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 waterfront 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 Leonardo 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 Improvement 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 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. The present store a replacement of it.

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. In 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 store 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 his conducting "the blacksmith business now owned by his son William T. Casler". Casler was renting the business by century's end as in indicated by brief notes in the
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 farm 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 ASP - for cheese and crackers for the Society's Railroad Social.
Debbie Curthait - for a copy of her research paper on Lincoln, graded "A"
Greater Red Bank Voice - for a copy of the book "The Monmouth Patents"
Edith Jackson Hartford - for an index to Barber and Howe J. Louise Joest - a file cabinet and two Monmouth County promotional booklets
Keyport Historical Society - a 1929 Middletown HS handbook
Robert Klyven - for a coal shovel from the Pennsylvania Railroad, a timetable and rule book and a prohibition era bottle of a type 'imported' along the Township's bay shore.
Peter Komeliski - a copy of "26 Miles to Jersey City"
Alice Robinson - disassembled model of "The Marker", a trolley club publication
Robert Schufffing - for a 1939 Oronoel
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 a member and 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 Plattsmouth 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. Frequently, 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 1934 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 Walling’s 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. Monmouth’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 New 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 train histories. Rail transport was important to Monmouth’s past and is vital to its present and future. The Society hopes this reading of its history adds to understanding its significance.

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 Monmouth 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 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 Monmouth Township history. It provides varied opportunities to express one’s 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 Scouleras - 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. Frenneau.
39. Possibly in Pete’s Chatterbox, just north of Cooper’s Bridge on Route 35, installed in the fall of 1941.
40. Harmony Avenue. It was changed in 1927.
41. Gilson’s 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"