Dripps, 1876).

southern portion of Reverend Hunt's land had been subdivided and two houses had been constructed on Highland Avenue at the corner of Rector Street. E.F. Ayres lands also had been subdivided with houses lining both sides of Hillside Avenue including the Metuchen Library at the corner of Hillside Avenue and Jefferson Street.¹³ The southern section of the district was built up by 1910.¹⁴

The Significance of the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District

The Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District—developed in the last quarter of the 19th century through the first half of the 20th century—is emblematic of Metuchen. Known as the “Brainy Borough” at the beginning of the 20th century, Metuchen was a commuter suburb that attracted a wealthy and well-educated population that worked in prominent professional and cultural fields in New York, Jersey City and other centers of commerce while returning to Metuchen to socialize at the clubs, join literary societies and borough improvement organizations. The Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District was the home to many of the people that gave the “Brainy Borough,” its name as well as housed the social and civic organizations that drove life in the community of Metuchen. These institutions lined Middlesex Avenue which runs through the heart of the district. Middlesex Avenue was part of the Lincoln Highway, designated in 1913, as the first transcontinental highway. Known as the “The Main Street across America,” the Lincoln Highway and Middlesex Avenue showed early 20th century automobile travelers Metuchen's best face.

As early as 1910, Metuchen had a reputation of a well-educated borough, “Metuchen is quite noted for its brains...”¹⁵ The first reference to the name “The Brainy Borough” also occurred in 1910 when the *Metuchen Recorder* noted, “The honor we enjoy of being known as ‘the brainy borough’ is principally due to the brilliant women who adorn our community.”¹⁶

While its reputation as a cerebral community is based on its intellectual luminaries like Henry M. Alden, the longtime editor of *Harper's Magazine* and the author Mary Wilkins Freeman, the numerous cultural and literary societies equally gave a foundation for Metuchen's reputation. In 1879, the Young Men's Literary Society was established. Once women were admitted, the name became the Annulet Society.¹⁷ Mrs. Hester M. Poole, a poet, feminist and literary critic, founded the Quiet Hour in 1895 to discuss literature, social matters and feminism.¹⁸ The Metuchen Book Club was formed in 1879 and the Library in 1885. In 1888, the Delphic Dramatic Association was established. Added to these were the Chautauqua Literary Circle and the Grosvenor's Club, active groups at the end of the 19th century. In addition to the literary societies, there were civic organizations like the Borough Improvement League (1901), numerous churches and fraternal

¹³ Ca. 1890 Eggert Map. From file provided by Metuchen Historic Preservation Committee.

¹⁴ Sanborn, 1910

¹⁵ *Metuchen Recorder* (February 12, 1910).

¹⁶ *Metuchen Recorder* (April 9, 1910).

¹⁷ David Trumbull Marshall, *Boyhood Days in Old Metuchen* (Flushing NY: The Case Publishing Co, 1930), <http://www.jhalpin.com/metuchen/history/boy62.htm>, Chapter 62.

¹⁸ Thomas Weber, *The Heritage of the First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen, N.J.* (1967), 84-85.

organizations, two volunteer fire companies and the Metuchen Club, the social heart of the community.¹⁹

On March 3, 1914 the *Independent Press* of Bloomfield, New Jersey challenged Metuchen to compete against Glen Ridge to prove which borough had the most “mental celebrities” and could thus call itself “The Brainiest Borough.” According to this first article, Metuchen had given itself the title of “Brainy Borough” when the novelist Mary Wilkins Freeman had moved to Metuchen. To prove it went beyond brainy to the brainiest, *The Independent* challenged *The Recorder* of Metuchen to each week deliver a Metuchen leader. This would be countered by Glen Ridge. Whichever community ran out of names first would be the loser.

The Recorder met the challenge and opened with Henry M. Alden, the managing editor of *Harper's Weekly* for 50 years who was often referred to as the “Dean of American Magazine Writers.” Alden moved to Metuchen in the 1860s and should be credited with the birth of the “Brainy” title for the borough. A long-time resident of the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District, Alden was often visited by famed figures such as Mark Twain, Mary Wilkins (Freeman), William Dean Howells, Helen Keller, Joyce Kilmer, Ogden Nash, and Joseph Pulitzer.²⁰ Alden, according to the *Recorder* was, “...the friend and associate of the leaders of American literature, but as the author of much that made ‘Harper’s’ dear to the lives of thinking readers and by his own literary works, has contributed largely to the mental and spiritual growth of his time.”²¹ In 1914, Alden, an almost 40-year resident of Metuchen, lived at 153 Chestnut Avenue within the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District.²²

Over the course of the spring and summer of 1914, the battled continued with Metuchen introducing a name and Glen Ridge responding. Metuchen’s second citizen was Charles Volkmar, a ceramic artist.²³ The third, F. Marmaduke Potter, a graduate of Rutgers and Columbia University and Rhodes Scholar and Principal of Voorhees College, Yellore India²⁴ lived at 85 Rector Place within the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District in 1920.²⁵ The fight continued with Metuchen contributing, Gustav Lindenthal, bridge engineer;²⁶ Walter Williams, the director of the Woolworth Company;²⁷ S.S. Carvalho, manager of Hearst’s Publications;²⁸ Mary Wilkins Freeman, authoress; William D. Stevens, illustrator;²⁹

¹⁹ Paul F. Fenton, *1868-1968: A History of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Metuchen, N.J.*, (Metuchen: St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, 1968), 28-30.

²⁰ *Nannygoats*, Volume 9, Issue 1 (Winter/Spring 2011), 1, 5; Weber, 78-85.

²¹ *Independent Press* (Bloomfield, New Jersey: March 20, 1914).

²² Dennis Bertland Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District Database from the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District Research Project.

²³ *Independent Press* (Bloomfield, New Jersey: April 3, 1914).

²⁴ *Independent Press* (Bloomfield, New Jersey: April 17, 1914).

²⁵ Dennis Bertland

²⁶ *Independent Press* (Bloomfield, New Jersey: May 1, 1914).

²⁷ *Independent Press* (Bloomfield, New Jersey: May 29, 1914).

²⁸ *Independent Press* (Bloomfield, New Jersey: June 19, 1914).

²⁹ *Independent Press* (Bloomfield, New Jersey: July 24, 1914).

Reverend J. G. Mason, clergyman;³⁰ Dr. A. Clark Hunt, Sanitation Expert;³¹ George S. Silzer, Lawyer and 1923-1926 Governor of New Jersey; Charles McKnight Smith, artist; Annie and William McCullough, artist and poet; William Dinwiddie, war correspondent; William W. Crehore, engineer; Charles Edgar, clay merchant; Lewis Nixon, shipbuilder; Frank O. Thompson, university professor; Aylin Pierson, architect; John Duffy, publicity agent Lehigh Valley Railroad.³² Of the 21 names of Metuchen residents offered in the contest, nearly one third of them lived within or adjacent to the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District in 1910 and/or 1920.³³ In addition to Alden and Potter, Hunt, Pierson, Smith and Stevens all lived within or close to the district. This provides further evidence of this district's prominent role in Metuchen society.

The 21 people who were listed in the Brainiest Borough contest are indicative of the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District. Henry M. Alden and his wife the poet Ada Foster Murray Alden were joined in the district by publisher Charles F. Heartman and garden writer Mrs. F.M.P. Pearse. Artists living within the district included noted sculptor Edward Ardolino who created the entrance pediments to the National Archives and another sculptor, Anthony DiLorenzo. They were joined by architect and engineer Captain Charles B. Carman who lived at 68 Linden Avenue known for his work at the Raritan Arsenal, an armory built by the Army in 1917. Numerous other lawyers and businessmen also lived within the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District.³⁴ Analysis of the 1910 and 1920 censuses as well as Metuchen City Directories from the same period proves that roughly 20% of the documented occupants of the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park Area District were employed in professional occupations like doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects and businesses owners. This included several artists and designers as well as authors, publishers and newspapermen.³⁵

While the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District was the premier neighborhood of a premier New Jersey suburban commuter community during Metuchen's heyday 1890-1940 and its inhabitants exemplified the "Brainy Borough" designation, the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District is also the home of numerous local landmarks that played or continue to play an important role in Metuchen society. Found along Middlesex Avenue which runs through the center of the district, these include the Metuchen Club, the Borough Improvement League, St. Luke's, Wildwood Park and the Public Library.

The Old Franklin Schoolhouse marks the western end of the district on Middlesex Avenue and is the headquarters of the Borough Improvement League. Originally built ca. 1807, it served as the only school in Metuchen for 50 years; in 1873 with the construction of a larger school, the Old Franklin Schoolhouse became a private residence. The Borough Improvement League (B.I.L.), an organization committed to service to the Metuchen

³⁰ *Independent Press* (Bloomfield, New Jersey: August 7, 1914).

³¹ *Independent Press* (Bloomfield, New Jersey: August 21, 1914).

³² *Independent Press* (Bloomfield, New Jersey: November 5, 1914).

³³ Dennis Bertland

³⁴ Tyreen Reuter, "Brainy Borough" Database

³⁵ Dennis Bertland

community, was organized in 1901 and incorporated in 1906. An important early mission of the B.I.L. was the saving and preservation of the Old Franklin Schoolhouse. In 1906, the B.I.L. purchased the Old Franklin Schoolhouse and restored it. For over 100 years, the building has continued to house this important Metuchen institution.

Neighboring the B.I.L./Old Franklin Schoolhouse is the Metuchen Club on Middlesex Avenue, now owned by the YMCA. The Metuchen Club was founded in 1890 and became the social center of the Borough in general and the historic district in particular. Tennis and cards were important day time activities while in the evenings there were dances, card parties and vaudeville. There were twelve formal and informal dances as well as special events for New Year's and Valentine's Day. There was an annual musicale and dramatic evening.

Across Middlesex Avenue sits the Metuchen Public Library. Although the existing building dates to the 1930s, the founding of the library occurred during the early development of the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District. Its origins date to 1879 and the founding of the Metuchen Book Club. Out of this came the Metuchen Library in 1885. James Gilbert Mason was the pastor at the Presbyterian Church from 1877 to 1925. He is credited with fostering the intellectual life of Metuchen; he helped found the public library in 1885 with Henry Mills Alden.³⁶

In the mid-1860s, the congregation of St. Luke's Episcopal Church was established and by 1868, the Carpenter Gothic church had been constructed on Middlesex Avenue. In a 1968 history of the church, Metuchen was described as more like Cotswold village where, "Children grew up within the parish, intermarried and continued to live in the vicinity...Many of the inhabitants were literary or artistic...almost everyone, it seemed, liked dress-up social functions. These ran the gamut from the large balls held for the benefit of the local fire companies to the more intimate literary soirees or drawing-room concerts."³⁷ While this described Metuchen as a whole, it also illustrated life in Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District during its heyday, 1890-1940.

St. Luke's Church sits across Oak Avenue from Woodwild Park. Woodwild Park was established as the estate of Thomas Strong, "Woodwild House" constructed between 1855 and 1870. In 1902, a section of it became a public park. The stone pillars off Middlesex Avenue that today mark the park are believed to have been the entrance to Thomas Strong's estate. These are an important character defining feature of the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District today.

Another important feature associated with early Woodwild Park is the watering trough, today set back from Middlesex Avenue. The Middlesex Water Company was incorporated in 1897. In 1899, the company offered free water for water fountains in Raritan Township. The Woodwild Park Association purchased and installed a fountain in early 1900 on Middlesex Avenue to be used for horses. Although it was moved back from the edge of the

³⁶ *Nannygoats*, Volume 9; Weber, 78-85.

³⁷ Fenton, 25.

road for safety purposes,³⁸ it remains extant today and continues to be maintained by the Association.

In addition to the institutions along Middlesex Avenue lending significance to the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park district, Middlesex Avenue itself is a notable contributing feature. It was designated part of the Lincoln Highway, the first interstate highway in the United States established in 1913. Advocates of the “Good Roads Movement” led a campaign to establish a highway system throughout the country. However because there was no federal funding available, no new roads were constructed. Instead, existing roads were identified and labeled as the Lincoln Highway which became the first successful, all-weather, coast-to-coast, automobile highway. Middlesex Avenue was a component of this “Main Street across America.” While the roles Metuchen citizens played in the movement or in Middlesex’s Avenue designation have not been established, it is clear that many travelers formed their impressions of Metuchen by what they saw as they traveled this stretch of the Lincoln Highway.³⁹

³⁸ de Vries, 1-5.

³⁹Linda McTeague, “Evaluation of Historic District Potential in Metuchen, N.J.” (April 10, 2010), 6-7;
<http://www.drivelincolnhighway.com/history.html>; http://lincolnhighway.jameslin.name/by_state/nj.html;

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