



***African-Americans
and the
Ku Klux Klan
in 1920s Metuchen***

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Introduction

My name is Tyreen Reuter and I moved to Metuchen in 1998, and soon after became involved with the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society. I currently work as a historian for a cultural resources consulting and historic preservation firm based in Metuchen.

The following is a short research paper written for a history course I took in the Historic Preservation Program at Drew University in the Spring of 2000. The course, entitled *New Jersey History from the Civil War to the Present* was taught by Howard Green, a well-known New Jersey historian. Students were asked to research and write about a conflict their town's local history...

The topic I chose for this project is the Ku Klux Klan in Metuchen during the 1920s. I became interested in this subject while researching the history of a local public building. I came across several news items in the local newspaper from the 1920s that dealt with Klan activity in the area. Within a few days, I attended a Martin Luther King Jr. memorial celebration where a town official praised Metuchen for its "long history of tolerance and diversity." Combined with the fact that I had only recently had the misfortune to park at a local restaurant next to a car festooned with both Confederate Flag and "White Power" bumper stickers, I decided to look into this "long history" for myself.

What follows is an example of a local history research project that uses local resources (library, archives, residents), but is limited to a specific time period, the 1920s.

It is **not** a complete history of racism throughout the history of the area, and although the subject is approached from the standpoint of African-American local history, the Klan was opposed to a wide variety people and would have been opposed to most of us for some reason or another.

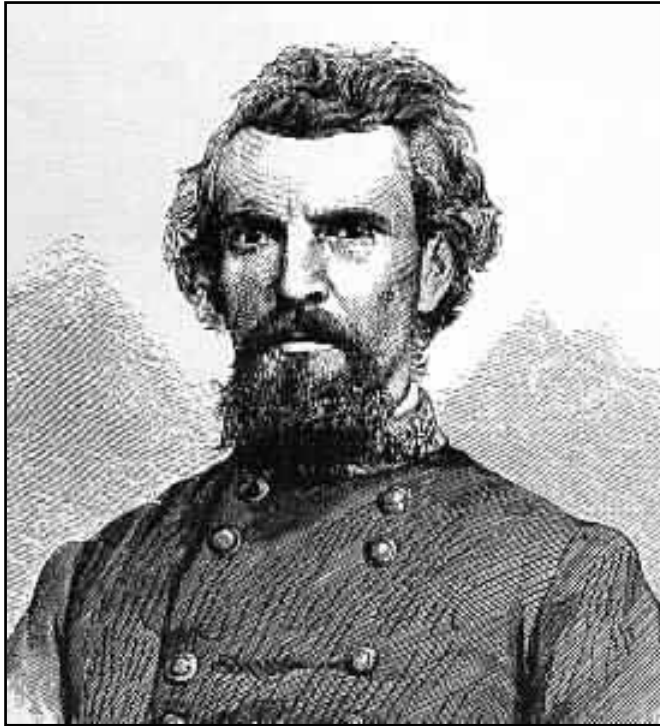
The Ku Klux Klan: Origins

In order to put into context the events that occurred in Metuchen, it is helpful to look at the basic background of the Ku Klux Klan's formation and national profile in the 1920s. The term "KKK" or "Klan" will be used here to describe all of the variations of this group at once. The KKK has splintered off and renamed its divisions innumerable times, but all variations have been derived from the original and hold to the same basic tenets.

The KKK was created in 1866 in Tennessee by a group of six men who had served as Confederate officers during the Civil War. "Ku Klux" came from the Ancient Greek word for 'circle' ('kuklos'.) "Klan" was added for alliteration and to honor their combined Gaelic heritage. It was developed as a fraternal, mystic society with the intent of aiding Confederate widows and frightening recently freed slaves.

A year later, Nathan Bedford Forrest organized the KKK on a larger scale with a more focused aim of promoting white supremacy. Within two years, the KKK had about 500,000 members in twelve states (Newton, viii.) In the Southern states, the Klan was closely aligned with the Democratic Party which was struggling to regain control after the war. Once this control was back in Democratic hands, the Klan's membership and visibility declined significantly. However, it left a powerful legacy of Confederate patriotism and violence, and while its racist ideals did not disappear during the intervening years, as an organization it was relatively dormant until the 1920s.

Origins and “First Era” of the Ku Klux Klan



Nathan B. Forrest



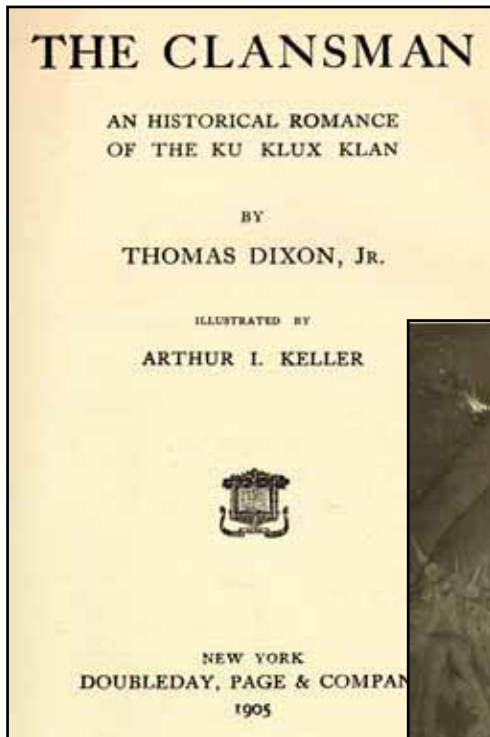
*Photograph
of a First Era
Klansman's
uniform
robes*

Second Era Klan

The Klan's legacy was rekindled in the early twentieth century and reached its peak in terms of power and influence during this time known as the "Second Era." There are several reasons for its resurgence. The first, pointed to by both critics and supporters of the Klan, is the 1905 novel "The Clansman" by Thomas Dixon. This "romantic" depiction of the Klan was made into the first ever epic Hollywood film, directed by D.W. Griffith, in 1915. This film, "Birth of a Nation," was controversial but nonetheless screened in the White House and endorsed by then President Woodrow Wilson. The Supreme Court's Chief Justice at the time - who happened to be a former Louisiana Klansman - also publicly endorsed the film, although both he and the President later retracted their endorsements under pressure.

“Second Era” of the Klan

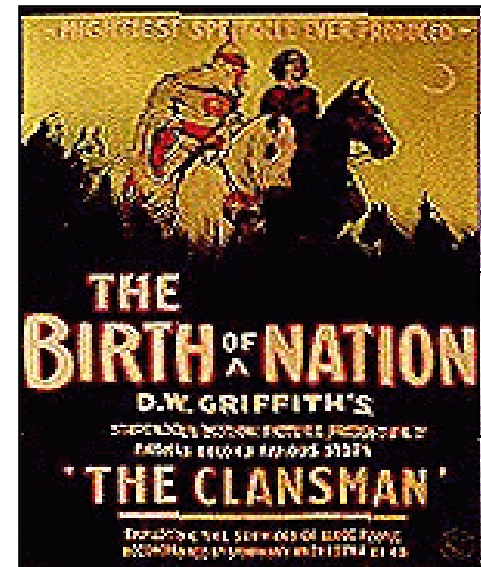
The Clansman and Birth of a Nation



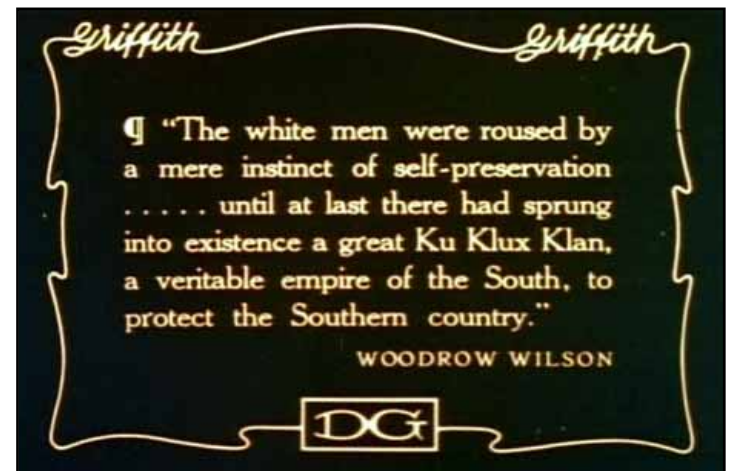
1905 novel



Book illustration



1915 Movie poster



Wilson quote used in *Birth of a Nation*

Causes of the Second Era Klan

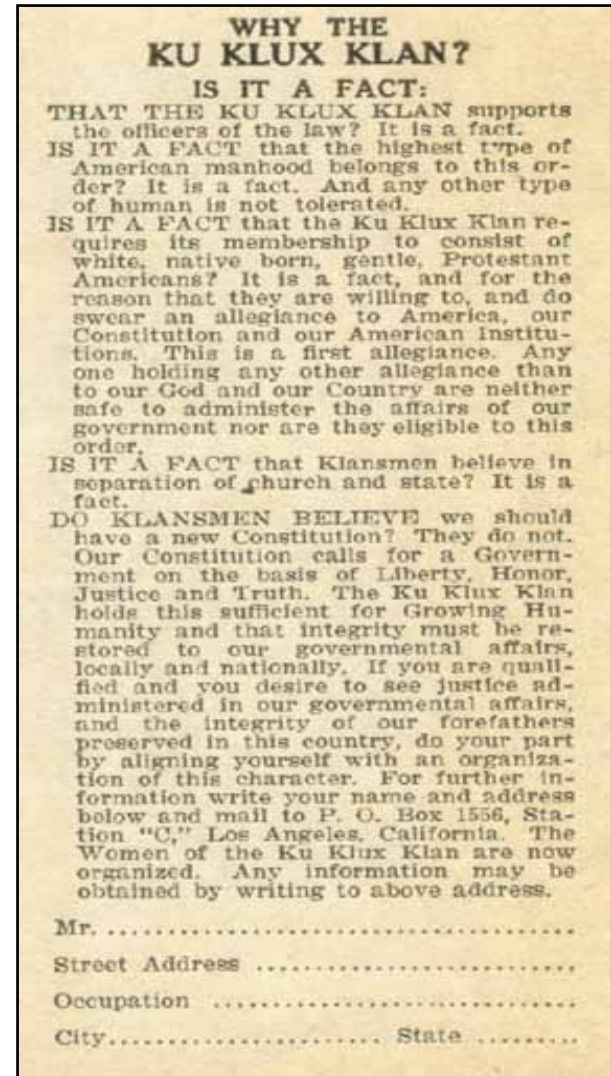
Violent labor strikes, the northward migration of African-Americans, the huge influx of immigrants between 1900 and 1920, and Prohibition all combined to aid in the Klan's resurrection.

An Atlanta minister, William Simmons, began actively recruiting members through the use of "Kleagles" (commissioned recruiters). Some of his early recruits had been involved in a lynching in 1915 which included the first cross burning by a group called the Knights of Mary Phagan).

“Second Era” of the Klan

Other causes of Resurgence...

- Northern migration of African-Americans
- Labor movement and major strikes
- Immigration from Catholic countries
- Prohibition
- Active recruitment by “Kleagles”
– commissioned recruiters
- Women were actively recruited:
Suffrage and Temperance



1920s recruiting flyer

Second Era Klan: Members and Enemies

The group thereafter became the “Knights of Ku Klux Klan,” and were again supposedly formed as a benevolent and charitable society which supported the flag, Bible, the Constitution, public schools, and motherhood. However, its list of sworn enemies had now grown to include not only radicals and African-Americans, but Catholics, Jews, immigrants, and labor unions.

Protestant ministers were some of the most sought-after recruits, as they not only gave an aura of respectability to the Klan, but also because they were seen to have a vested interest themselves in fighting off the “Catholic threat.” Women were also actively recruited, as the Klan supported women’s right to vote in an effort to counter-balance African-American votes, and the Klan’s support of the Temperance movement was thought to appeal to women.

Like the Klan of the first era, the rituals of second era were similar, if not based, on the Masonic, patriotic, civic, and fraternal societies popular at the time. The connection was so close that approximately 60% of Masons in Oregon were also Klan members (Horowitz, page 4.)

“Second Era” of the Klan

Presented itself as a charitable organization supporting...

Flag, bible, the Constitution, public schools, churches, pro-temperance, “Motherhood”

In reality, supporting...

Native-born, Protestant, White
Intimidation of enemies

Klan enemies...

African-Americans, “liberals,” Catholics, Jews, labor unions, immigrants.



1920s robe and banner from the Albert Pike Klavern in Rutherford, New Jersey. Confederate General Albert Pike, the Klan’s chief judicial officer during the First Era, was also a major figure in Scottish Rite Masonry and is buried in the Masonic Lodge in Washington, D.C..

Growth of the Klan in the 1920s

The Klan's membership grew from approximately 5,000 in 1915 to over 100,000 in 1920, and to somewhere around 4,000,000 in 1924, when between 30,000 and 40,000 Klan members marched in the capital. Various histories of the Klan's second era indicate that this event marked its peak in terms of strength and activity

The Klan used its numerical strength in order to gain political influence, and capitalized on similarities it had to the agendas of law enforcement and clergy (anti-bootlegging efforts, for example) in order to make allies. Even if a sheriff or elected official was not an actual member, the overall strength of the Klan and the hold it had on much of society made it much easier for prejudice in all its forms to be practiced.

According to Judith Deveson, in her thesis "The Ku Klux Klan in New Jersey in the 1920's," the New Jersey Klans had about 60,000 members during the 1920's, ranking it tenth in the United States. Its initial strongholds were in Passaic, Bergen, Essex, Union, and Morris counties, but eventually Monmouth and Middlesex counties had high numbers as well. Notable activity took place throughout the state however, and Mercer County was the scene of the largest "Klonvocation," or rally, in the Northeast in 1925, when 10,000 New Jersey Klan members paraded through Yardville, Hamilton Square, and Mercerville.

Growth of the Klan in the 1920s

National Membership

- 5000 in 1915
- 100,000 in 1920
- 4,000,000 in 1924

New Jersey

- 60,000 during the 1920s
- 10th nationally - more than Alabama, Louisiana, and Tennessee
- 1925 "Klonvocation" of 10,000 in Hamilton area: parade through Yardville, Hamilton Square, and Mercerville



August 8, 1924



1920s Klan rally in New Jersey

New Jersey Klan in the 1920s

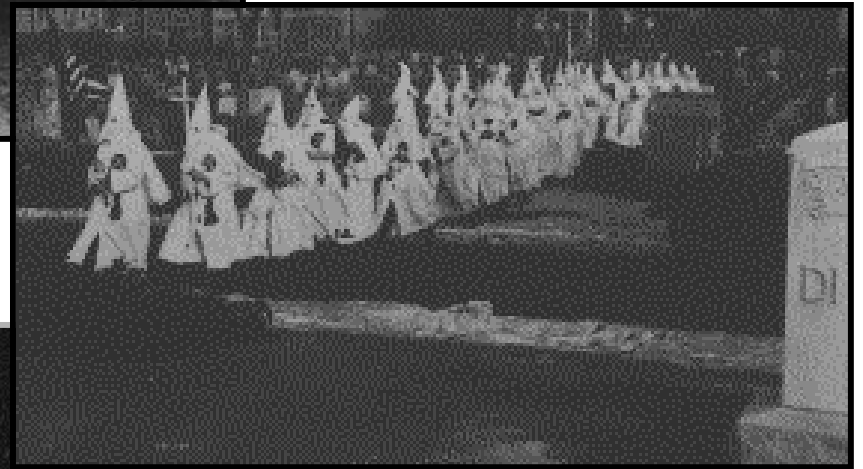
The Klan gathered strength in New Jersey for the same reasons it did nationally, the only difference being a somewhat less violent approach and a sharper focus on Catholics and Jews than that of other states. This led to the image the Klan hoped to cultivate of its being more of a “middle class purity crusade” (Horowitz, page 2) than a violent gang of thugs. To this end, the Klan publicized its charitable acts heavily and relied on religious leaders to polish its morally righteous image.

By 1929, however, the Klan’s influence and membership was once again declining. Its violence, corruption, and anti-Catholic fervor backfired at the same time that one of its major drivers, immigration, was decreasing.

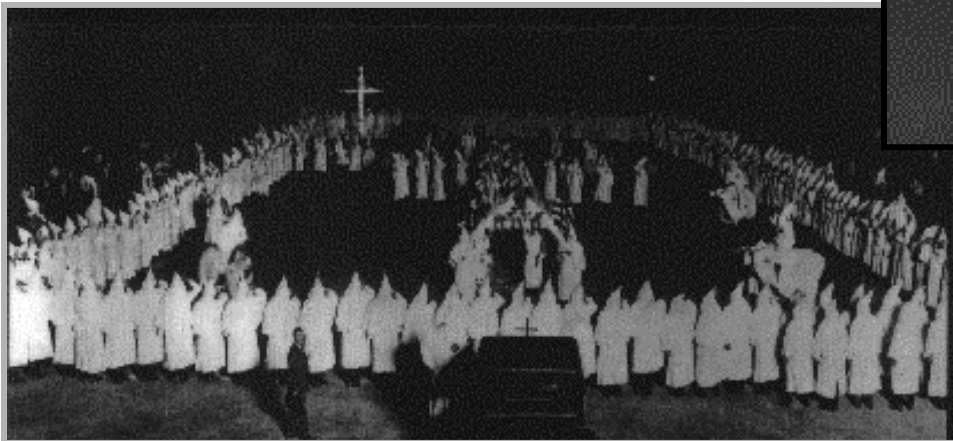
1920s Klan Rallies in New Jersey



Above and below: Klan rallies and ceremonies in New Jersey in the 1920s



Above: Klan attending a funeral in New Jersey in the 1920s.



Metuchen in the 1920s

Many, but not all, of the elements that combined to allow the Klan's growth on a national level during this time were also present in Metuchen. The 1920 Census for Middlesex County indicates that there were about 3400 residents in Metuchen. The vast majority of these were white and of native birth, and most likely Protestant as well since news items in the local paper, *The Metuchen Recorder*, indicate that the Protestant churches dominated the religious life of the town. There was, however, an established Catholic church and parochial school, as well as a growing immigrant presence. There were only 162 African-Americans listed in the 1920 census for Metuchen, and roughly one-third of those were female or male domestic servants living in their employers' homes.

Census records and the 1920, and 1929 Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of the area show a small cluster of African-American homes located around the Bethel AME church near the intersection of Durham and Central Avenues.

As well as near the intersection of Pearl and New Streets. A row of "tenements" (one with fire damage) and a "colored church" at the intersection are shown a block off Main Street.

Potter's Crossing in Raritan Township (now Edison) had a larger and more complex African-American community. This photograph is thought to be of an all African-American school near Potter's Crossing.

1920 Census of Metuchen

3,334 entries for the Borough of Metuchen

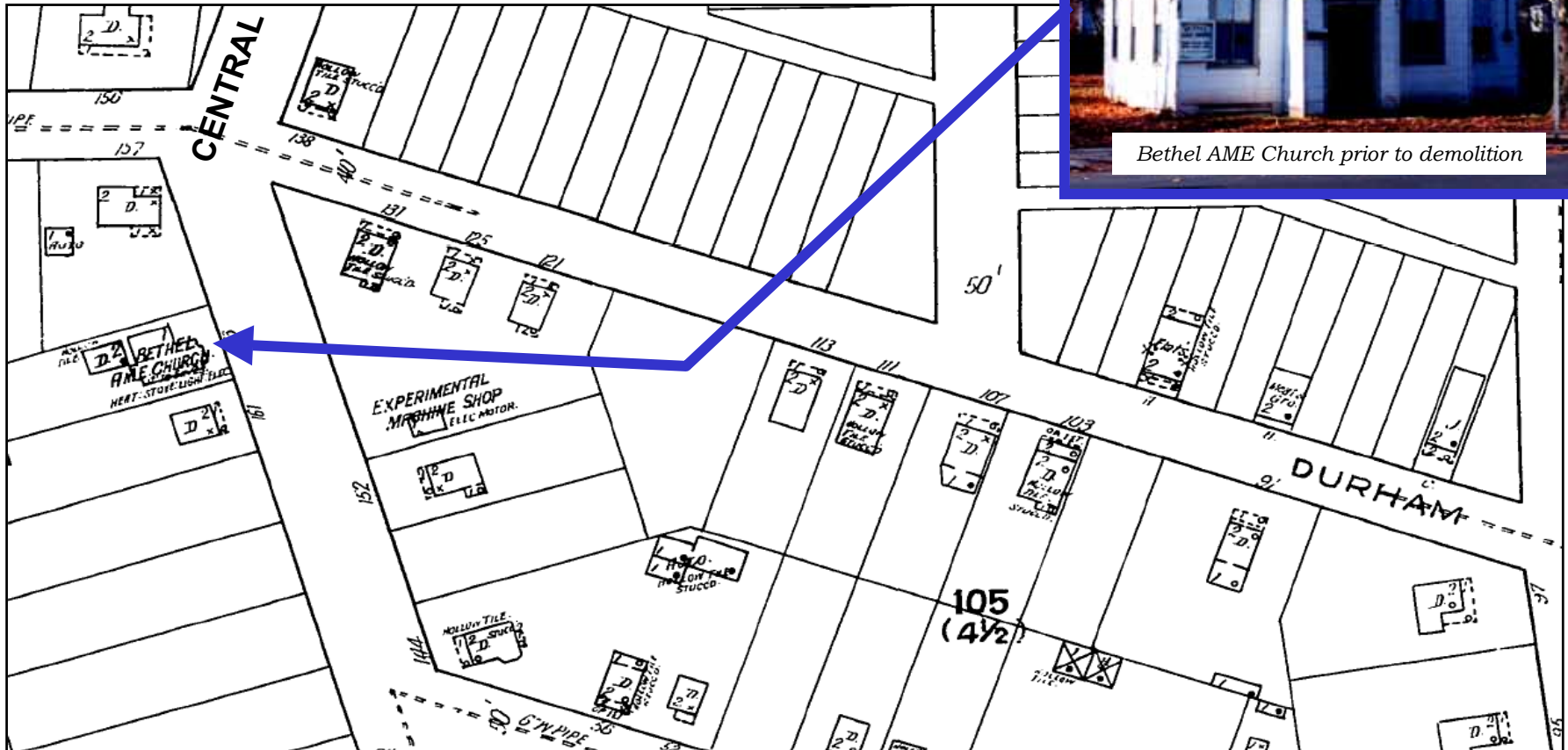
- **Mostly White, native-born.**
- **Immigrants mostly Swedish, Hungarian, Polish, Irish, Italian.**

162 African-Americans

- **Majority born in the southern states.**
- **More than a third worked as live-in domestic servants throughout the Borough – both women and men.**
- **Families and groups of families on New Street, Central Avenue, Durham Avenue, Center Street, Bloomfield Avenue, Maple Avenue, Middlesex Avenue, and Christol Street.**

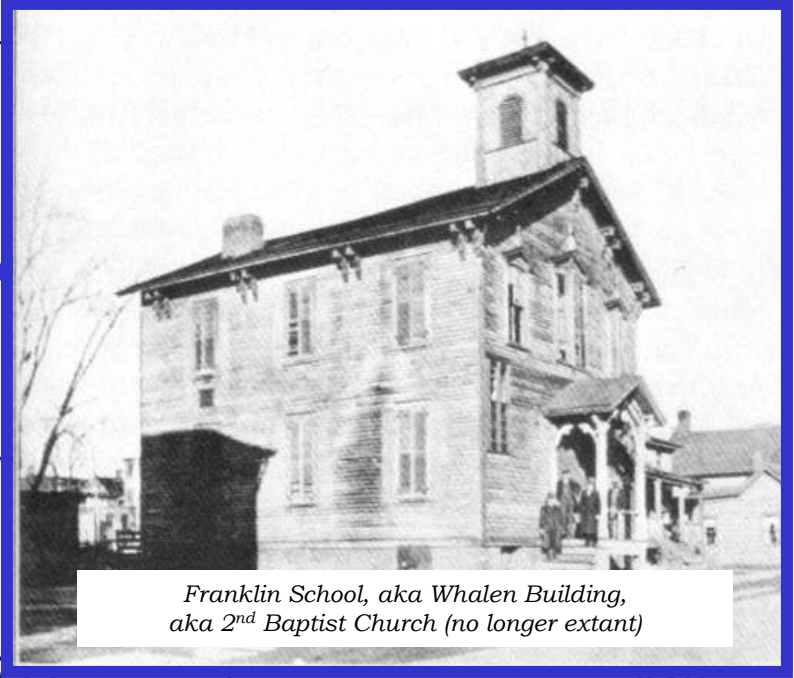
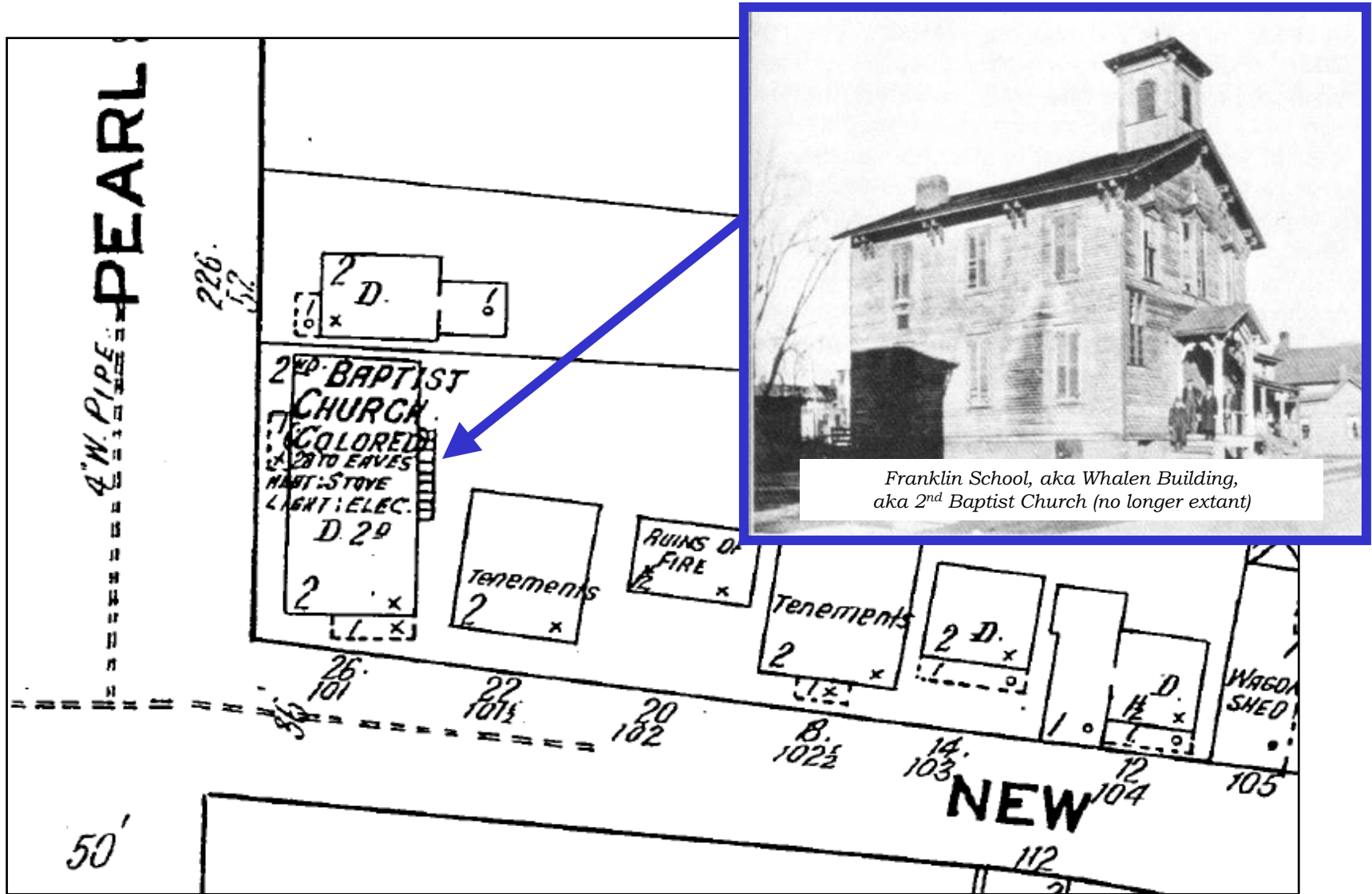
Durham and Central Avenues

"West of the intersection with Main Street however, the economic level descends progressively until the borough limits are approached and the street ends amid miserable shacks clustered about the equally miserable remains of Metuchen's first tavern and here a small colony of Negroes live." - Lloyd Grimstead, 1941



1920 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map

New and Pearl Streets



1920 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map

Metuchen's Community

The Recorder also indicates a number of other things about the social atmosphere of Metuchen at this time. Civic, patriotic, religious, political, and secret societies were extremely popular and influential. The paper is dominated by news of and events sponsored by the Borough Improvement League, W.C.T.U. (Women's Christian Temperance Union), Baptist Ladies Society, Presbyterian Ladies Aid Society, The Brotherhood (of Presbyterian Men), Masonic Lodge, Royal Arcanum, Everyman's Bible Group, Y.M.C.A., Rotary, D.A.R., and others. The members of these groups were often the town's political and religious leaders.

Community Organizations in 1920



The Metuchen Club

The Borough Improvement League



Metuchen Golf & Country Club

Minstrel and Blackface Shows

One of the most frequent and applauded form of entertainment for many of these groups was to perform in blackface shows to benefit either a charity or their own organization. These minstrel shows were held as frequently as two per week, and often advertised with mocking slang titles: “Plantation Evening... we’s g’wine to be thar”. They were publicized and reported on as newsworthy and important civic events. On page one of the same April, 1927 issue, both Paul Robeson’s appearance at a benefit for the Middlesex County Y.M.C.A. and a blackface show at the Metuchen Y.M.C.A. were advertised.

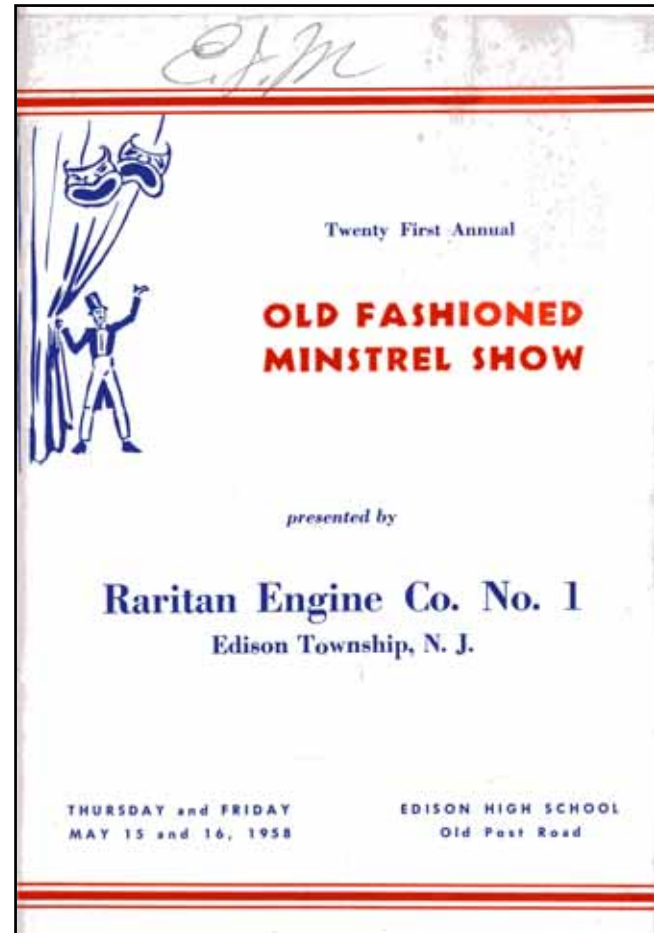
Another element of Metuchen society seen in the newspaper accounts is what was probably the generally accepted attitude regarding African-Americans at the time. They are belittled not only in these blackface shows as well as in contemporary accounts of individual ‘colored men’. The “Cornelus” story in David Marshall’s “Boyhood Days in Old Metuchen” is told with the aim of making us laugh at the ignorant, child-like, and docile qualities of ‘poor old Cornelus’. The *Recorder’s* September 7, 1928 front page story has much the same intent: it explained what a “Sad Colored Gentleman” Washington Johnson was to see beer and “dago wine” seized from bootleggers poured out onto the ground.

Minstrel and Blackface Shows



1909 Program

Included musical numbers such as “Jungle Town” and “The Gibson Coon,” and performers named “Sambo Eli” and “Nigger Gin.”



1958 Program

Included “Cotton Pickers” as performers and musical numbers such as the “Dixie Land Strutters”.

Minstrel and Blackface Shows



J and J Athletics Association Minstrel Show, November 15, 1935

Racial Attitudes

Considering that less than 5% of Metuchen's population was African-American during the 1920s, there was a disproportionate amount of reporting on crimes committed by African-Americans, whether residents, or (more frequently) those who were stopped initially for traffic violations, (i.e., "swinging plates") while passing through on the Lincoln Highway. The tone of headlines such as "Jersey City Giant, Crazyed by Hootch, Cuts Up Mrs. Euritha Smith Here" (June 22, 1928) are in no way matched by the rather serious and sedate reports given about White criminal activity. The title "Three Black Crows," with a front page photo of the offenders posing with rifles while sitting on a fence, was used to describe three young African-American boys caught stealing. "Woman Attacked by Wandering Negro," "Colored Man Arrested in Sly Robbery," "Two Colored Offenders, Negro Woman Asleep with Revolver in Lap," "Arthur Rice, Colored, of Englewood, is a Very Adaptable Man," "Runaway Negro Boys Sent Back Home in Jalopy," and "Colored Woman Dressed as Man" are all examples of articles from the time with similar tone.

Minstrel and Blackface Shows



Undated photograph from the Grimstead Archives

Discrimination: the Story of Percy Mulligan

Although not a criminal, but rather a well-liked and respected resident, the story of Percy Mulligan also shows the general attitudes of the time. In the 1920 census, Mr. Mulligan is a 30 year old African-American man living at 3 Railroad Street with his wife Georghie and son Percy, Jr., and working as a chauffeur for a private family. Four years later he was appointed by the police committee to serve as one of three non-patrolling marshals. According to the *Metuchen Recorder* on March 7, 1924:

Considerable opposition has been expressed... it has even been stated that the entire force is unanimously against the appointment of Mulligan, and strenuous protest will be made if he is sworn in. One member of the force insists that his resignation will follow Mulligan's taking office, and it is said that he is not alone.

No one apparently questions Mulligan's character nor the ability of the man for the job, nor is it a personal issue, but it is felt that a color line should be drawn on appointments of this nature.

The following week, it was reported that Mr. Mulligan resigned from the appointment, being that he was "the cause of much agitation and general discussion, not...because of any personal objection to the man named, but because of prejudice against the placing in office of a colored man..." According to a member of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society, Mr. Mulligan later served as a regular police officer for many years, but never discussed this incident to those who knew him later. After his death, his wife and son donated some of his belongings to the Historical Society and then moved away, most likely to North Carolina where Georghie had family.

Open Discrimination

PERCY MULLIGAN RESIGNS NEW JOB AS BORO MARSHAL

Resignation Tendered Upon Advice of Friends In Face of Criticism

NO NEW APPOINTMENTS

The appointment of Percy Mulligan as a special marshal by Mayor Clarkson upon recommendation of Chief of Police Hutchinson and the Police Committee of the Borough Council a week or so ago was the cause of much agitation and general discussion, not only members of the force but many citizens expressing vigorous objection to the appointment, but because of any personal objection to the man named, but because of prejudice against the placing in office of a colored man in a community whose population includes only a very small percentage of negroes.

The agitation has been brought to a close by the statement, unofficially given out, that the newly appointed marshal has resigned. This action was taken, it is said, upon the advice of several friends of Mr. Mulligan, who advised the move as the best for the welfare of all concerned. It is rumored that one or more members of the Borough Council were instrumental in securing the resignation because of the unpopularity of the appointment.

All three appointees were sworn in immediately after the appointment, and Messrs. Danford and Manziane are still holding office.

No appointment has yet been made to fill the vacancy caused by Mulligan's resignation, so far as could be learned at time of going to press.

Metuchen Recorder
March 28, 1924

April 1, 1930, was in this family Enter surname first, then the given name and middle initial, if any Includes every person living on April 1, 1930. Omit children born since April 1, 1930		Relationship of this person to the head of the family	Married - or - single	Value of real estate owned, if recorded	Married - or - single	Does this family live in a tenement?	Sex	Color or race
5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Mulligan, Percy	Head		\$5,000	R	h	h	h	
— Georgia B	Wife - 41				V	3	h	
— Percy Jr.	Son				V	h	h	
Brush, Earl J.	Head							

1930 census record for the Mulligan family

Klan Activity in Metuchen

Because of the secrecy surrounding their membership and activities, the news reports of the time and stories from local residents are basically all that exists to tell the story of actual Klan activity.

Information from unofficial interviews with some current residents led to both substantiated and unsubstantiated stories regarding the Klan and racial discrimination. One story concerned an African-American Monsignor appointed in the early twentieth century to serve in Metuchen, and how for the first several years of his appointment many residents would reputedly cross the street to avoid contact with him. Another story involved a resident's mother who had attended a Klan rally in Whitehouse at Woodbrook Farms. After the first meeting, she decided it was "foolish" and a "silly waste of time" and never went again.

Local Klan Activity in the 1920s



1926 photograph of the Unity Klan No. 17 of Rahway and Linden sponsoring a fundraising drive. The banner at center reads: "Help Us To Rebuild The Negro Church Of Carteret."

Local Stories

Perhaps there is slightly more evidence that there is truth in another local resident's comment that "it is no coincidence" that the Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial is placed opposite the Masonic Lodge. Given the similarities as a secret society and its national connections to the Klan, it would not be surprising if a number of Metuchen's Masons were at one time also Klansmen or at least supportive of their ideals. However, there is no direct evidence of a connection between the organizations, only some crossover between possible members of both, as will be mentioned further.

Local Stories



Masonic Lodge, Metuchen
ca. 1955



Martin Luther King, Jr Memorial Park
Dedicated January, 1976

News Reports

Evidence was available about some of the Klan gatherings and cross burnings that took place in Metuchen in the 1920s, the period of time examined here, in the local newspaper. The Metuchen Recorder reported on May 18, 1923 that a meeting of Methodists was interrupted by a “klan dodger” of unknown identity. A printed “hand slip” was left that indicated a large Klan was located nearby and that any interested parties should contact a P.O. box in Guttenberg, New Jersey. It was indicated that persons were seen loitering near the area into which the “dodger” disappeared, but no one was able to identify him. This contact was most likely an attempt to enlist Protestant clergy support, as was being done on a national level in the organization.

Two months later a cross burning on Lafayette Road near Woodbridge Avenue was attempted by a group of about 50 white-robed Klansman. A “party of local anti-klansmen” interrupted the ceremony. Still no identifications were made, as the “anti-klansmen” appear to have arrived too late. Suspicions were raised that the Klan had somehow been warned of a raid.

In August of 1923, the KKK and opponents clashed in Perth Amboy. 5,000 people had gathered to break up a Klan meeting scheduled to be held in the Odd Fellows Hall. Two local men were injured in the riot that developed. One, Thomas Davis, was beaten by Klan members, and it is unclear what side the other man, Gilbert Martin, was involved with or by whom he was beaten. Judith Deveson states in her paper that there were many Catholics in New Jersey who banded together against the Klan. Although it is not indicated in the report, it would be logical that these opponents, as would those who attempted to break up the Lafayette Road meeting, would have some common tie such as religious affiliation.

That Fall, *the Recorder* reported on an odd event witnessed at the New Jersey College for Women. A congregation of robed and hooded “Klansfolk” were conducting trials and mock punishments for some of the freshmen students. Eventually it was discovered to be a sophomore hoax.

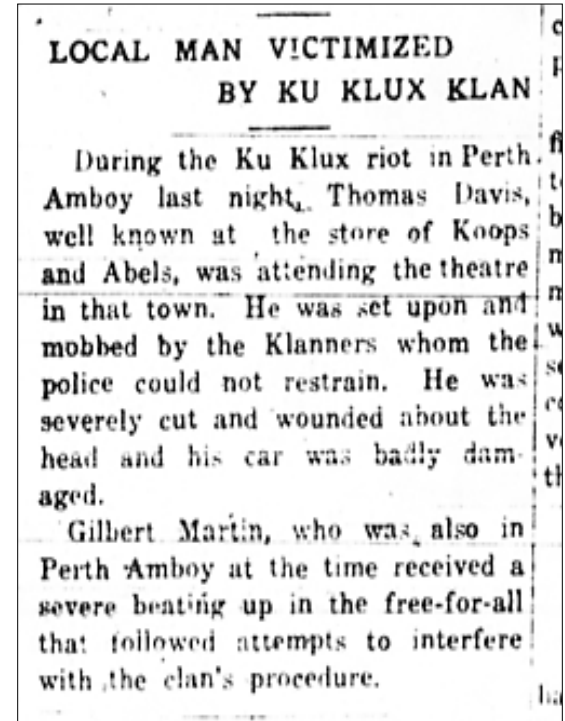
Local News Reports



Metuchen Recorder
May 18, 1923



Metuchen Recorder
July 20, 1923



Metuchen Recorder
August 31, 1923

Nixon Nitrate Explosion

Evidence for one of the local stories regarding the Klan was found in the news reports from following spring of 1924. According to the New York Times, an explosion at a fertilizer plant located in the Nixon section of Edison killed 20 and injured another 100 on Saturday, March 1. The March 7th edition of the *Recorder* indicated that five of those killed were Metuchen residents. One of these, Edwin L. Smith, was the nephew of a well-known Metuchen Policeman, and a member of the Masonic Lodge. According to the report:

An interesting and novel turn to the last rites was the appearance of a large delegation of the Ku Klux Klan, who held very beautiful and impressive ceremonies over their deceased brother. A large white floral pillow with a cross of red in the centre was bestowed by this order. Doctor Mason and Doctor Fenton were in attendance at this funeral. The interment was in the Presbyterian Cemetery.

Nixon Nitrate Explosion

ENTIRE BOROUGH MOURNS AT DEATH OF LOCAL MEN

The funeral services were held at the Hillpot funeral chapel on Monday evening, and the George Washington Chapter of the Masonic Lodge of New York City conducted a part of the funeral services, Mr. George Humphries acting as the officiating clergyman.

An interesting and novel turn to the last rites was the appearance of a large

delegation of the Ku Klux Klan, who held very beautiful and impressive ceremonies over their deceased brother. A large white floral pillow with cross of red in the centre was bestowed by this order. Dr. Mason and Dr. Fenton were in attendance at this funeral. The interment was in the Presbyterian Cemetery.

A “large delegation of the Ku Klux Klan” attended the funeral of “their deceased brother,” who was killed in the Nixon Nitrate Explosion Plant in March 1, 1924.

Metuchen Recorder
March 7, 1924

Connections to the Klan?

In this instance, the Klan is connected - however loosely - to the Masonic Lodge and Police Department. In addition, the "Doctor Mason" mentioned is actually one of the most upstanding and prominent citizens of Metuchen at the time. The Reverend Doctor J.G. Mason served as the Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church from 1877 to 1930. He was reportedly a close friend of Thomas Edison's and had been a Prohibition Party candidate for President of the United States. Not only his attendance at the funeral, but the public mention of his presence there seems to indicate some connection to the deceased and thereby the Klan, although this can in no way be confirmed. The Dr. Fenton mentioned appears to be the Dr. Reverend Paul Fenton, minister of St. Luke's Episcopal Church on Middlesex Avenue. *Coincidentally, both of these men are also remembered for their published histories of their respective churches.*

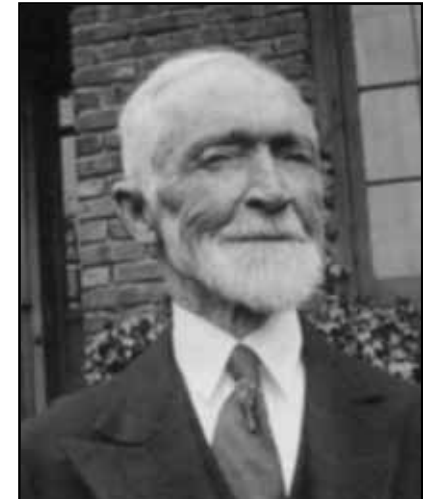
Dr. Reverend James G. Mason

3	Mason James G.	Head	R	M	W	78	M			Yes	Yes	Tennessee
	— Anita	Wife		F	W	70	M			Yes	Yes	Mexico
	— James Jr	Son		M	W	36	M			Yes	Yes	New Jersey
	— Irene J	Daughter ⁱⁿ Law		F	W	30	M			Yes	Yes	Illinois
	— Anita D	Granddaughter		F	W	2 $\frac{1}{2}$	S					New Jersey
	Anderson Ettie	Servant		F	W	22	S			Yes	Yes	Virginia

Ettie Anderson, a 22-year old woman from Virginia, is listed in the 1920 census as a "Mulatto" live-in servant to the Mason Family at 260 Woodbridge Avenue, Metuchen.



Parsonage House at
260 Woodbridge Avenue



Dr. Reverend James G. Mason

Crossing Burnings

A month later, the police again just miss catching Klan members in the act. On April 24, 1924 the *Metuchen Recorder* reports:

Ku Kluxers Burn Cross

Burning of Cross Here Last Night Thought to Be Work of the Klan. Second Visit to Borough

The Ku Klux Klan visited Metuchen for the second time last night when a flaming cross was discovered on the corner of Pearl and New Streets. The cross, which was about twelve feet high, was discovered between two-thirty and three a.m. and it is reported that about one hundred cars crowded with masked and hooded Klansmen assisted in the demonstration.

The Klan in this instance surrendered their usual precedent of lighting their cross on a hillside and instead located it in the heart of a small negro colony almost in the center of the town's business section. The negro residents were terrorized by the presence of the Klansmen but no attempt at hostilities of any sort developed.

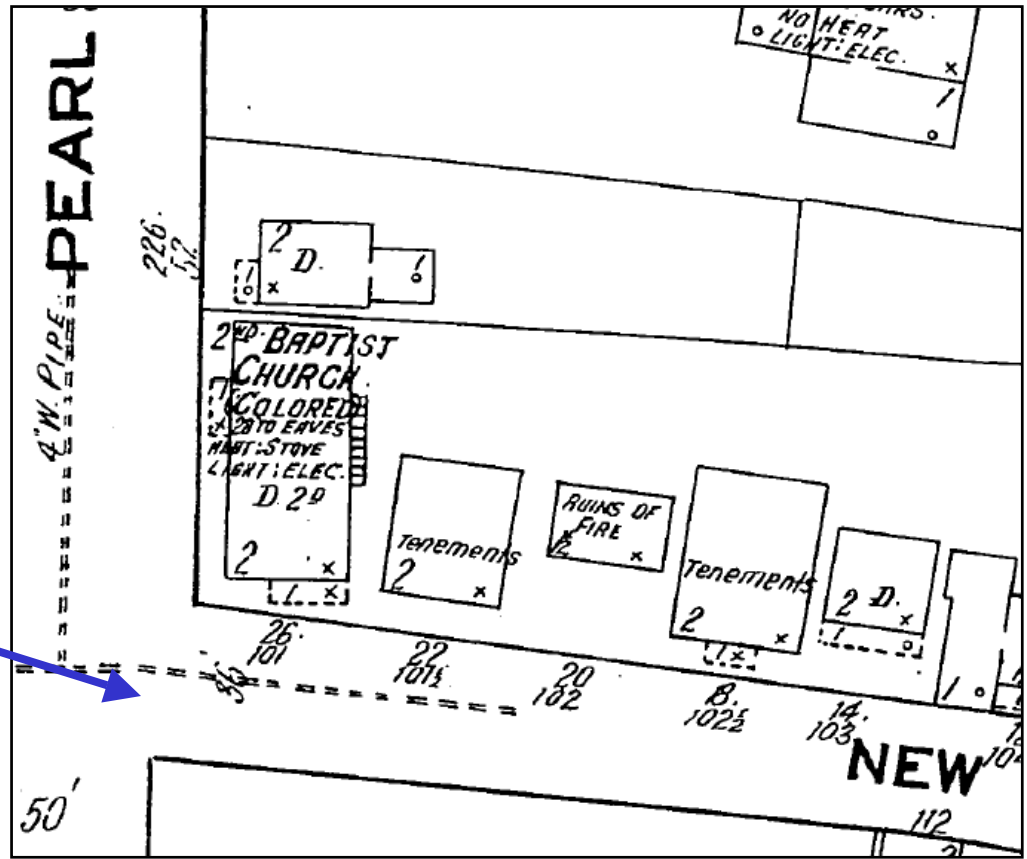
The police, who saw the blaze, arrived on the scene after the departure of the Klan.

It is unclear why the *Recorder* says that only two visits were made by the Klan to the Borough (since there were clearly more by this time), but the message from the Klan is very clear. It is the first **reported** instance where obvious efforts to intimidate were made. This was not a simple recruiting effort, meeting, or show of strength. In addition, it is again unfortunate that the police were unable to arrive earlier. Considering that the distance from the Police Station to the corner of New and Pearl is roughly four blocks, it is **very strange indeed** that **100** cars could leave the scene before at least **one** of the police's automobiles could arrive.

Reports of Cross Burnings



Metuchen Recorder
April 25, 1924



1920 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of the intersection of Pearl and New Streets in Metuchen

More Cross Burnings

1924 appears to be the year in which the most of the Klan's activity took place in Metuchen, and the police were again thwarted in their efforts to identify the culprits, as described on the front page of July 4, 1924 *Metuchen Recorder*:

Seven Crosses of Ku Klux Klan Burned Saturday

Fiery Symbols Similar to Crosses of Klan Ignited Here, Police Find No Trace

Metuchen was the center of a Ku Klux Klan demonstration last Saturday night when it is alleged seven crosses were burned at various points about the borough.

This seems to be part of a general demonstration, for crosses were also erected and burned at Milltown, South Amboy, Cranbury, and other towns in the vicinity. Someone summoned the police on the discovery of a cross behind the Edgar School but when they arrived the fire had almost entirely consumed the cross and no one was near.

Another cross was burned in front of Ten Eyck's gas station on the Lincoln Highway at the intersection with the Port Reading Railroad, a third in the field owned by the Kelly estate, corner of Main Street and Plainfield Avenue, diagonally opposite Wilbert's coal depot; while a fourth was burned on Maple Avenue, and three others reported at various points in the borough.

No one seems to have seen the Klansmen or any autos which might be implicated"

Although the location of these crosses may roughly correspond to the location of several African-American families throughout the Borough (see Appendix), given the various enemies the Klan could have been targeting, it is impossible to confirm their intent – they could have also been targeting boarding houses where immigrant workers lived.

A week later, two strange and possibly tongue in cheek reports are made in the July 11th edition of the *Recorder*. The first item, about a “Prowling Ghost”, states that:

There have been ghosts and rumors of ghosts around Oak Tree recently. Some were incredulous, others said they had always known such beings constituted part of our population. Now the ghost has actually been seen. Tall, “spooky”, arrayed in long white garments, it is all that a ghost should be, and it has a very ghostly habit of bobbing up unexpectedly and disappearing as suddenly.

There are at least a half a dozen people in the vicinity (some of them of rather tender years, whom you’d think any merciful ghost would let alone) who will tell you earnestly, honestly, and true that they know there is a ghost here because seeing is believing.

The second is a smaller news item that simply says “Salamone’s music store, Metuchen Hardware, and Pennsylvania Terrace are more popular than ever since the *Demoklannic* convention started its fall session.”

Both of these could be interpreted innocently, but it was a well-known practice of the Klan to purposefully use their garments to scare supposedly superstitious African-Americans. It is also unlikely that such an unusual and coincidental typographical error would be made to the word Democratic.

Fortunately, the end of the summer of 1924 is also the end of any **reported** cross burnings in the 1920s in Metuchen. But minstrel shows and “colored” crimes” were continually reported on throughout 1925, 1926, and 1927, but no verifiable Klan activity was mentioned.

Local News Reports

**SEVEN CROSSES
OF KU KLUX KLAN
BURNED SATURDAY**

Fiery Symbols Similar to
Crosses of Klan
Ignited Here

POLICE FIND NO TRACE

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This seems to be part of a general

Metuchen Recorder
July 4, 1924

**PROWLING GHOST
GREATLY ALARMS
OAK TREE FOLKS**

Ghost Seen

There have been ghosts and rumors of ghosts around Oak Tree recently. Some were incredulous, others said they had always known such beings constituted part of our population. But now the ghost has actually been seen. Tall, "spooky," arrayed in long white garments, it is all that a ghost should be, and it has a very ghostly habit of bobbing up unexpectedly and disappearing as suddenly.

There are at least half a dozen people in the vicinity (some of them of rather tender years, whom you'd think any merciful ghost would let alone) who will tell you earnestly, honest and true, that they know there's a ghost here, because seeing it is believing.

Metuchen Recorder
July 11, 1924

Salamone's music store, Metuchen Hardware, and Pennsylvania Terrace are more popular than ever since the Demoklannic convention started its fall session.

Metuchen Recorder
July 11, 1924

Similar Organizations

In 1928, however, a new branch of the national organization of the “Sons & Daughters of Liberty” began to be mentioned in the *Recorder*. The April 4, 1928 edition announced a card party to benefit this organization, indicated that 25-30 Metuchenites were already possible members, and a Mrs. C.P. Lawrence should be contacted for membership information. This group’s membership requirements & mission are notable in that they were strikingly similar to that of the Second Era Klan.

According to the report, membership in this organization was open to white, native born citizens between the ages of 16 and 25 who were Protestant and in no way involved with liquor. Their mission was to “Care for the sick, elderly, and helpless dependents; Bury the dead; Promote social interaction between members; Protect the Sabbath; Preserve the public schools system; Oppose public funds being distributed to un-taxed organizations; Guard separation of church and state; and Work to restrict immigration to prevent the ignorant, diseased, pauper, non-English speaking, or generally undesirable.”

In September of 1928, the group boasted a large increase of membership: 68 Members in Metuchen, nearly 1700 members and 11 councils in Middlesex County, and approximately 28,000 total members in New Jersey. The Metuchen branch, known as Lone Eagle Council #240 was managed by Miss Elizabeth Mohring, Miss M. Vomelsdorf, and Mrs. V. Winfield. Although the Klan’s national membership was in decline by this time, it appears that the Sons & Daughters of Liberty movement was growing - at least locally.

Until this point, there was not much evidence of specifically anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant groups in Metuchen. The Klan’s efforts could have been aimed in that direction, but it is difficult to determine. This new group could also have close ties to or list former Klan members or supporters as its new members. Again, since membership was highly secret, we can only work out the details by cross-referencing the few names provided in these reports.

Sons & Daughters of Liberty

Membership open to white, Protestant, native born, 16 to 25 year-old citizens “in no way involved with liquor.” Their mission was to:

- Care for the sick, elderly, and helpless dependents
- Bury the dead
- Promote social interaction between members
- Protect the Sabbath
- Preserve the public schools system
- Oppose public funds being distributed to un-taxed organizations
- Guard separation of church and state
- Work to restrict immigration to prevent the “ignorant, diseased, pauper, non-English speaking, or generally undesirable”



“S&D of L” markers found in New Jersey cemeteries

Still More to Learn

Unfortunately, the answer to the question of whether or not the Metuchen area was highly involved in the Klan could go either way: if all of the activity that took place was reported on, then in comparison to events on the state and national level, our area was probably not highly involved, and the efforts made to publicize the Klan's activities could even be seen as resistance rather than passive cooperation.

However, if there was a great deal more going on than can be confirmed given the evidence available, then the Metuchen area could very well be considered highly active. Regardless, enough was reported on to possibly explain the comment that "it was no coincidence" that the Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial was placed across from the Masonic Lodge. Perhaps it was in some way an effort to remind each other of a declared peace.

After the conclusion of this short project in June, 2000, I have continued to come across small pieces of additional information with regards to Klan activity in Metuchen in the 1930s and through to the 1970s, when a cross was burned on Linden Avenue in front of the home of an African-American who was on the Metuchen Board of Education. It seems that with additional research, much more information on this subject would surface and I feel there is a great deal more I can learn – so please let me know if you have any information to share on this subject.

I plan on continuing to ask questions and putting pieces together when I find them, even though it doesn't always form a pretty picture. I do believe there is a great deal for Metuchen to be proud about in terms of its history, even in terms of its efforts towards diversity and tolerance, but I don't believe it is as glossy and perfect as some would like us to believe.

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