



# Newsletter of the Middletown Township Historical Society

VOL. III NO. 6

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## Middletown's Trains and Trolleys (Concluded)

The trolley had a strong impact on development of its service areas. Highlands, which separated from Middletown Township forming a borough government in 1900, saw its waterside resort business boom. Atlantic Highland's business community prospered, serving surrounding Township neighborhoods. The identity with that borough was particularly close in parts of Leonardo, with several Leonardo facilities using Atlantic Highlands addresses. The greatest impact on the Township proper was housing and education. Middletown in the late 19th century consisted primarily of farms, many of them large. Pre-rail housing construction was generally limited to one or a very small number of houses erected on land bought from a farmer. A trend to developing farms into substantial seasonal homes had started around 1890. The best known and longest enduring was Water Witch Club. It is located in the Navesink hills and was organized with a governing body regulating internal affairs. It is the present Monmouth Hills section. The Highland Park Improvement Company started a similar settlement on the former Burdge farm on land overlooking Leonardville Road. However, only a few large homes were built, with the short-lived venture falling short of expectations. Melvin A. Rice bought the unutilized land in 1912, adding it to his Drynoch Farm that once covered the Croydon Hall property. Other parts of the tract make up the Beacon Hill Country Club.

The new Atlantic Highlands branch railroad was helpful in attracting city folk who summered in the Township. Developments dotted Belford and Leonardo roads near the train and trolley. They were smaller than the country estate type, but larger than the one to four site carving from a farm. The largest trackside development would appear southwest of the bay shore on the Campbells Junction to Red Bank trolley.

Farmer Joseph Field, affectionately known as Uncle Josie, became a local legend from his great vigor to the end of a long life. He was a bachelor until age 75, fathered three children and lived to 104, dying in 1897. His farm was about 400 acres, located south and west of Highway 35 and Oak Hill Road. The farm was bought in 1910 by directors of the Monmouth County Fair Association, who formed the Minnesink Park Realty Company. They gave the fair association 62 acres between the highway and the railroad, expecting the sale of building lots to return the entire purchase price. The fair moved to the site in 1913 from rented land in Red Bank. The Township's largest real estate development and a major agricultural society located here in large part due to the trolley.

High school education was not wide-spread in New Jersey until two decades into this century. This article will mention only one reason - transportation. The one or two room multi-graded school was necessary in the 19th century because there was no way to transport pupils. Most were satisfied with basic instruction in the three Rs. The transportation obstacle was even greater for the few who wanted to continue schooling. Thus, early high schools were limited to the populous towns such as Long Branch, Freehold and Red Bank.

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## Aspects of Highway History

A history of Kings Highway is virtually a history of Middletown village. A new one is needed, but not in these few pages. The article will describe places and people connected with highway history. It will run in consecutive issues over the course of the exhibition "Middletown's Historic Highway". Subject matter will often be lesser known aspects or places, those needing a more accurate or thorough description. The first is the Truex Blacksmith Shop.



The Truex Blacksmith Shop when occupied as such during the early years of this century.

The building is located on the southwest corner of Kings Highway and Conover Avenue. It was built around 1825, is one story brick with a later stucco covering. It is not attractive, but is unusual as a brick business building of the period surviving virtually unaltered. It was once part of a complex including harness and wheelwright shops. Fire and obsolescence took a large toll. The wheelwright shop burned, as did successive brick stores on the southeast corner. An 1890 fire destroyed a c.1875 store, while a later fire consumed its replacement, with the present stores a replacement of it.

The blacksmith shop was in the Casler family for most of its existence. Construction records are obscure, but a c.1850 business directory indicated John Casler as Middletown's blacksmith. Jacob Brower, recalling 1866 Kings Highway thirty-five years later, remembered him conducting "the blacksmith business now owned by his son William T. Casler". Casler was renting the business by century's end as is indicated by brief notes in the

press. H.G. Holloway left the site in 1897, was succeeded by Daniel D. Bray who stayed until 1901, who was succeeded by Edward Johnson. The Truex connection, with his name association with the shop, is more interesting than a string of horseshoers. The Truex origin is not clear. An account of Truex is told in Mandeville's "Story of Middletown". It was traced to the Newark Evening News in February 1925. Briefly, Truex is claimed to have organized and drilled at the shop a private militia company between the wars (Mexican and Civil). William Snyder Truex was born in Middletown October 2, 1818. He studied briefly at West Point and joined the army afterwards. Accurate biographical information is difficult to assemble for Truex. There is an inconsistency in dates in the lengthiest account of his life, a Monmouth Inquirer obituary, and records at the Military Academy, for example. He served in the Mexican War and was a farmer before and after it. The record between the wars is vague. Numerous private militia companies existed, but there is no other evidence of one of Truex'. He was in command as officer of the day of four military groups as the Middletown Point (Matawan) July 4th celebration in 1857, but not one was his. Truex joined the Utah Expedition in 1858 and was with it until 1861. The story merits further checking.

Truex, then a colonel, organized the 14th Regiment of New Jersey Volunteers in 1862. They trained at Camp Vredenburgh in Manalapan Township, just outside Freehold. One wonders if some engaged in preliminary drilling at the shop. Perhaps the shop was the site of a pre-1857 organization. Some of the most noted members of the Truex crew entered the Civil War from other states. Time may have permitted the Middletown group to scatter. In any event, it is fitting to honor this brave soldier. Truex will receive better biographical treatment once the facts are found. One hopes the blacksmith story can be confirmed.



The Murray Farm House c.1890s.

The Murray farm was once large and grand. It included the Hartshorne House, the Highway's oldest. The annals of the Murray family are well-written by Mary Murray Hyde. See her account in Volume II of Nelson's "New Jersey Coast". William Murray bought his farm in 1815 for \$9,000. He was a large stockholder in a bank and owned a village store. Let us focus on a later owner, Charles Coudert and his pivotal role in Middletown's history.

The Couderts were French. Charles and his brother Frederic were successful New York lawyers. Their firm Coudert Bros. still thrives

in New York and is a major international force. Charles purchased the Murray farm around 1880, paying \$17,000. for about 190 acres. He improved the buildings and brought in high-grade livestock. Cows were sold. Others were expected to produce high quality butter for sale to fancy New York clubs. The butter was unsalable as the wild onions on the ground contaminated the milk produced. A later effort at produce and fruit made the farm a success. Charles Coudert used the farm as a country estate. He incurred a lengthy illness and died there in July 1897.

Other Middletown farms were larger, better known, older and founded by seventeenth century settlers. Why is this one singled out? The Coudert period signaled a major trend in Middletown Township towards large country estates as second homes and businesses. Many were farms and some remain, in various states of their original condition. One, Haskell's Woodland Farm, lost its mansion to fire. However, its grounds are open annually for the Race Meet and are celebrated as one of the Township's great open spaces. Another, Cobble Close Farm, is a gem of the Period Revival era of early twentieth century architecture. A third, Melvin A. Rice's Drynoch Farm, lost all of its identity with agriculture, became a private school, Croydon Hall Academy, and now exists as a municipal complex, including historical museum. The Murray-Coudert house was moved back from the road and enlarged. The farmland was developed, but the now stately dwelling stands near the northwest corner of Kings Highway and New Monmouth Road as a symbol of Middletown's transition from agrarian to residential community. (The blacksmith and Murray House photos are from the collection of the Monmouth County His.Assn.)

## Dues... Are Yours Paid?

### Middletown Quiz

37. What daredevil flying stunt did Eddie Schneider, Middletown's Spanish Civil War pilot, perform here?
38. Whose pen name was Robert Slender?
39. Where was the first television in a Middletown public facility?
40. What was the former name of Port Monmouth's Main St.?
41. What expensive real estate was once one of the worst obstructions on the Navesink River?
42. When and where was Chanceville changed to New Monmouth?

### Thanks

- Chapel Hill A&P - for cheese and crackers for the Society's Railroad Social.  
 Debbie Garthwait - for a copy of her research paper on Lincroft, graded "A"  
 Greater Red Bank Voice - for a copy of the book "The Monmouth Patent".  
 Edith Jackson Hankins - for an index to Barber and Howe  
 J. Louise Jost - a file cabinet and two Monmouth County promotional booklets  
 Keypoint Historical Society - a 1929 Middletown HS handbook  
 Robert Kliven - for a coal shovel from the Pennsylvania Railroad, a timetable and rulebook and a prohibitory era bottle of a type "imported" along the Township's bay shore.  
 Peter Komelski - a copy of "26 Miles to Jersey City".  
 Alice Robinson - tools and hardware  
 Frederick Rolf - Two copies of "The Marker", a trolley club publication  
 Robert Schoeffling - for a 1939 Odranoel  
 U.S. Navy - a copy of the Leonardo fuel storage study.

## Middletown's Trains continued

Middletown's first high school was located on the corner of Leonardville Road and Hosford Avenue, the site of the Bayshore Middle School. The area was claimed to be the center of the Township's population, an argument to counter its lack of central geographic placement. The land was owned by Melvin A. Rice, who donated it to the Township for the school. Advancing education was a major interest in his varied career. Mr. Rice was president of the New Jersey and Middletown boards of education. Sectionalism was a strong force on the issue. A July 21, 1911 election for locating the school there voted 367 to 275 in favor of the site. Ironically, a trolley with a load of Navesink voters favoring the site broke down in Atlantic Highlands, preventing most from voting.

The school was built and the trolley developed considerable student traffic. School business was typical of a passenger pattern that would lead to financial woes. Service was profitable during peak hours, but low ridership during off hours created net losses. Increasing fares led to a drop in ridership and was not a solution. The trolleys helped build business by their stimulation of real estate development. Evidence comes from maps of subdivisions near the rights of way and from newspaper accounts. Typical is an October 24, 1907 note in the "Monmouth Democrat", "A real estate boom has struck the village of Navesink since the advent of the trolley". It was also extending the village, as the reference is to the Plattmont development on the outskirts of the village.

The automobile was a luxury for the rich when Jersey Central Traction opened. Henry Ford revolutionized transportation by establishing the automobile assembly line and slashing prices. Private cars were becoming commonplace by 1920 and the trolleys were feeling the effect. Buses were also developed and operators were eager to serve the public. Bus owners were generally not granted franchises on trolley routes in order not to weaken further the trolley lines. However, when Jersey Central Traction ceased operation in July, 1923, the buses began the next day.

As noted in October, most Township rail passengers, including commuters, travelled on the Atlantic Highlands Division. It had three Township stations on the bay shore. The road made a profit from passenger operations in its early years. World War I also boosted revenue. The post-war years were characterized by complaints of declining service and demands for increased fares. Frequent stops, a virtual necessity when many passengers walked to the station, slowed the trip. A remedy was elusive, choices were few and riders endured the ride. The line served the Township's population center. The New York and Long Branch road's Middletown station was closer to the geographical center, but was a minor factor in early commuter days. Many Township NY & LB riders used the Red Bank station, some getting there via the trolley until its 1923 demise.

The NY & LB carried many vacationists and excursion travelers to the ocean shore resorts. An interesting sidelight merits passing note, particularly in view of the East Keansburg name change campaign. Keansburg wished a tie to the NY & LB route. Businessmen there proposed in 1928 extending Palmer Avenue to the railroad and building a new station. It would have been called South Keansburg.

The ill wind of war blew some good to the railroads with a considerable increase in traffic. War's end brought a resumption of the dispute "less service-raise rates". The railroads' case was now fueled by the need to fund the purchase of new diesel equipment that would provide a better ride. Fares remained relatively low, the equipment replacement was lengthy and the service dispute continued.

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The juncture of the Jersey Central Traction tracks with the Central Railroad tracks.

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The 1954 opening of the Garden State Parkway was the most important event in the Township's history since the two railroads started operation 93 and 74 years prior.



The trolley station at New Monmouth was typical of many on the line. It is Wallings Crossing, with Tindall Road in the background, just below the Four Corners at the Baptist Church.

The advent of this super-highway, arguably the best road in the nation, permitted the transforming of a largely agrarian municipality into a bedroom suburb. It also kept new residents on roads for all travel. The quality of rail operations declined sharply, a familiar process.

The railroad story continues. Events can rarely be told or perceived in a historical context in their time. Middletown's presence on a major passenger line is a major civic virtue as is its large station parking lot. The railroad is operated and the lot was built with state subsidies. It is almost ironical that the station is the second busiest on the North Jersey Coast line because of its capacity to store passengers' automobiles. These issues point to the inter-relationships of transportation, matters still being measured. They will be important segments of future rail histories. Rail transport was important to Middletown's past and is vital to its present and future. The Society hopes this reading of its history adds to understanding its significance. (RG)

## Exhibition Opens: "Middletown's Historic Highway"

The exhibition "Middletown's Historic Highway" opened on December 12. It will remain through June 1988. The exhibit portrays Middletown village history in two ways. Pictures and commentary describe many of the important structures. Artifacts help portray life in times gone by. In the words of exhibit curator Peg Jordan, "We have tried to recreate the atmosphere one would have found in the old days". Four corner environments in the main exhibit room are farm equipment, farm home, blacksmithing and a general store. See the tools the blacksmith used and the Truex shop when occupied for ironworking. See an apple press and contemplate that 125 years ago, far more apples were drunk than eaten. See objects too numerous to mention.

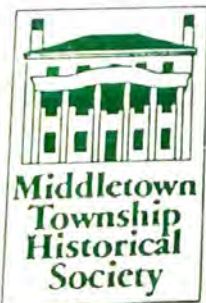
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PHONE: 291-8739 during museum hours.  
EDITOR: RANDALL GABRIELAN

DEDICATED TO RESEARCHING, COLLECTING AND EXHIBITING THE HISTORY OF MIDDLETOWN TOWNSHIP.

Museum: In the main building at Croydon Hall on Leonardville Rd. between Chamone and Bellevue Aves. in the township's Leonardo section. Open Saturdays & Sundays.

Meetings: 8:00 PM at the museum, generally on the fourth Monday with occasional exceptions for major holidays.

Donations of historical materials: Please see a museum guide or write to the Society.



reflecting times that were simpler, not better, but certainly different than the convenience-laden late twentieth century. Hours are Saturday and Sunday, 1:00-4:00 PM.

## Doing Local History: Exhibits

A key Society function is displaying exhibitions on Middletown Township history. It provides varied opportunities to express ones interests and talents. Our museum opened two and one-half years ago with a commitment to temporary, changing exhibits. The purpose was two-fold. The first was necessity. As a new museum without a collection, we were forced to borrow and improvise. Our growing collection now contributes objects to exhibitions. The second was vitality. Regular change attracts repeat visitors. It permits displaying more of the Township's long and varied history.

The new exhibit "Middletown's Historic Highway" attracted the participation of more members than any one prior. It is society activity at its best. Numerous exhibit possibilities create opportunities for showing the talents of many members or prospective members. Special interests of one person may permit an exhibit that might not otherwise be mounted. It could be your pet project! Come to meetings to express your ideas. It could be the beginning of an exhibit and the start of a pleasant society relation.

The possibilities are too numerous to mention here. Many aspects of human activity have occurred locally, often with a special character of the region. One subject proposed is firefighting, a universal pursuit with a local tradition. Let us hear your ideas.

## New Members

Thomas A. Butler - Middletown  
E. Jeannine Dillon - E. Keansburg  
George & Ruth Hartman - New Monmouth  
Kathleen Scoutelas - River Plaza  
Julius A. Simchick, Jr. - Middletown  
Amiel & Susan Zimmer - Navesink

## Quiz Answers

37. He flew under the Oceanic Bridge, witnessed by Ed Banfield.
38. Philip M. Freneau.
39. Possibly in Pete's Chatterbox, just north of Coopers Bridge on Route 35, installed in the fall of 1941.
40. Harmony Avenue. It was changed in 1927.
41. Guions Point. It was so described when the January 2, 1913 Monmouth Democrat reported its removal. At the time it was a sand bar running nearly halfway across the river.
42. In 1859, by a petition to the Postmaster General "extensively signed by inhabitants of that vicinity"

### MEMBERSHIP DUES PER CALENDAR YR.

Individual — \$5.00  
Family — \$10.00

Dues for new members  
joining after Oct. 1 in-  
clude following year.