

EVALUATION of HISTORIC DISTRICT POTENTIAL in METUCHEN, N.J.

Prepared for the Metuchen Historic Preservation Committee

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PROJECT PURPOSE: To evaluate the potential for National Register historic districts in the Borough of Metuchen.

SCOPE OF WORK

Due to budget constraints, the project's scope of work was limited to the following:

- Examination of locally available historical materials such as maps, directories, publications, histories, historic resource surveys and photographs.
- Reconnaissance-level survey of historic resources.
- Analysis of historic district potential in Metuchen with an outline of potential historic districts.

INTRODUCTION/HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1979 Heritage Studies, a Princeton-based consulting firm, completed a county-wide survey of historic resources in Middlesex County. Until 1870, Metuchen was part of Woodbridge Township. Although a 1799 map shows some early development, the County study noted that there was no appreciable development of Metuchen until completion of the railroad in the late 1830s. Subsequently, a railroad station was constructed on Main Street, a business district was developed between the railroad station and Middlesex Avenue and a more culturally and economically diverse population was drawn to the community. Therefore, when Raritan Township was incorporated in 1870, Metuchen, now the largest village in the new Township, became its political, commercial and social center. Public improvements were made, such as water supply and electric lights, and the number and variety of businesses grew.

The “1876 Plan of Metuchen,” drawn by C. L. Felton, C.E.[Figure 1], in addition to showing both the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Easton and Amboy Railroad crossing the community, shows considerable linear development along Main Street, between Walnut Street to the north, and Cedar Street to the south, with the heaviest concentration on the west side of Main. Beyond that, there was scattered development on a number of streets radiating out from Main in both directions, with a secondary concentration along parts of Le Grand Avenue, now known as Amboy Avenue.

The 1979 survey cites the 1900 incorporation of the Borough of Metuchen as the time when Metuchen’s prestige as a fine community in which to live was discovered by “New York bankers, brokers and literati whose presence increased sufficiently by the early part of the twentieth century” so that Metuchen became known as “the Brainy Borough,” though the sobriquet’s originator remains unknown.

Examination of a c. 1890, hand-drawn map by R. J. Eggert, M.D. [Figure 2], illustrates the residential development of the Middlesex Turnpike, a portion of Oak Street, Rector Street and Hillside Avenue, a development trend that steadily increased through 1910, 1920 and 1929¹ as shown on Sanborn maps for those years. The maps show also the development of Oak Avenue, Linden Avenue and others with substantial houses, which today illustrate a variety of early 20th century styles. The development of these residential streets tended to differ from that of the earlier, linear street development. While there had always been large estates scattered throughout the Township/Borough, these newly developed residential streets typically had larger lot sizes and showcased larger houses in a variety of popular styles than did much of the prior vernacular residential development, thus showing that they were planned for residents of more than average means.

Borough directories of the very early 20th century show that Middlesex Avenue area, Graham Avenue and Hillside Avenue were in particular favor with New York and Jersey City commuters, as well as with locally prominent professionals and businessmen.

METUCHEN HISTORIC DISTRICTS

The first assessment of Metuchen’s historic resources was undertaken more than thirty years ago as part of a county-wide survey of historic, cultural and architectural resources, with the survey of Metuchen resources conducted in 1978. Completed in 1979, the survey results can be found the “Middlesex County Inventory of Historic,

¹ See Sanborn maps in master copy.

Cultural and Architectural Resources.” The following are some important points related to that survey.

MIDDLESEX COUNTY SURVEY, 1979

- The idea of one large historic district in Metuchen originated with the 1979 survey.
- The '79 survey ignored any historic resources that post-dated 1910, though, technically, at that time all resources dating from 1928 or earlier would have been eligible for inclusion. Now, resources as recent as 1960, if historically or architecturally important, would be eligible.
- With the exception of Hillside Avenue and a portion of Rector Street, and scattered individual houses, the '79 survey largely ignored the entire residential district that stretches out on the north side of Middlesex Avenue between Main Street and Grove Street.
- In addition to the inclusion of individual 18th and 19th century buildings, when considering district potential, the survey focused primarily on the 19th century linear development of Main St., as well as the Woodbridge Avenue and Amboy Avenue neighborhoods and suggested an oddly shaped district cited as the Main St.-Amboy Ave. District.
- At that time, the '79 survey consultant noted the following: the difficulty in delineating a district, the irregular and provisional district boundaries, numerous intrusions described as “innocuous,” and the exclusion of important non-contiguous structures.
- The boundaries of the district suggested by the 1979 survey were outlined on a 1979 zoning map *[Figure 3]*.

HINTZ/NELESSEN SURVEY

Circa 1989 or later, the planning firm of Hintz/Nelessen completed a survey, most likely as part of a master plan revision, which resulted in a map that located historic resources and outlined a large, single historic district. This district incorporated the 1979 district

boundaries, while adding a significant portion of the residential area flanking Middlesex Avenue and the area between Durham, Main, Middlesex and Central, thus creating one huge district.²

PROBLEMS WITH THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY AND HINTZ/NELESSEN SURVEY BOUNDARIES

- The erosion of parts of Main Street due to demolition and non-contributing infill, incompatible alterations, and deferred maintenance has impaired the integrity of some resources and destroyed linkages between resources, thus isolating some parts of the proposed district. This is the case with parts of Main St. between Middlesex Ave. and New St, and between Amboy Avenue and High St. While certain properties on Amboy Ave. remain intact, specifically the north side of the block between Main and Halsey, resources on the south side between Main and Vorhees Place have been substantially obliterated.
- Additionally, the mixture of uses (commercial, residential and civic), a date span ranging from the early 1800s through c. 1940, post-survey intrusions and demolitions, and the varied quality of resources argue strongly against the creation of one, large district as suggested by both the Middlesex County and Hintz/Nelessen surveys. However, options for historic districts do remain.

CURRENT HISTORIC DISTRICT OPTIONS

The strongest candidates for National Register/New Jersey Register and local historic district status are listed below. However, historical research will be necessary to support of these districts.

- **Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park Area:** This potential district includes both sides of Middlesex Avenue between the old Franklin School and Grove Avenue, Oak Avenue to Chestnut Street, Linden Avenue to Chestnut Street or slightly beyond Chestnut, Chestnut Avenue between Linden and Woodwild Park, Maple

² See large area outlined in black on the Hintz-Nelessen map found in the master copy of this report.

Avenue between Chestnut and Linden, and a portion of Elm Avenue, all on the north side of Middlesex; and Rector Street and Hillside Avenue from Rector to Robins Place on the south side. While there are related individual houses located beyond the boundaries listed, a significant number of smaller houses on smaller lots, along with various later intrusions have resulted in a marked change in streetscape from the majority of the district.

- **Hillside Avenue-Rector Street:** An alternate to including these two streets in a Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park district.
- **Graham Avenue Area:** This area includes Franklin Place, Lake Avenue between High and Spring Street, Spring Street between Lake and Main, and parts of High Street from Graham to Lake.
- **Main Street-Amboy Avenue:** This is a limited area of one block with a possible linkage to Woodbridge Avenue.

DESCRIPTIONS OF POTENTIAL HISTORIC DISTRICTS

MIDDLESEX AVENUE AREA-WOODWILD PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT

Historical Significance

The period ranging from c.1890 through the 1930s “was the period when the connotation ‘Brainy Borough’ was most likely warranted for Metuchen. Many of its inhabitants were literary or artistic; some returned annually to winter homes in the city [New York]; quite a number enjoyed horses and almost everyone, it seemed, liked dress-up social functions...social activities reflected the balanced living of the day...” [St. Luke’s 1868-1968] This description from a 1968 history of St. Luke’s Church appears to be supported by local directories of the period, which indicate that the area’s streets were prominent among those favored by New York and Jersey City businessmen, as well as local professionals and business owners, and several structures still standing were, at that time, centers of social and civic life.

The Metuchen Club on Middlesex Avenue [now owned by the YMCA], founded in 1890, was the focus of Saturday night social life in Metuchen. During the day, members played tennis on the four tennis courts and cards on the piazza. Evening activities included buffet suppers, twelve formal and informal dances, card parties, a New Year's reception, a Valentine party, vaudeville, a musicale, a dramatic evening and teas. Local residents played golf at the Woodwild Golf Club [no longer extant] and many enjoyed horseback riding and bicycling. Some became interested in civic improvements. In 1906, the Borough Improvement League made the former Franklin School on Middlesex Avenue its meeting place. Other focal points of the district included St. Luke's Church, where many social activities were either conducted or planned, and Woodwild Park. In 1902, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Corbin donated Woodwild Park to be held in trust by the Woodwild Park Association for public use, and the extant 1903 watering trough/public fountain installed at the intersection of Oak Street and Middlesex Avenue, became a symbol of community refinement and pride. Also prominent in the district was the Metuchen Inn, which opened in the early 1920s and, as the successor to the former Hillside Inn, may have hosted a few famous guests who visited area residents or who were engaged to perform in local concerts and plays.

For Metuchen this was a period of growth as an affluent suburban commuter community. According to its website, the Metuchen Building and Loan Association was chartered in 1897 for the purpose of developing the new Woodwild Park residential area of Metuchen. Metuchen's population in the 1890s was less than 2,000, but by 1930 it was 5,748 and by 1940 it was 6,557. During this period, Middlesex Avenue, between Main Street and Grove Avenue, along with the areas north and south of that stretch of Middlesex, was developed with substantial homes that reflected the status of its residents; and as the area reached its peak in the 1930s, the new Metuchen Public Library was constructed on Middlesex Avenue.

"It must be conceded that life proceeded at a more leisurely and uncomplicated tempo and then [during the early 20th century], if ever, came tranquil days." [St. Luke's Church]

Not only is the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park neighborhood representative of early 20th century Metuchen when it was known as the "Brainy Borough," Middlesex Avenue is a portion of the Lincoln Highway, the first interstate highway in the United States. The development of the Lincoln Highway, known at the time as "The Main Street across America," coincides with the explosion of residential development within much of this proposed district. Designated in 1913, the Lincoln Highway was inspired by the "Good Roads Movement" led by automobile

enthusiasts and bicyclists between 1880 and 1916. Whether Metuchen's bicycling groups played a part in the movement is as yet unknown. In any case, due to Middlesex Avenue's designation as part of an early interstate highway system, many travelers formed their impressions of Metuchen by what they saw as they traveled this stretch of Middlesex Avenue. To this day, Woodwild Park is listed as an attraction on the nation's interstate highway system.

Approximate/Suggested District Boundaries

Today, the c. 1890-1940 period of development is perhaps best exemplified in Metuchen by a district comprised of the following streets *[Figure 4]*:

- Middlesex Avenue from the former Franklin School and the Public Library to Grove Avenue;
- Chestnut Avenue from Linden Avenue to and including Woodwild Park;
- Oak Avenue and Linden Avenue to Chestnut, including a few houses on Linden and Oak north of Chestnut;
- Maple Avenue between Oak and Linden;
- About a half block of Elm Avenue, west of Linden;
- Rector Street; and
- Hillside Avenue from Robins Place to Rector Street.

It should be noted that all streets on the Woodwild Park side of the district bear the names of trees, an appropriate choice for a development associated with the park by name. Whether or not the Metuchen Building and Loan Association had any part in development on Rector Street or Hillside Avenue is at this time unknown. What ties these two streets with those on the north side of Middlesex is the period, quality and style of the architecture, and the fact that they are linked by important period structures on both sides of Middlesex Avenue. While the district's period of significance is c. 1890 to circa 1940, several earlier structures and sites, such as the old Franklin School, St. Luke's Church, the Gilman House and Woodwild Park, gained additional stature during this period, through either new or expanded use.

Individually significant or noteworthy buildings and sites within the district include the following:

Middlesex Avenue:

- The former Metuchen Club (#483), a circa 1900 Colonial Revival structure featured on early postcards; now owned by the YMCA;
- The former Franklin School (c. 1807/1842, #491), a Federal/Greek Revival school listed on the National Register of Historic Places; it housed the Borough Improvement League during the district's period of significance;
- The Metuchen Inn/Gilman House (#424): formerly a Second Empire residence, as an inn it may hosted some famous guests;
- St. Luke's Church, a circa 1860s Carpenter Gothic church listed on the National Register of Historic Places;
- The watering trough-public fountain, installed in 1903 as a civic improvement to serve travelers through Metuchen as well as local residents;
- The Metuchen Public Library, a nice example of Classical Revival civic architecture built in the 1930s;
- The entrance to Woodwild Park, a nature and wildlife preserve owned and maintained by a private trust, but open to the public since about 1902; and
- Two imposing examples of Neoclassical Revival residential architecture, #300 and #335, the latter known as the Burroughs House).

District Architecture

In America, the period between 1890 and 1940 featured a variety of architectural styles, and the Middlesex Avenue Area Historic District includes, in addition to the buildings mentioned above, examples of just about every architectural style popular during that period, including earlier examples constructed prior to the period of major development. While there are many more than those listed, some examples include the following:³

Vernacular Gothic Revival

- # 52 Elm

³ Selected photographs submitted with the master copy.

Italianate

- Cubical: #376 Middlesex
- Vernacular: #105 Hillside

Colonial Revival

- #204 Chestnut
- #31 and 62 Oak

Queen Anne

- #43 Rector
- #117 Hillside
- # 567 Middlesex (small, vernacular cottage)

Queen Anne/Shingle

- #61 Hillside

American Foursquare/Colonial Revival

- #28 Oak
- #72 Hillside

Craftsman

- #35 Linden
- Middlesex, opposite the Metuchen Inn
- 364 Middlesex

Tudor

- #83, 85 and 87 Linden

Eclectic

- #100 Hillside: incorporates faux Tudor half-timbering and a Mediterranean tile roof on a dormered Four-Square masonry structure
- Oak, between # 52 and #20: features shaped, parapeted gables and stucco cladding, popular features of the Mission style

- #56 Oak: features the sweeping roofline of the Shingle style, tall (Queen Anne influence) chimneys of rustic stone (Shingle influence) with windows influenced by the Prairie style

Summary/Rationale

The Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park area is probably Metuchen’s strongest candidate for historic district status due to the following:

- Its representation of the community’s turn of the century/early 20th century development as a premier suburban commuter community in New Jersey and its identity as the “Brainy Borough,” as well as its status as the premier neighborhood of Metuchen in the first half of the 20th century.
- The variety and quality of residential architecture dating from the second half of the 19th century through circa 1940.
- Its connection with civic and social life in Metuchen during this period.
- The prevalence of local landmarks on Middlesex Avenue: Franklin School/Borough Improvement League Building, Metuchen Club, Public Library, Metuchen Inn, St. Luke’s Church, the watering trough and the entrance to Woodwild Park.
- Middlesex Avenue’s role as part of the Lincoln Highway.

Applicable National Register Criteria

National Register criteria that might apply would include the following:

- A: The district is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- C: The district embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction, or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

Whether Criterion B (association with lives of people important in our past) would apply will depend on the results of additional research.

Threat to District

The major threat to the district is the potential erosion of Middlesex Avenue. The late 20th century saw the creation of a new street (Stirling Place), which compromised a few properties on the south side of Middlesex. There have been several intrusions, particularly on the south side, and several properties have suffered the loss of defining architectural features or the use of inappropriate siding. Historic district status might help to halt further decline of this important street.

Recommendations

1. Make the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District the top priority for Register listing and consider creation of a local district as well.
2. To ensure or strengthen National Register eligibility, research should be undertaken as follows:
 - Research regarding district homeowners, c. 1890 through the 1930s, to support the supposition that these homeowners were indeed representative of the “Brainy Borough” and that they were among the “movers and shakers” of the community.
 - Research to substantiate the claim that famous guests visited the Metuchen literati and stayed at their homes in the district or at the Metuchen Inn.
 - Research regarding the designation of Middlesex Avenue as part of the Lincoln Highway to ascertain any community involvement (e.g. any Metuchen bicycling groups active in the Good Roads Movement) or any reactions to the designation.
 - Research related to the residential development known as Woodwild Park.

HILLSIDE AVENUE HISTORIC DISTRICT OR HILLSIDE AVENUE-RECTOR STREET DISTRICT

(Hillside Avenue between Robins Place and Rector Street; Rector Street)

A few of Hillside Avenue’s earliest houses were built in the 1860s and 1870s, but Hillside Avenue primarily showcases some examples of c. 1890 – 1910 residential architecture. While this street could probably succeed as a district on its own merits, it has been included in the Middlesex Avenue Area/Woodwild

Park District described above. Should additional research prove that development of Rector Street had no relationship to the development of the Middlesex Avenue Area/Woodwild Park Historic District, Rector Street could be combined with Hillside Avenue to form the Hillside Avenue-Rector Street Historic District.

GRAHAM AVENUE-THOMAS POND HISTORIC DISTRICT

(including SPRING St., FRANKLIN Pl. and portions of LAKE Ave. and HIGH St.)

David Graham Thomas laid out Graham Avenue in 1860, while Spring Street was developed in 1861. These were fine residential streets that attracted prominent residents of the community who, like Graham himself, owned houses that dated from the 1860s to c. 1900. Several houses of similar quality were constructed on Franklin Place and High Street. Thomas's Pond, fronting on Lake Avenue and Franklin Place, was and still is an important focal point of the neighborhood, as the rear yards of properties on Graham, Spring and Franklin border the pond. The pond and the surrounding park is a place where children have frolicked for more one hundred and fifty years. The park and pond, donated by the Thomas grandchildren, is now known as Thomas Park. While some of the houses on Spring St. have been lost and a few intrusions exist, the view of the pond today, as seen from Franklin and Lake, is strongly reminiscent of its circa 1900 appearance, making the pond a major contributing feature of the historic district.

Perhaps the most famous resident of the neighborhood was George S. Silzer, a former state senator who became the 38th governor of New Jersey. His home, designed in the Colonial Revival style by local architect Clement W. Fairweather, still stands, though somewhat altered, at 79 Graham Avenue. David Graham Thomas, who lived in a c. 1860 Italianate house, resided nearby at 59 Graham Avenue.

Across the street from Thomas Park, on the northwest corner of Franklin Place at Lake Avenue, stands the Dutch Reformed Church, designed by Clement Fairweather and constructed in 1949. While it does not contribute to the proposed district's period of significance, it is a pleasing, harmonious intrusion.

Approximate/Suggested District Boundaries [Figure 5]

- Graham Avenue from High Street to railroad

- Spring Street from Main Street to Lake Avenue
- Franklin Place
- High Street (north side) from Graham Avenue to Lake Avenue
- Lake Avenue (east side) from High to Spring
- Possibly 259 Main Street at the corner of Spring

This circa 1890 house could be considered for inclusion as the property includes frontage on Spring Street, and it relates more to the Graham-Spring District stylistically than to the more vernacular residences on Main.

- Possibly a few c. 1860s houses on the south side of High Street between the intersection of Graham and the YMCA if research connects them to the development of Graham Avenue.
- The boundary could be stretched to include the Mary Wilkins Freeman House located nearby on Lake Avenue.

Applicable National Register Criteria

See explanation of criteria for the Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District on page 10. Governor Silzer's residency and the local importance of some residents may be a factor for including Criterion B. The inclusion of the Mary Wilkins Freeman House might also enhance the nomination.

District Architecture

The majority of the district's houses were constructed between 1860 and approximately 1910 in local, largely vernacular interpretations of the popular architectural styles of the day such as Italianate, Queen Anne, Shingle and Colonial Revival. A few of the district's historic houses have undergone major additions or architectural changes, and several new houses have been constructed. However, with the exception of a one-story, c. 1960s contemporary on Spring Street, which represents a significant intrusion in the streetscape, the district character has remained largely intact. Some examples of the district's architectural styles include the following:

Italianate

- #59 Graham (David Graham Thomas House)

- #48 Graham

Queen Anne

- # 2 Graham (a brick and shingle example)
- #24 Franklin (a brick and shingle example)

Shingle

- 259 Main (towered example)

Colonial Revival

- Several houses on High between Graham and Lake
- #76 Spring
- #36 Graham
- #79 Graham (Gov. Silzer House)

Other Contributing or Harmonizing House Styles

- # 35 Franklin - Vernacular with Italian Renaissance Influence
- East side of Graham; number not visible – Vernacular, stucco-clad Four Square with faux half timbering detail in front gable

Threats to District

Principal threats to the Graham Avenue-Thomas Pond District include loss of integrity due to inappropriate alterations and demolition leading to inappropriate infill.

Recommendations

1. Conduct research related to neighborhood history and property owners.
2. Provide public education related to appropriate additions and alterations.
3. Pursue National Register Listing.

MAIN ST.(west side)-AMBOY-AVE.(north side) HISTORIC DISTRICT

Development along Main Street, Amboy Avenue and Woodbridge Avenue was among the earliest in Metuchen following the construction of the railroad through the community. This area included houses and a church dating from 1848 (Presbyterian Parsonage and Church) through the 1890s, with the majority dating from the 1850s through the 1880s. Like the Graham Avenue-Spring Street area, this section of Metuchen was home to some of the town's most prominent residents. In the 1860s and 1870s imposing Second Empire and Italianate houses were built along Amboy Avenue, and other substantial homes could be found on Main Street and Woodbridge Avenue. More than a few are important to local history. The Reverend T. Bradford House (#296 Amboy), a Second Empire example, was built as a summer residence. It served as both a hotel and a community center for soldiers during World War I. The Reverend E. Wilson House (#304 Amboy), a cubical Italianate structure with a belvedere, was once used a private school. The Bloomfield House (#312 Amboy) may have associations to the Bloomfield family who owned the Bloomfield Clay Company and specifically to Charles A. Bloomfield, founder of the Department of Ceramics at the State Agricultural College (Rutgers).

At the turn of the century, residential focus shifted to the newer Woodwild Park area at Middlesex Avenue, and by the mid-20th century many grand old residences on Amboy and Main were converted to professional or commercial use, and a few were demolished to make way for other development. In some places, new construction interrupted residential streetscapes of period houses. Today, a row of mid-to-late 19th century houses on Woodbridge Avenue has been visually separated from houses on Main Street by more recent brick construction plus the remodeling of the old frame Presbyterian Church.

While some of Amboy Avenue's grandest old mansions have suffered from unfortunate alterations, some of the houses on Main Street have aged gracefully. Residential architecture within the district ranges from stylish, almost high style Italianate and Second Empire examples built during the 1860s and 1870s, to more vernacular examples from the same period. Alterations notwithstanding, the early importance of this district warrants its recognition and preservation as a historic district, which can represent perhaps the most important period in Metuchen's early history. However, an application for Register listing must present a very strong historical significance component to offset the alterations that have occurred, primarily on Amboy Avenue structures.

District Boundaries *[Figure 5]*

The potential district includes the west side of Amboy Avenue, between Main Street and Halsey Street; the west side of Main, between Amboy Avenue and the Pennsylvania RR, including the old Presbyterian Cemetery.⁴ Wernik Place (c. early 20th century), while not of the age and significance of Main and Amboy, makes a convenient rear boundary line behind the Amboy Avenue houses, though the rear lot lines of the Amboy Avenue houses could be used instead.

Woodbridge Avenue, the east side of Main Street and the south side of Amboy Avenue are excluded.

Threats to District

Additional additions, inappropriate alterations and demolition continue to threaten the district.

Recommendations

1. Conduct research to learn more about the significance of the original and early property owners.
2. Pursue National Register listing
3. Educate property owners regarding the investment tax credit for Register-listed properties.
4. Educate local officials and planners regarding the historical significance of this small district.

Applicable National Register Criteria

See explanation of criteria under “Middlesex Avenue-Woodwild Park District,” on page 10.

⁴ Subsequent research may not support inclusion of the old Presbyterian Cemetery in this district.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES CONSIDERED FOR REGISTER ELIGIBILITY

Clive Street/Plainfield Avenue Italianate Houses *[Figure 4]*

Two houses on Clive Street, numbers 36 and 76, are extremely well-preserved examples of Italianate houses constructed in the 1870s. In fact, they come quite close to being considered high-style architectural examples, and while they are not part of a historic district, they are certainly worthy of Register listing. Any application for listing would be further bolstered by historical research related to owners, architects and builders. Another Italianate at 6 Plainfield Avenue might also be considered for listing due to its association with the locally prominent Robins family. Unfortunately, its former tower has been truncated at the roofline, thus weakening its Register eligibility. However, if a strong local history case can be made, or if it can be linked to the architects and builders of the Clive Street houses, it might be able to gain Register listing.

The Radio District *[Figure 4]*

The Radio District, a 1928 neighborhood of small bungalows and two-story colonial-style houses on tiny lots, represents an early, pre-Levittown tract development, which was to become an American building trend following World War II. The district was developed by Radio Associates Builder-Developers, who advertised homes that could be purchased with just \$100 down and small monthly payments. Local brothers, Henry and Charles Kuntz, whose family farm was in the area, were partners in Radio Associates, a firm that also built tracts of small houses in other nearby communities such as Iselin and Edison. The firm's office was located in the district at Plainfield and Main. The tract of uniform small lot housing created a compact neighborhood bordered by Plainfield Avenue, Main Street, West Chestnut Avenue and Central Avenue, and including Midland Avenue and University Avenue. Other streets within the district were given the names of major universities: Rutgers, Princeton, Columbia and Harvard. The northernmost block of Center Street also lies within the district.

The district's current eligibility is, at the very least, uncertain. While the district includes many houses which have been maintained in their original form, some inappropriate alterations and intrusions are evident. Most intrusive are those few that have changed the height and massing of the original house or which represent newer infill. Due to the small lot sizes of a neighborhood where houses stand in close proximity to one another, such intrusions tend to have a greater negative impact than they would in a district with larger lots and generous

setbacks. It is unfortunate, but the future integrity of this district is questionable. Of local interest is the fact that Major General Earl G. Peck grew up in the district, but that fact in itself would not qualify the district for Register listing. At present it is an unlikely candidate. If the district were to be listed, it would be because it represents a well-preserved, pre-Levittown example of early tract housing; however, the loss of architectural integrity seriously compromises the eligibility of the Radio District.

Additional research would have to be undertaken to bolster any attempt at listing. According to area historian Walter Stochel, Charles Kuntz traveled to the Soviet Union in the 1920s to advise the Soviet government on agricultural practices. Whether or not research regarding this other role of Mr. Kuntz could bolster the nomination of an early housing tract is also questionable.

Woodbridge Avenue Houses [Figure 5]

A row of houses on Woodbridge Avenue, all vernacular examples of mid to late 19th century house styles, was evaluated for possible Register eligibility. Built during the same period as the Amboy and Main District houses, the houses are now visually isolated from that section. Therefore, it is unlikely they would qualify for Register listing in the absence of compelling historical associations.

Mary Wilkins Freeman House [Figure 5]

Mary Wilkins Freeman, a native of Massachusetts, was a prolific, critically acclaimed author during the 1880s-1930 period. She was a friend of Mark Twain and other important writers of the period. Through her association with Metuchen resident Henry Mills Alden, editor of *Harper's*, she met and married another Metuchen resident, Charles Freeman, and the two established their home at 207 Lake Avenue. While they later moved to a larger house built opposite Thomas Pond, that house is no longer extant. Therefore, the Mary Wilkins Freeman House at 207 Lake is the only extant house associated with the author and her thirty-year residency in Metuchen. During her many years in Metuchen she was associated with several local clubs and organizations, including the Quiet Hour and the Borough Improvement League. According to an article in "Nannygoats," the newsletter of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society, "her 1905 book, *The Debtor*, caused a minor uproar as it was thought to be an unflattering caricature of life in the Borough."

The extant Mary Wilkins Freeman House may be eligible for National Register listing either individually or by attaching it to the nearby Graham Avenue-Thomas Pond Historic District, as it is situated not far from the proposed district boundaries. A successful listing would be bolstered by an exterior restoration.

Presbyterian Church, Parsonage and Cemetery

Due to the significant remodeling of the church in the late 1950s, the church, parsonage and cemetery on Woodbridge Avenue were not considered at this time; however, as Metuchen's oldest extant church, parsonage and cemetery, the church's history may override the architectural changes; and, with the passage of time, the alterations may take on their own architectural significance.

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- Nancy Zerbe prepared the grant application which funded this project. Along with Tyreen Reuter, Ms. Zerbe escorted the consultant on an informative initial reconnaissance of Metuchen's historic resources and met with Ms. McTeague for a mid-project review.
- Tyreen Reuter and Becky Seely met with Ms. McTeague at the Metuchen Library's Grimstead Room and supplied research materials from its collections. These collections include materials collected by the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society. Ms. Reuter also provided the consultant with electronic copies of various historical materials during the project period.
- Tyreen Reuter, Nancy Zerbe and Walter Stochel answered a variety of questions posed by Ms. McTeague.
- Mary Lou Strahlendorff answered questions related to Woodwild Park and the Woodwild Park Association.
- Richard Weber supplied copies of the Hintz-Nelessen Map to be used as the base map for outlining potential historic districts.
- The following members of the Metuchen Historic Preservation Committee provided guidance and feedback during the project period: Richard Weber, chairman, and Suzanne Andrews, Becky Seely, Lori Chambers, Tyreen Reuter and Nancy Zerbe.

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