



Nannygoats



Vol. 21, Issue 4

Newsletter of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society

Fall/Winter 2023

Oral Histories are an invaluable local history resource, which is why the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society has devoted so much time and effort transcribing existing oral histories and conducting new ones whenever possible. Last year, Jennifer Warren, the Society's archivist, conducted just such an interview with Richard F. Plechner, a resident of Metuchen for nearly 90 years. She and the Society sincerely appreciate how gracious and kind both Judge Plechner and his wife, Mary Lou Strahlendorff, were in granting and facilitating the interview at their home on Oak Avenue. Sadly, Judge Plechner passed away on December 14, 2023, and in his honor this issue of 'Nannygoats' highlights this extremely accomplished Metuchenite and includes some excerpts, condensed and edited for clarity, from his oral history. The complete version of Judge Plechner's oral history is available on our website at www.metuchen-edisonhistsoc.org.

Richard F. Plechner (1932-2023) was the only child of Walter William Plechner and Sophie Louise (Coppersmith) Plechner. Born in Murray Hill, New York, the family moved to Metuchen when he was four years old. His parents both received PhDs from Columbia University, where they met, and his father was a chemical engineer for the Titanium Division of the National Lead Company. His father also served in the U.S. Army Reserve as a lieutenant colonel and was killed in World War II and is buried in Tunisia. Following his father's death, his mother returned to work as a research chemist for Carter-Wallace, where she worked for thirty-three years. Judge Plechner lived in several places in Metuchen throughout his life including 57 Library Place, 27 Hillside Avenue, 79 Lake Avenue, 48 Spring Street, and 62 Oak Avenue.

Judge Plechner attended Franklin School in Metuchen before transferring to Rutgers Elementary School in Somerset and then later the Peddie School in Hightstown. He received a degree in political science from Rutgers University in 1954 and graduated from Rutgers Law School in 1959. Following law school, he set up his own private law practice in Metuchen at 351 Main Street where he worked for twenty-eight years until he was appointed Superior Court Judge for the State of New Jersey in 1988. He served in the Army Reserves for over thirty years, was a longtime member of local and state Republican

organizations, was the Middlesex County Republican chairman for Middlesex County during the 1980s, and ran for New Jersey State Senate in 2003. He retired in 2017.

In his oral history interview, Mr. Plechner discusses his family and his early childhood

memories of Metuchen including bike riding, ice skating on Connor's Pond, the Forum Theatre, the Radio Section, Metuchen's

first electric car, and businesses along Main Street. He also recounts his education, his experiences during World War II, his work as a lawyer in Metuchen, various political anecdotes, and meeting President Ronald Reagan on more than one occasion.

The following text is edited and condensed from the 2022 oral history.

Growing up in Metuchen

Metuchen wasn't full of kids; you know it wasn't that big. I think there were around 5,000 people in Metuchen at that time. There are like three times that now. So that makes a little difference.

In the winter, we used to go skating on Connor's Pond, which is right over here (east of Oak Avenue). Because there were no houses, there were just woods once you got beyond these houses right along [East] Chestnut. I broke my arm skating there, and that was a big deal. I had it in a cast. Back then they used to wrap them in plaster casts and everybody signed it and I had all these autographs on it. I thought that was hot stuff. [laughter]

The first times I went to the Forum Theatre, [tickets]

Richard F. Plechner 1932-2023



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.

Eagle Projects Benefit Local History

Eagle Scout candidate Aidan Palmer of Metuchen recently completed a project at the Colonial Cemetery in Metuchen, and even though some passersby might not notice the work was done, it was an extremely important project; Aidan repaired the loose stairs and wobbly handrails leading to the site from Main Street, repaired (and replaced where needed) the retaining boards lining the embankment, and painted everything to match. Society Director Tyreen Reuter served as Advisor and the Matochshoning-Rebecca Cornell Chapter, NSDAR, helped fund the project as it included improvements around the DAR memorial as well.



In early 2023, Rocco Lippi of South Plainfield completed his project to construct an informational kiosk on the Short Hills Battlefield site off of Woodland Avenue in Edison. Society Director Walter Stochel provided historical information from our files for the kiosk and connected the Eagle candidate to municipal officials to get approval to place the kiosk on Township parkland. Supervising a team of Scouts and volunteers, Rocco built, transported to the site, and erected the kiosk on a cold bright Saturday in January. Rocco is a 2023 graduate of St. Joseph's High School in Metuchen, and currently is studying visual film arts photography at Ithaca College. His Court of Honor ceremony was held on October 14, 2023.



Nannygoats

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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.

Fall Cemetery Cleanup

The weather cooperated spectacularly for the Society's Fall Cleanup of the Colonial Cemetery in Metuchen, resulting a record turnout of 50+ volunteers over the course of the day. Volunteers included Society Members & friends, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Metuchen Robotics team members, and a large and particularly handy contingent from the Metuchen Elks Lodge #1914 (see photo below for some of their members). The Elks very generously provided D2 solution & supplies for proper gravestone cleaning and did a phenomenal job with branch removal. Many thanks to Society Member Charlie Leckenby, who organizes these bi-annual cleanups.



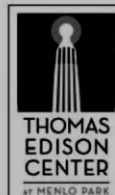
New in the Archives

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.

- Slide of Old Lehigh Valley EMD Switcher (ex-LV 122) painted as a Conrail 8649 in front of the Old Gulton building in Metuchen, November 1977 (donated by David Hutchinson)
- 23 class photographs for Franklin School / Metuchen High School from ca. 1910s-1930s; excerpt from the 1938 Metuchen High School yearbook; 1976 Borough of Metuchen calendar; 1997 MEHS calendar; Durham Cafe pens; American Italian Civic League address card; and Morris Stores boxes (donated by Joe Perrino Jr.)
- Matchbook cover for Metuchen Restaurant & Hotel at 421 Main Street (donated by Byron Sondergard)
- Various documents related to the Clara Barton School Parent-Teacher Association, ca. 1940s-1950s; the Metuchen Regional Historical Society, 1972-1977; the Edison High School Parent-Teacher Association, 1960-1962; the Raritan Township Board of Education, 1950-1951; the Middlesex County Council of Parent-Teacher Associations, ca. 1950s-1960s; the New Jersey Congress of Parents and Teachers, ca. 1948-1952; the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, 1950-1961; the Metuchen Choral Group, 1957-1958; and the New Hope Gospel Chorus of Metuchen, 1962; etc. (donated by Janet Aspinwall)
- Small collection of 53 Revolutionary War era artifacts recovered primarily from properties adjacent to St. Margaret Mary's Church in Bonhamtown and properties near Raritan Landing in Piscataway by local metal detectorist Jim Metz (donated by widow of Jim Metz, 7/2023)
- 1988 dog collar tag for Borough of Metuchen, NJ, 0109 (donated by Dave Nelson)
- Photographs of Joan Annette's house at 20 Cody Avenue, Edison featuring her young daughter Susan Popp & dog, ca. 1963-1964 (donated by Emily Popp)
- Copy of *Boyhood Days in Old Metuchen* (2nd ed.) by Dr. Trumbull Marshall, © 1930; reprinted 1977 (donated by Mr. & Mrs. J. Cappuccitti)

The New York Times

Fans of local history already know what an amazing resource public libraries are, especially the digitized and searchable archives of the *Metuchen Recorder* on the Metuchen Public Library's website. There's more good news... you can read *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* online for free as well – current and historic issues! Visit the library's website for a 72-hour access code, and after the time has lapsed, you can get a new access code.



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



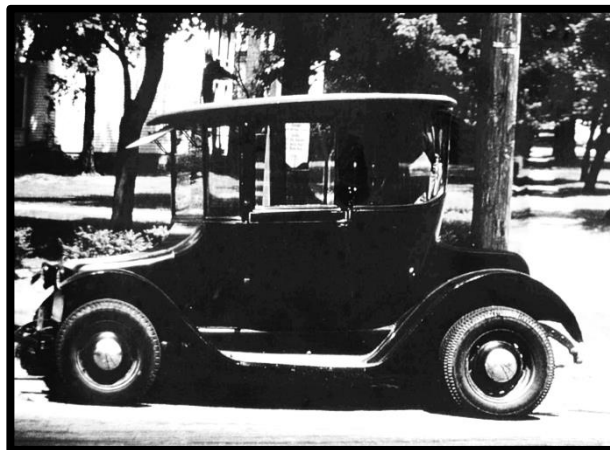
**ALL-VOLUNTEER, 501(c)3 NON-PROFIT CHARITY
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were ten cents for kids, which was half-price or something. It cost twenty cents or twenty-five cents for adults. You could buy something with your money back then. And I and sometimes Bobby Meshanic or Jackie Hill, who was another friend of Bobby Ellis, and I would go to the movies on Saturday, particularly because the movies were appealing to kids.

Well, on Saturday, they would have a movie that would be good for kids like *Roy Rogers* or something like that before the regular movie. And they'd have a regular movie that was suitable for kids.

I remember one Saturday I got there and the price had been raised and it was like twelve cents. All I had was a dime or a dime and a penny. I had eleven cents. So I had to run all the way home so I could get back in time to see the movie. I got home and got another couple cents from my mother. And then went back to the movie.

There was a lady in Metuchen, I guess this was before World War II or right after it started, that had an electric car. And you know they talk so much about electric cars nowadays, but this was back in the early forties... but Mrs. Coerr was the name of the lady who drove it around. She didn't drive much. She wasn't that modern, but she would be parked in front of the library a lot of the time because she liked to go to the library and she was on the library board. And as kids, we'd see it parked there. We'd run, we'd stand up on the whatever you call the thing that comes out of the car where you stand on, and look in. And that was very exciting for us. You know I was probably about eight or nine years old at the time. And the car inside was like a little parlor. It had vases in it. They didn't have little automobile seats, they had little chairs, a couple of them, like living room chairs. It's very interesting, you know as a kid, it was very exciting to see that. The lady lived [at 300] Middlesex Avenue and I guess she didn't travel much out of town from what my parents told me.



Life as a Child During World War II

Well, it was tough in a way. My father was away. He went on active duty in December of 1940. He was called up for one year. Well, December 1940 was not a good year to be called up for one year!

Of course, the war came on December seventh [1941]. And he was in the First Infantry Division in the Division Headquarters. He was a lieutenant colonel when he was killed. They went to England first, and then they went over the beach in North Africa. They first went into Algeria and then Tunisia. He's buried in Tunisia. We went over to see

his [grave]—buried in the American Military Cemetery there because, I get this from my mother, he said if he gets killed, if he doesn't come back, he should be buried where he fell. Now, basically I was only ten years old at the time my father was killed [in 1943]. So I can only look at it from the viewpoint of a ten-year-old.

My mother for a while was the Children's Room librarian [from 1941 to 1943]. That was when my father was still alive and he was overseas. And she did it as something to do. They didn't have the money to pay a librarian. They only could give her a couple hundred dollars a year. So she took the couple hundred and then she did the job for the year. That was the arrangement.

We used to go to Metuchen Inn. And then during the war, it was closed because the people who owned it were German. And they couldn't operate a business in town, which I thought was too bad.

We used to go to Schwaebische Alb up in—oh, heck where's that? Watchung? It's over by Route 22, but up on the hill where the highway is, yeah, below that. And that was closed because of the war, because the people that owned it and ran it were German.

Our family background is German. I didn't [feel any hostility], but I was a kid; growing up, no, because we lived here for several generations. I've never been to Germany, never knew anything about it basically, and the same with my parents. A lot of German immigration was around the 1850s and that's basically when our family came over. But I was not alive in 1850 despite rumors to the contrary.

At school, they had stamp books and you buy war stamps and put in the stamp book. At that time, \$25.00 bonds were \$18.75. When you took out the stamp book, that's what was traded / turned in for. I had bonds. I had some of the \$18.75 bonds, couldn't afford much more than that.

Oh, scrap metal, yes, that's interesting. There was an old Model A, wreck of an old Model A in the woods back here [Woodwild Park], and we used to play in it as a kid cause Walnut Place was right down the street here behind the library. And then during the war, it was hauled away for scrap metal. And we, by we, I mean myself and the other kids, were very disappointed and upset by that.

Becoming a Lawyer

One of the reasons I wanted to be a lawyer was because I thought it would be good to work for myself. So that's what I did. I rented an office from Marty Jessen and stayed there for all the years until I went on the bench. 351 Main Street. Well, I always had a secretary, and sometimes two. When I started, there were like seven or eight [lawyers in Metuchen]. Yes, there are quite a few now.

I did my clerkship for Pincus and Shamy in New Brunswick. I learned a good deal from that. There's a difference between law as it's taught and law school and as it's practiced.

Military Service

Well, I was involved in the Reserves for thirty-seven years. I was originally involved in the National Guard. When I was seventeen, I joined the Guard. And I did that all through college. I was finally discharged as a corporal from the National Guard to accept a commission as a second lieutenant from ROTC. All told, I think thirty-four years. I started a Private and I was retired as a Colonel and I got a pension, which is nice, eventually. I guess [I joined] primarily because my father was in the reserve, being on active duty when he was killed.

President Reagan

We had Ronald Reagan speak at a Republican function in North Brunswick. And I was the one who got him to come. He was governor of California then. It was before he was President, though he probably was running for it at the

time. This is back in 1977, is the date on the program. "Middlesex County Republican Organization's Cocktail Party and Banquet, July 11, 1977." That's probably when I was Middlesex County Republican Chairman and he was going to fly down then to Linden Airport.

Small airport there. And he had a plane that he was flying in, and they flew and landed there. And we met him out on the runway, and it was me and some of the people from the Republican organization and Stan Lease, who drove a second car. And we got Reagan from the plane and Stanley started off with a car. And there was a pipe sticking up through the pavement and he drove over it and it whacked something on the bottom of his car and the car began an awful noise after it.

So the muffler was dragging on the ground and making an awful sound. And he pulled into a gas station on I guess it was [U.S. Route 1], off whatever way you came down

coming from Linden to New Brunswick. And he pulled into a gas station there and tried to get it fixed up and a guy came out and the guy said, "Oh, we don't do repairs. We just sell gas." And this kid that was working there at the station went to the car window and looked in and he yelled back to the men at the station, "Ronald Reagan's here!" And they all ran out to look at him and say hello to him and whatnot. And they fixed his car as a result.

And [then] he had to speak somewhere in New York State, I can't remember where. And he had a rule

that he only could fly if there were two pilots, a copilot and a pilot. Somebody said, "Colonel Plechner will help." So I sat in the copilot's seat and they said to him, "Oh, Colonel Plechner needs to sit up front and be the copilot." Well, I was an infantry colonel... And later some member of Ronald Reagan's entourage said, "You're not a pilot, are you?" I said, "No, I'm an infantry officer." [Shows framed photo of himself and President Reagan leaving a plane, signed "To My Co-Pilot, Best Regards, Ronald Reagan."]

For the full text of Judge Plechner's Oral History, visit www.metuchen-edisonhistsoc.org

Images

Page 1, New Jersey Superior Court Judge Richard Plechner, 1990, *Home News Tribune* Morgue Collection. **Page 4**, Sarah Coerr's electric car and 62 Oak Avenue in 1932. **Page 5**, Shaking hands with President Ronald Reagan at the White House.

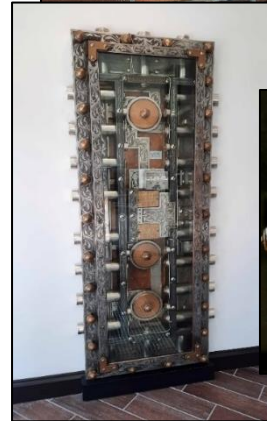


New Bank Building Honors Local Banker, Preserves Historic Vault

This past summer, Manasquan Bank officially opened its Metuchen branch location at the corner of Main and New Streets in Metuchen.

Quite appropriately, the building was named for and dedicated to Katherine J. Liseno in honor of her lifetime of service to both the Metuchen Savings Bank and the community at large. In all, Liseno spent 55 years in the banking industry and, according to NJBIZ, in 2017 was the longest-serving female bank CEO working in New Jersey.

Manasquan Bank incorporated history right into the new building as well; they retained and installed the decorative elements of the 1907-1908 Mosler Bank Vault from the Metuchen Savings Bank's original locations, first in the National Bank Building at 406 Main Street and then where Peterson Park is now, at 442 Main Street.



John Karl "Jack" Boeddinghaus 1928 – 2023

John Karl "Jack" Boeddinghaus, 95, of Metuchen, passed away on December 26, 2023, at Parker at Landing Lane in New Brunswick. Born in Staten Island, he moved to Metuchen when he was 3 years old and graduated from Metuchen High School in 1946 before attending Rutgers Agricultural School and serving in the Army during the Korean War. He is likely most remembered locally as the owner and operator of Jack's Flower Shop on South Main Street in Metuchen from 1948 until he retired in 1997.



Jack was an extremely active community member throughout his life. In addition to being a longtime Society member with his wife Phyllis, he was a member of the Metuchen Country Club, the Metuchen Rotary Club, the Metuchen Riding and Hunt Club, St. Luke's Episcopal Church, and the Metuchen Republican Club. He served on the Metuchen Borough Council and Shade Tree Commission.



Surviving are his wife of 75 years, Phyllis Boeddinghaus, two daughters, Erika Snyder and Karla Umland, and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Peterson Park Dedicated

In September, Metuchen Savings Banks' former drive-through lot was officially dedicated in honor of Thomas Mundy Peterson. Located at 442 Main Street, the pocket park was donated to the Borough of Metuchen by Manasquan Bank, the financial institution that recently merged with Metuchen Savings Bank. More improvements to this new public space are forthcoming, and we are delighted that it was named for the person who is arguably the most significant, but underrecognized, in our local history. For more about Peterson, see *Nannygoats* Volume 10, Issue 1 on our website.



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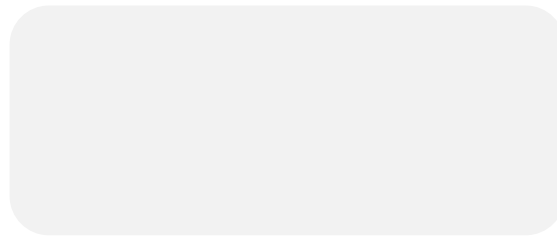
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Missed an issue of our newsletter? All back issues of *Nannygoats* are available for download from our website at www.metuchen-edisonhistsoc.org

Save The Date!

Annual Meeting

Following a short business meeting and elections, Ralph Heiss will present a program about the Lehigh Valley Railroad Through New Jersey.

Saturday, January 13, 2024
1:00 p.m.
Edison First Aid Squad #2
848 New Dover Rd, Edison

Local History Day

"50 Years of Collecting"
As the Society kicks off our 50th Anniversary, this year's theme will be what we've archived in our collections since 1974.

Sunday, February 18, 2024
1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.
Metuchen Public Library
480 Middlesex Ave, Metuchen

Where Are Our Members?

You don't need to be a *local* resident to be a supporting member of the historical society! We have members from all over the United States. Here are just some of the places our current members now reside:

Boston, MA ★ Hanover, NH ★ Topsham, ME ★ Shandaken, NY ★
Allentown, PA ★ Washington, DC ★ Silver Spring, MD ★ Virginia Beach,
VA ★ Beaufort, SC ★ Brookhaven, GA ★ Melbourne, FL ★ Spring, TX
★ Albuquerque, NM ★ Placerville, CA ★ Philomath, OR

Become a Member!

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.



Join our 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 @metuchen-edisonhistoricals1744.